

***EDUCATION AND RESEARCH;
AND EVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET?***

Introduction by Anneke Boot

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

The Hague, The Netherlands

OECD/CERI-project on Evidence Based Policy Research

Fourth seminar on Implementing, Scaling Up and Sustainability

London, July 6th and 7th 2006

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The request of Tom and Tracey to tell you about how in the Netherlands evidence based policy research is implemented, reminded me of the conversation a few months ago with Professor Jelle Jolles. Some of you, acquainted with the OECD-project *Brain and Learning Sciences*, already know who he is: Jelle Jolles is a professor in neuropsychology and neurobiology at the University of Maastricht, an outstanding scientist in his field. He wanted to speak with the department of *Education, Culture and Science* about reinforcing the interaction between research and education on the theme of brain&learning. Until now, the interfaces between these two worlds are rare and thin, and professor Jolles holds very strongly the conviction that both can gain a lot by building bridges. In terms of this conference: science claims to have a lot of non-exploited evidence available for education.

There we had another reason to look thoroughly to our system of producing and utilising knowledge about learning and education. We had to ask ourselves: is he just a newcomer in the world of education research who is not acquainted with the rules of the game, or is there something wrong with the system itself?

I am afraid that an honest answer must be that our system is not in top condition for the challenges of today. More over, there are big challenges that urge us to perform better.

In my presentation, I will give you a rough sketch of these challenges, just to give you an impression of the climate in which we are operating.

After that, I will discuss how we try to reshape our system, not in an exhaustive way, but only the key issues of a new approach mostly by way of questioning.

The first challenge we have to deal with is a political one. Education is top priority for almost all political parties in the forthcoming campaign with the national elections to be held in November this year. Most of them recognise that we have to invest more in education and science in order to maintain our prosperity in an increasingly globalising and competitive world. However, they attach a condition to their willingness to invest more money into education and science. New education policies should be based on proven effectiveness. In addition, science has to pay more attention to utility and dissemination aspects.

At the same time, we know that policy makers and politicians sometimes seek solace in certain expediency. More over, outcomes of scientific investigation in education or of social sciences in general can often be interpreted in different ways by nature. And how objective and independent are researchers and their institutions after all? Is research sometimes used for delaying a difficult decision? There is always more information to gather, but in the end, nobody can see the wood for the trees anymore. These practices are especially not conducive for establishing trust between policy makers and members of parliament.

The second challenge lies in society itself. There is a wide spread feeling of malaise about the quality of education, especially of secondary education. The answer that Dutch pupils score rather well in PISA, is not convincing enough because this score is not believed to be sustainable for the future when the older generation of well educated teachers has retired.

This feeling of a not well-enough performing school system exists not only among politicians. A philosophy professor and his wife, a former classical studies teacher, expressed their discomfort by raising a movement entitled in English: *Better Education the Netherlands*. This movement is not only about establishing what is wrong, but also about an appeal to a greater professional élan. The more serious press pays a lot of attention to this movement and is by

doing so, intensifying the political debate on the quality of education and on teaching as a profession.

The central point of the debate seems to be to what extent pupils and students are given autonomy to develop their own learning process. Some schools have gone very far in this. They did away with almost all class teaching and instruction in favour of more individual learning paths with pupils and students themselves in the lead. In this debate, the question is often raised whether there is any evidence regarding the quality of the outcomes of this transformation. And whether it is possible to compare these outcomes with those of more traditional class teaching.

In this social and political climate, policymakers have to come up with a strong story to build trust both in education practice and research. If politicians decide to spend more money on education, the sector will be held more accountable for the spending of it.

So how are we going to reshape our knowledge system to make it fit for the next decades? That is the second part of my presentation.

In this final conference, the focus is on implementation. Implementation implies the availability of an entirely elaborated and agreed policy. In the Netherlands, we have not yet reached that situation. Many parties involved agree that new policies and practices should be more based on proven effectiveness, but we are still wrestling to convert these positive words into concrete actions.

The policy line on Evidence Based Policy Research started with a request to our Education Council to prepare an advice on this subject in its work programme 2005. In addition, this

request was linked to the participation of the Netherlands in this OECD-project. During the preparations of this advice, the council participated in the The Hague seminar of the project.

In January 2006, the advice was published. The Education Council said the following.

The education world often introduces new methods and approaches without ascertaining that the new method or approach is indeed better than the one used previously. On the other hand, available knowledge on, for instance, proven effective language course books, only slowly finds its way into educational practice. To put it briefly: we seem to be dealing with a certain ‘unused space’. Insufficient efforts are made to gather evidence on the effectiveness of teaching methods and additionally, to capitalize that knowledge. Research can yield a reliable assessment of the suitability of methods and approaches, thus preventing lengthy ideological debates and trial and error efforts.

