Report of the National Round Table in the Netherlands on early school leaving

December 4, 2013

Content

Dutch National Knowledge Centre for Mixed Schools

Guido Walraven (editor), Paco Lucassen, Talitha Stam, Naomi Woltring

1. Introduction

The NRT was organized on behalf of the European policy network SIRIUS. In line with earlier reports on the Netherlands for SIRIUS, early school leaving was chosen as the theme for the Dutch NRT. The Ministry of Education was involved in the choice of the theme and the organization of the meeting. It also acted as the host of the meeting.
As the national partner for SIRIUS, the Dutch National Knowledge Centre for Mixed Schools would like to thank the MoE for its commitment and for the wonderful cooperation around the meeting.

The main goal of the NRT was, to evaluate the results of (the implementation of) the Dutch policy on early school leaving especially for students with a migrant background. We realized that goal through exchange and dialogue between policy, practice and research.

Program of the meeting

9.45	**Opening and welcome**
	- Introduction of SIRIUS, Guido Walraven (National Knowledge Centre for Mixed Schools)
	- Introduction of the Dutch policy on early school leaving, Esther Arons (MoE)
10.00	**Facts and figures of the Dutch policy**, Dennis van Gessel (MoE)
	What do we know about students with a migrant background and early school leaving?
10.20	**Reflection from a researchers point of view**, Maurice Crul (Erasmus University Rotterdam, SIRIUS)
10.30	**Practice – what works, for whom and why?**
	Monaïm Benrida (MoE) and professionals from good practices in the cities of 's Hertogenbosch, Gouda and Schiedam
10.50	**Reflection from a researchers point of view,** Ilias el Hadioui (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
11.00	**Discussion in three groups**
12.00-12.30	**Exchange of results from the group discussions**

Background information: brochure and other materials in English
The MoE published an English brochure about the Dutch policy on ESL and its results.
There are also other materials in English: several presentations of MoE at an international conference in Istanbul on December 19, 2013.
The link to all English materials is:
http://www.aanvalopschooluitval.nl/actueel/bericht/expert-ESL-presentation-by-director-Voncken-during-Ministerial-Education-Conference-

2. First plenary session

Presentation: Dutch policy on early school leaving (ESL)

In 2006 a policy program to prevent and combat early school leaving started (called 'Aanval op Schooluitval'). At that time there were around 70.000 new early school leavers per year. In 2012 that number was around 35.000.

Students who leave school early have no formal qualifications and therefor have more difficulties in finding a job; they also have a higher chance to get involved in criminal acts.

At the national level there is a general ESL policy, in other words there is no special treatment for specific target groups. At the regional and local level, however, schools and cities have room of maneuver to develop more specific policies within the national policy framework. This approach allows for tailor made solutions to local problems and for specific local groups of students, e.g. students with a (specific) migrant background. Cooperation of all actors in a region is a key to success. Since the approach is rather effective, it is described as a 'golden triangle': the MoE delivers a policy framework, schools and cities together develop the regional and local policies. There are long-term performance agreements between schools, municipalities and national government.

Registration of school absenteeism and ESL is essential for policy development and implementation. Since 2009 a digital absence portal is in use, and monthly reports help actors to identify local and regional problems and take appropriate action.

The facts and figures show ESL is higher among students with a migrant background than among other students. In both groups ESL is reduced during the period the policy program has been implemented, however the difference between the groups continued.

Since migrant background is only one of many factors for drop out, the gap between the two groups is no reason for the MoE to change the general policy. Especially not, since that policy allows for local and regional policies for specific target groups. When an analysis of local facts and figures calls for action towards specific groups, even extra national budget is possible. Examples are programs for Roma students, Moroccan students or young mothers (also from the Dutch Antilles).

Reflection from research, Maurice Crul (Free University Amsterdam)

In the Netherlands ESL is well researched. The research focus is mostly on the individual level and individual characteristics of early school leavers. Little attention is paid to the meso- and macro level. At the meso level activities within the school and the classroom are important. What signals are there for absenteeism and ESL, and what are adequate and timely responses? What can schools do to help all students during their school career? What role can parents and mentors play?

At the macro level of the school system at least two characteristics need attention. The first characteristic is the age that children start at (pre)school. International comparative research shows, that starting school at the age of four like in the Netherlands is relatively late. Many children with a migrant background have a language deficit when they start Dutch primary school (and the fact that

migrant children and non-migrant children often visit different types of preschool facilities increases the language gap).

A second characteristic of the Dutch school system is an early selection in secondary education. At the age of twelve the choice for lower secondary education has to be made. Students with a migrant background are overrepresented in de lower streams. A concentration of students with learning difficulties and problems there enhances risks for drop-out. And while students in de higher streams stay in the same school until their exams, students in de lower streams change schools at the age of sixteen. That is a risk moment in the school career in itself. Moreover, the schools for upper secondary (vocational) education have large numbers of students, whereas students at risk need small scale schools with personal attention.

