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ABSTRACT

To reduce the multiplicity of secondary schools, broaden students' educations, allow later career choices, and increase educational equality, the Netherlands in 1975 established several experimental comprehensive secondary schools. Opposition at the time led to the separation of the schools from the regular school system. Development of the schools was also hampered by inadequate discussion of the implementation process. Since 1975, a governmental change has reduced the schools' resources, opposition has continued, and comprehensive schools have not developed at a national level. Within the schools, lack of expertise and money has slowed organizational and curricular development. Further, lack of comparative data on the experimental schools has reduced the opportunity to learn from their experiences. In 1985 the Dutch parliament will decide whether to implement comprehensive schools nationally. A move to comprehensive schools will cause problems unless better research is available and unless the regular secondary schools are brought closer to the comprehensive schools. (RW)

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M.A.P.:

Development and implementation of the
Dutch comprehensive school

by

Bert P.M. Creemers

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INTRODUCTION

The development and implementation of the comprehensive school concerns a far-reaching educational innovation in the Dutch secondary school system. It not only aims at the goals, the learning structure, the curriculum of the schools and so on, but at the whole educational system as well.

That means that it is not only a process of change in the local schools, that only schools participate in such a process, but it is a process of change in the whole educational system. Different groups and schools, such as primary schools, schools following on the comprehensive school education, such as schools for vocational education, guidance, counseling and so on participate in such a process.

Therefore it is impossible to give a description of the whole process in management analysis paper. Furthermore not all the information needed for such a description is available at the moment.

Time for such a description and reports from different sources is necessary. All we can get at this moment are research reports (Creemers, 1977; Wagenaar, Van Kessel, De Vries, 1979; De Vries, 1980, en 1981) and until this moment not much research is being carried out in the Dutch comprehensive schools and reports by the schools themselves that contain more rough information. An important source of information is the advice of the so-called Advice Committee for the comprehensive school (ICM).

All give a blue-print for the educational change process. We shall in the following give a brief description of the educational change process based on the advice of this committee and what is going on in the schools at this moment and in the change process on a national level and then shall give our comments, criticism on that process of change and especially on the change strategy employed. Our comments and criticism are based on our own ideas about educational change and about the above mentioned reports on educational change processes. Further this criticism is based on educational theory, educational research in educational change projects, and so on. It is clear that this paper gives my personal views. I blame some agencies in educational

change processes for the comprehensive school. They and you can blame me for this paper.*

The structure of the paper is as follows:

Paragraph 2 gives a description of the start of the innovation process.

In my opinion the decisions at the start made it impossible to achieve a structural change in the secondary school system.

My comments in this part are especially related to that topic.

Paragraph 3 gives a description of the present state of affairs, the contains and the problems at this time.

Paragraph 4 contains an anticipation of what will happen in the future and gives an alternative strategy for the development and implementation of the comprehensive education in the Netherlands.

* This paper is partly based on a paper published earlier in Dutch. Creemers, Bert P.M., en Vries, Annemieke de; Constructie en invoering van de Middenschool, in RION-bulletin no. 6, Haren 1980.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. A brief description

The educational secondary school system in the Netherlands is very segmented. There are different types of schools, for general education and for vocational education, catering for different aptitudes of the students. Although there are made some corrections, improvements in the system during the 50's, the structure as a whole remained the same. In the 60's and the early 70's there was a great deal of criticism of the secondary school, by educational theorists and educational research and the labour unions. This criticism was based on research reports about the participation of different social classes in education, ideas about equal opportunity, and so on.

The discussion memorandum 'Contours of future education in the Netherlands' contained a plea for comprehensive education. The following are the main principles:

- The choice of further study and a career is postponed until a later date. Nowadays, in the selective, categorial educational system, children generally have to choose at the age of 12, which usually has radical consequences for the rest of their lives. In the comprehensive school the choice is postponed until as close as possible to their sixteenth year.
- The efforts of the primary school to offer equal, i.e. optimal, opportunities to all children for development are continued. It is expected that a contribution can be made by reducing any disadvantages caused by home background and by the limitations of the traditional female role.
- The content of the education offered to 12 to 16 year olds can be broadened. This can be achieved by increasing the number of subjects and offering opportunities for a more balanced and less narrow development of all the skills the children have. These explicitly include the creative or artistic, organisational and social skills.
- Suitable teaching and learning situations can be offered for individual development and the stimulation of social awareness.

