

Geography teaching in The Netherlands: Changes and Challenges

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Having read Professor Marsden's Editorial, we are pleased to report that there is no evidence that geography is the worst taught subject in Dutch primary schools. However, this does not mean that the level of geography in the Netherlands is what it should be according to minimum standards set by instructors and other experts. Periodical surveys of the educational level in primary education from the Dutch Central Institute of Test Development (*PPON*, 2003) indicate that:

- 60% of the pupils reach the minimum standards for topography;
- 70% of the pupils reach the minimum standards for map reading; and
- 80% of the pupils reach the minimum standards for topics including earth and landscapes, population, agriculture, industry and services.

Although comparing the test results of 1995 and 2001 shows little difference except for map reading, the trends related to the position of geography in primary teacher training are rather disconcerting. The time allotted for geography in initial primary teacher training is quite limited and under considerable pressure. This may have long-term effects on the quality of primary geography.

An analysis of geography in the lower level of secondary education illustrates this dilemma. The Inspector for Education reported in 1998 that 84% of 4000-plus pupils who completed geography tests at the conclusion of the lower levels of secondary education reached the minimum standards which were set by 25 experts. Yet developments in the curriculum for lower secondary education tend to weaken the position of geography. While various geographers helped to construct the new curriculum for the higher levels of Dutch secondary education, a completely different framework was used in developing the new curriculum for the lower levels. For the first time, governmental policy makers did not consult the Dutch Royal Geographical Society, geography teacher trainers, or any other group of experts in geography curriculum planning. Leaders and teachers from selected schools were asked to formulate their vision concerning forthcoming geography instruction given to students ranging from 12 to 15 years old. The number of aims for all subjects was restricted to 58. The result was a few vaguely formulated geographical aims. It is unfortunate to note that the attention given to physical geography was much less than that for human geography. Subsequently, geography has been positioned in the social

studies cluster, placing physical geography under increasing pressure. Even more alarming is that individual institutions have the option to reject geography as an independent subject. This is decided by school managements and not by subject teachers. The diminishing time designated to initial teacher training for lower secondary education dedicated to geography and geography didactics will most certainly have negative effects on the quality of geography instruction in lower secondary education levels.

Geography in The Netherlands is an independent subject in almost all primary and secondary schools. Pupils between 10 and 15 years of age receive between one and one and a half hours of geography instruction every week. Yet, the position of geography in vocational schools is weaker. In higher levels of secondary education, geography is simply optional. Since the 1970s, issues such as water, immigration and globalisation have held a central position in Dutch primary and secondary geography teaching. While news concerning geography in Dutch schools is not as alarming as in England, and although the Dutch Inspector, in contrast to the British Chief Inspector, is cognisant that geography is already issues-based, there remain areas of concern. For example, Marsden argues that by 1980, seeking a balance between matter, method and mission was not an acceptable agenda due to opposition from left- and right-wing 'think tanks'. This balance is also a problem in The Netherlands. Since the end of the 1970s, Holland has recognised the need for more issues-based geography and the acquisition of skills. The disproportions in Dutch geographical education at the start of this century are the result of Dutch education failing to assist students in acquiring knowledge of regions and a lack of overall basic conceptual knowledge of the earth and the world. Geographical and interdisciplinary skills such as research methodology and communication have taken a central position. Students learn to analyse issues concerning unemployment, underdevelopment and/or environmental problems using a range of geographical skills. However, students analyse these issues without sufficient knowledge of the geographical concepts or processes which produced the observed changes (Van der Vaart, 2001). The idea is that geographical knowledge is necessary to provide students with a good basis to begin their discovery of the world successfully.

This idea is conveyed in new curriculum plans. For example, the new Dutch curriculum for the higher levels of secondary education entitled *Regions in Perspective*, starting in 2007, sets its focus on modern regional geography. Another example is the draft program for geography at lower levels of secondary education which focuses on 'a contemporary world view'. Almost all Dutch geography teachers are pleased with this new direction in geography curriculum development. It is not a matter of back to 'facts and figures', but rather, a modern approach to regional geography. Most instructors prefer a modern regional approach to a thematic one. Geography focuses on places and regions and the phenomena and processes that make the differences between one place and another. This geography is useful for citizenship and makes geography a clearly recognisable subject for students, parents, school leaders, the media, and policy makers. It is 'back to basics' in a modern way in which geography is more than empirical knowledge but rather a balance between matter, method and mission. If we want to help students find their way in this world, they need declarative knowledge (facts and conceptual frameworks) in addition to procedural

knowledge. One needs a geographical basis to find one's way in this fast changing world.

Two relatively recent cases of homicide in The Netherlands became controversial topics of international news. The 2002 assassination of Dutch parliament member, Pim Fortuyn, by a radical environmentalist, shocked the world. Then two years later Theo van Gogh, a Dutch film-maker and newspaper columnist, made world news headlines when he was shot and killed by an Islamist fundamentalist. Internet message boards appeared in which fundamentalists threatened members of parliament. This upheaval evoked a heavy debate about central values in Dutch society and the role that education should play in introducing these values. In 2005, the national Board of Education advocated a canon involving historical knowledge as a way to stimulate cohesion and integration in Dutch society. The canon implied learning the highlights of Dutch history to strengthen the feeling of 'being Dutch' and feelings of national identity; as if teaching history could prevent violence in modern Dutch society. Rather than having fragmented knowledge about one's history, it is more important to possess knowledge about the world we live in. This is precisely the role geography plays. Geography provides people with a foundation and is essential in assisting people to contemplate and learn about the world we inhabit.

References

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