Evidence that something works, can be established in several ways, for instance by way of experiments or by conducting a survey among teachers. The various evidence methods together constitute an ascending scale. The left-hand side contains few evidence providing elements (soft evidence); on the right-hand side, evidence-providing elements accumulate (hard evidence). The most solid form of evidence, furnishing many elements, involves controlled experiments with the random allocation of test subjects to conditions. Other types of research set-ups include pilot studies, cohort studies and case studies. In addition to these types of (harder and softer) objectified knowledge, experience-based knowledge from professionals can also contribute to gaining insight into ‘what works’.

Like other countries and sectors, the education sector in the Netherlands is struggling with the question as to how it can improve its practical use of the research results regarding methods that have been proven effective. Various factors inhibit the exploitation of scientific research: the view that research is threatening the autonomy of the education world, the additional

implementation time required, the fact that effects are often measured on a rather narrow scale and the high costs of research. With regard to experimental research, these drawbacks apply to an even higher degree.

In order to further an evidence-based approach to education, the Council has drawn up four recommendations.

1) Entering on the agenda

A shift towards evidence-based working requires a change in culture. In order to bring about such a change, the Minister, the education organisations involved and the development, training and research agencies must place this topic on the education agenda.

2) Access to knowledge

Access to knowledge on the effectiveness of teaching methods and approaches must be facilitated. A digital desk should be set up to provide access to research data on effective methods, for instance by way of reviews.

3) Schools to make their choices clear

The additional autonomy of educational institutions has led to an increase in their own responsibility for the quality of the education they provide. This calls for additional investments in quality assurance and knowledge management. Educational institutions should use evidence-based insights to make choices for specific goals and methods of operation more conscious. Parents and students, after all, demand education of the highest quality. A possible incentive for educational institutions might be to sharpen up the existing obligation to justify choices in the school prospectus, the annual report, the policy plans and the quality assurance plans. To this end, the Inspectorate would need to intensify its supervision in this matter. Schools, however, are and will remain free in the choices they make.

4) Additional incentives

In connection with the measures stated above, additional incentives are needed to promote evidence-based working. These might include developing action guidelines and protocols, devoting attention to evidence-based approaches in teacher training, calling on university lecturers and other professional experts in the field of both research and education and creating more scope for studies into the effects of teaching strategies and the way in which these effects come about.

So far the words of the Education Council; it is the ministry's turn now to come up with a policy reaction.

This policy reaction can be broken up in answers to three main questions:

1. Is the world of our educational research in good order concerning the production of relevant knowledge?
2. Is the world of education in good order concerning the culture and capacity to exploit this knowledge?
3. Are the interfaces between these two worlds in good order to ensure the right matches between practice and research?

Considering the advice report, there is ample room for improvement on all three the questions. As I told you before: I make no claim to be exhaustive, but mention a few interventions, some already put into practice.

With regard to the world of research:

- Brain and cognition sciences seem potential, but at this moment, there is hardly any interaction with the more traditional education researchers. The ministry provides a platform to bring the various partners together. And because our minister for Education is also minister

for Science, she intends within the framework of science policy to give priority to the theme of brain&learning, both in the education field and the field of brain&cognition sciences.

- Is there enough coherence, and how do we get the right issues to be investigated? The ministry has taken the initiative for a so-called *Knowledge Chamber*, for a better exchange between the various knowledge producers and policy makers.

With regard to the world of education:

- How do we promote a professional culture among teachers and school leaders to make them eager to perform up to the state of the art in knowledge on education? Just a week ago, Minister Van der Hoeven concluded a covenant with the education field implying extra money only to spend on professional development of teachers and school leaders. In addition, we have some schools function as academic teacher training schools to develop a new position as teacher/researcher to build a greater capacity in schools.

- How do we make knowledge transparent and accessible for teachers and school leaders? The Education Council plead for a digital desk to provide access to research data on effective methods. Schools already have the so-called *Knowledge network*, a portal especially for education that they use very intensively. Therefore, we look for a smart connection with this portal.

With regard to the interfaces between research and the education field:

It is obvious that correlations between researchers and teachers are crucial to succeed in our ambition to have an educational system that performs best as possible. We want practitioners to play a role in research and vice versa, especially when it comes to developing and experimenting innovative teaching and learning methods that are sustainable for the future.

Therefore, we made this the central theme of the Dutch contribution to another OECD-activity: *Schooling for Tomorrow*. At the end of 2006, we hope to come up with some materials for a cohesive framework entitled *Sharing Knowledge for Innovation*.

The bottom line for all these interventions is our governance philosophy. As it is said in the CERI-paper for this seminar: the main driving force for a better-informed education system is to hold schools accountable for the quality of their education. Accountable to the government via the Education Inspectorate, but also directly to parents and other stakeholders in the environment of the school. They must be transparent to the public at large about the choices they make and the outcomes of these choices.

Back now to the title of my introduction: education and research, and ever the twain shall meet? We need a lot of bridges to close this gap. And fortunately, the Dutch are from way back experienced bridge builders.

Thank you for your attention!