More than hitherto, education can help people to stop regarding society and their place in it as a foregone conclusion, and to see them instead as things which they themselves can do something about. After that memorandum and the discussion about it, the Minister of Education at the time, Van Kemenade, started a so-called comprehensive school experiment. In the Netherlands it is possible to carry out experiments in education on the basis of a special law for experimentation that enables schools to try out educational ideas in practice. In this case it means that comprehensive education is not provided for by law but should be the result of an experimentation process. On the basis of the experimentation law schools can be involved in an educational change process, relatively outside the ordinary school system.

It has some advantages but disadvantages too (see comments).

The comprehensive school experiment started in 1975. The strategy of change behind it was that there should be a connection between development in schools and what is going on on national level (Ministry). The Minister of Education appointed an advisory committee for the comprehensive school experiment, which was to advise him about experimental process, the strategy of change, the support for the experiment, and so on. When the experimental process started, only two schools were involved. In the schoolyear 1981-1982 ten schools will participate in the experimental process.

The curriculum development and organisation of changes are especially to take place in these schools. Educational processes usually take place in these schools. There the main principles mentioned above should materialize.

The change processes in the schools should be supported by professional development, guidance, counseling, educational research, and so on.

There are a great many facilities for the schools involved in the experiment in this change process.

The comprehensive school experiment not only aims at educational innovation in separate schools, but there should be a comprehensive school on a national level. The results of the experimentation process such as development, kind of organisation, results of evaluation research, and so on should be used on a national level, especially after passing a comprehensive school law in Parliament. That means that the schools

contribute to the establishment of the comprehensive school on a national level, by departing in the experimentation process from the same principles, by reporting on experiences in schools, by their products from the developmental process, which can be implemented in other schools, and so on.

2.2. Some comments

- Heine, the poet, wrote that in the Netherlands everything happens 50 years behind the developments in other countries. This may be true but in my opinion the development of the comprehensive school in the Netherlands started too soon. There were a great many people, especially under educational theorists, educational researchers and in the labour unions, who supported the idea of a comprehensive school, but there were many people against it too, especially people working within the secondary schools and in different political parties in the Netherlands. Therefore it was impossible to introduce comprehensive school law but instead the experimental law had to be used which had the result that the development of the comprehensive school in the Netherlands was set apart outside the regular school system.

The problems connected with this situation should be solved by the participants in that change process, separate schools and individual people.

There were problems of different kinds to be solved, for example:

- What should be the education following the comprehensive school ?
- What can primary education expect from comprehensive education ?
- What kind of information is needed for a political decision on comprehensive education ?
- Is the attention for social science and other social subjects enough, too much or too little ? And so on.

The experimentation law gives too little protection and solution for this kind of problems.

Afterwards one wonders whether or not it was impossible to have comprehensive school law right from the start and to get at least more people supporting the idea of a comprehensive school.

Now on the one hand the experimentation process has started in the schools trying to develop comprehensive education and on the other hand polarisation of ideas is in progress. That leads to uncertainty on the part of the participants in the change process, which could have been avoided by better measures in the starting phase of the process.

- In another respect the start was too soon too. There were quite a few discussions and statements about the goals of these comprehensive education, but only little discussion about the means by which these goals should be attained. What kind of differentiation is suitable for comprehensive schools; what new curriculum should be developed and what kind of organisation can provide a curriculum and educational process that is more democratic and emancipatory. There is a lot of research about the results of kinds of differentiation in the sequences of the educational processes, curriculum development, and so on. Using this information might have been an advantage for the development and implementation process. But in the beginning the schools did not use this kind of information because they did not know it and there was not an organisation on a national level of educational research, curriculum development, and so on, which was really capable of providing such kind of information.

Besides the strategy employed made the schools into separate islands, which were not obliged to use such kind of information.

- The educational change strategy was developed, based on the results of other educational strategies of change of the so-called RDD-model in the past. But I am wondering if the choice that was made in 1975 to make schools the central focusing point of the whole change process and not to give them some outlines-products that could be implemented, and so on - was the right strategy and the right alternative for the RDD-strategy.

In my opinion there was a too big change from the old strategies to the new ones, which should have been more in accordance with the ideas, opinions in schools in the early 70's, instead of being in accordance with results, products of educational change strategies on the whole (see paragraph 3 and 4)

This is the main point in my criticism.

- In the Netherlands we have quite a few institutes giving support to schools. Perhaps there is overorganisation in it and the overorganisation exists definitely in the experimentation process of the comprehensive school. Especially with respect to extent of the goals, and non-precise starting points, which leads to divergency in the change process. Every participant in this structure can give his own explanation of what comprehensive education should be.

3. PRESENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

3.1. Brief description of the situation

What kind of changes took place since 1975 ?

- The political scene has changed. After Van Kemenade of the socialist party Pais of the conservative party became Minister of Education in 1977. The conservative party is against the development of a comprehensive school replacing the whole secondary educational system and is in favour of a more differentiated segmented school system for secondary education. Pais did not stop the experimental process but he did not give it new impulses and he has withdrawn some money especially within the support of the innovat on process (less money for research, less money for development, and so on).

Furthermore Pais has written his own dissusionpaper for secondary education in the future, which is in conflict with the idea of comprehensive education. This means that in the political scene the comprehensive school did not make much progress and making no progress means in eudcational innovation diminishment of ideas, diminishment of involvement of people, and so on.

- Connected with the point mentioned above the basis for comprehensive education in society has not become larger since 1975 and many people especially in teacher unions of general secondary and grammar school education were strongly against it and stayed that way. (Arguments: too little attention for better students, not everybody is the same, impossible to develop, impossible to implement by teachers, not all teachers are the same).

In the discussion about comprehensive education sometimes the results and experiences in the experimental comprehensive school were used.

- Within the schools involved in the comprehensive school experiment progress was made. There was some development but the development of curriculum, development of the organization began very slowly and was very difficult for the schools. At the start of the experiment there was no professional expertise in the schools in the fields of curriculum development, evaluation, organizational expertise, expertise in the new school subjects, and so on. Very slowly and with difficulty



the schools got the expertise needed to make a new program, to make a new organization. And they got the results of it by means of a new program, new school organization and children who came to the school based on the new program, parents who were advocating comprehensive school ideas. But it remains uncertain whether or not the developments which took place in schools, go in the direction of the comprehensive school and the realization of the main principles for such a comprehensive school. Sometimes that caused uncertainty for the participants on the local school level. I am not sure if it is possible on a national level to put together the experiences and expertises in different schools, to make programs, organizational patterns for comprehensive education in the future for the whole country.

- Development of comprehensive education on a national level hardly exists. There is little cooperation on different levels, the support on a national level contributes little or nothing to local developments, neither does the development on the national level.

Reasons for that: too little expertise in supporting agencies, not enough money, island position within the structure of schools and supporting agencies, and so on.

3.2. Some comments

- The development construction of comprehensive education calls for a lot of energy and money. Each school has to make its own curriculum program, and also support for its own development process, and so on.

That energy, that money is tight. Schools benefit too little from each other's experience, each school has its own development.

That takes too much time, money and people.

- The participants in the experiment schools, parents, children have too little certainty about the results of the construction development within the school. It depends too much on incidents without a collection of experience of capitalisation of educational know-how.

- This leads to casuistry. The experiences and results are hard to generalize or to systematize. It is impossible to draw conclusions for all the schools, from individual schools to the national level and so on. Each time you have to look at a separate school, the situation in that unique school and you don't know what to take of it, what is

worth while.

- This means that in the future other schools can not take advantage of the results, products, experiences from the schools involved in the experiment at this time. They are uncertain too about the results, about what will happen in their schools when they start with the experiment.

- In my opinion there is progress in the schools but it was hard work, took a lot of time, money and dedication of people. There was no or little progress on a national level, it is uncertain whether or not the developments in local schools (only a few) go into the direction of the construction of comprehensive education. Furthermore it is very uncertain that other schools which have not the same conditions, which don't have money, expertise, can make the same comprehensive school as these schools have done. Therefore the change process can not be implemented in other schools. Furthermore only a few products exist that can be implemented. In this respect there is one more very great difficulty namely that the schools involved in the experiment at this moment are not representative of the Dutch educational secondary school system.

4. STRATEGY DESIGN FOR THE FUTURE

4.1. Expectations of the future

In the strategy design used at this moment there will be a political decision about the implementation of comprehensive education in 1985 based on the results of the comprehensive school experiment until that moment.

Based on what is mentioned in paragraph 3 I have some doubts about the arguments for this kind of decisions. Information until now is fragmentary, only about some aspects of the instructional process, some results, and so on.

Furthermore, as mentioned before the information about the processes and the results are not comparable and are different for each school. Only for the people who believe in comprehensive education this kind of information is valuable, for others it has only little value or no value at all. Therefore educational research evaluation is needed to get more, better, objective, valid information about what is going on in the schools and the results of innovative processes.

Then the decision in Parliament has to be taken and there will be a law for comprehensive education or not. If we get a comprehensive school law then I suppose there will be problems in the secondary school system. Then in my opinion the results of the experiments are of little value for the secondary schools on the whole, except perhaps for schools that are comparable with the schools involved in the comprehensive school experiment at this time. A more serious problem after that decision in Parliament is the great discrepancy between the schools that are involved in the comprehensive school experiment at this moment and ordinary secondary schools as regards curriculum, the school program, expertise within the school and so on. You cannot expect that on basis of a parliamentary decision changes will take place within these schools.

Then we have the law but the schools are not able to put this law into practice, to make comprehensive schools programs, comprehensive education. The gap between these two is too great and on the other hand there is too little support to close the gap.

4.2. An alternative

In my opinion it is possible to develop at this moment an alternative for the strategy of change to be used in the comprehensive school. Changes have to be made on two points, e.g.

1. the construction, development of the comprehensive school and
2. the implementation of it.

1. The development and construction of the comprehensive school.

It is necessary to make a better use of expertise, educational research, curriculum development and a better use of information about what really can take place in schools. What really can happen in schools is to get information about the situation where educational programs have to function, about what teachers are able to or not, what students and parents want. But you cannot expect that the teacher has the expertise to construct the curricula, to build new school subjects, to build a new organization, to give concrete form to and to realize very roughly comprehensive education. For that kind of work another kind of expertise is needed. First we have to get ideas, opinions from schools, for the construction and development of comprehensive schools.

Then we have to construct curricula, school programs and to test them, to use them in schools and to get more experience in the kind of formative evaluation, from what is going on, what is possible and impossible in schools. And we can implement these curricula, programs, organizational models in other schools. I think it is possible in this way to cut the costs for construction and development at this time and what is more important, to cut the costs of implementation of the comprehensive school in the whole secondary system. This means that we have to make a definition of the tasks for the different participants in the innovation process, to get more information from educational research, development and evaluation, not only for the ultimate decision in Parliament but for decisions within the construction and development in schools and on the national level too.

2. For the implementation of the comprehensive school in my opinion it is necessary to close the gap between the comprehensive schools and the regular school system beforehand. Therefore perhaps it is.

possible to initiate educational change in the direction of comprehensive education in steps, for example put schools of a different nature (general education and schools for low vocational education) together. To get students together not only in the first year of secondary education but for two years. In this way you can make the transition from the regular secondary school system to comprehensive education in a few steps and not in one great step.

As pointed out such a transition is impossible to make for a great many people. To facilitate these steps there should be a program for in-service training of teachers and implementation in the traditional system of parts of what has been developed in the experimental schools.

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