Presentation: Good Practices

Taylor made solutions for the local and regional situation include activities within schools as well as a network of professional support around schools. Three examples were presented at the meeting (and in the group discussions there was time for more questions).

Den Bosch

In the city of Den Bosch a group of students with a Roma background showed a lot of absenteeism and ESL. An approach that allowed for exception for the students did not reduce ESL. Therefor a new approach was launched, without exceptions or escape routes. The student behavior is treated exactly the same as other students, with a focus on direct response to absenteeism and support from social workers. That approach seems more effective; more Roma students come and stay in school.

Gouda

The city of Gouda is a municipality with a large group of children and youth with a Moroccan background. Registration of absenteeism and ESL allows all actors a transparent and up to date view of the situation, so direct responses are possible. Special advisors with a minority background secure good contact with minority groups, especially with students and their parents. For parents it is important that the advisors speak their (Moroccan) mother tongue. A good contact in combination with direct responses has led to a decrease in ESL.

Schiedam

In the city of Schiedam a combination of programs is implemented to support students with multiple problems, especially young mothers. A network team of professionals is available to address both educational and other problems in an integrated way. The students of the program sit together in special classes within a regular school. There is day care for the babies and for instance psychological support for the young mothers.

Reflection from research, Ilias el Hadioui (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Ethnicity seems to be sort of a fetish in the Netherlands. On the one hand the Dutch try to get rid of stigma, on the other they are not able to let it go. It still is a sensitive issue. It would be wiser to look at it in a more matter-of-fact like manner. For instance with ESL we need to identify if ethnicity is a factor; and when it is, we need to focus our activities on when and where ethnicity exactly is of importance.

We need to link individual characteristics like ethnicity with factors at the other levels Maurice Crul mentioned, the meso and macro level, for instance when you are investigating patterns of behavior of specific groups of youth regarding ESL in big cities.

At the meso level school culture is highly important. How are students with a migrant background welcomed in the school? How do teachers deal with 'differences' in the classroom and the school? Has teacher training prepared them well enough for a constructive role – many doubt that.

At the macro level we might also ask whether the system can deal with the diversity among students. It seems there is a mismatch between the system and at least some (groups of) students.

3. Discussion in small groups

The discussion was held in three smaller groups, each with people from research, policy and practice. All groups started with the same set of questions, so we were able to combine the group reports into one report.

How does the Dutch policy look like in the day to day practice in schools and municipalities? What strategies are implemented for special target groups?

Schiedam
The New Life-project in the city of Schiedam is for young mothers in general, there are no special target groups with a minority background. In practice a large part of the mothers has a minority background, however. The teachers and social workers that support the young mothers focus on their needs, not on their ethnicity. They are sensitive to culture and to situations and moments when culture plays a role, for instance with young fathers from the Dutch Antilles.

Many students at risk of ESL have a multi problem background. Psychological problems, problems with housing and money, with their parents, etcetera. What helps, taking the experiences from Schiedam into account?
- When students live with their parents, it helps to have contact with the parents. Start when everything goes well, then you have easier access when something goes wrong. When the bond between students and parents is not good, contact with the parents is not helpful either.
- It is better to organize support for students at risk of ESL within regular schools, like Schiedam is doing, then in separate buildings (like some other cities do).
- Work on education and addressing the problems of the students at the same time.
  - Aim at a school qualification, that motivates;
  - Let students make a weekly plan for their personal problems with a coach;
  - Work in small classes – in Schiedam they work with classes with 20 students and two key teachers;
  - The students are in the same classroom the whole day.

Ede
In the region of the city of Ede 'liaison officers' between school and parents and students with a migrant background have a role in preventing ESL. They reach out to parents and talk with them (in their mother tongue of the parents want that) about the Dutch school system and how school success is a shared responsibility. In that manner the link between school and home is strengthened and the threshold to come to the school (e.g. for a parent meeting) is lowered. In cases of absenteeism the liaison officers can contact the student and the parents. The officers also act as resource persons on issues regarding cultural differences.

Organization for students in vocational education (JOB)
The organization is aware of problems regarding ESL, especially from students contacting their helpdesk. Some students drop out of school because they cannot pay for transport to school (any longer). Sometimes schools are reluctant to accept students at risk of ESL, because the schools want good qualification rates. The student organization also explains to students that schools get no fine for early school leavers but a bonus for every graduating student.

Minority organization FORUM
As a minority organization Forum is involved in ESL in different ways:
1. Stimulating parent involvement from preschool until the end of primary education.
2. Addressing the problems of the transition between primary and secondary education, involving schools and parents, and organizing extra lessons for students.
3. Helping students in vocational education to prepare for the labor market, for instance in finding trainee posts.

What experiences do we have with policy implementation?

Transitions in school careers
When a student goes from one (type of) school to the other, there are wishes that are in part conflicting. On the one hand you want the information about a student to go to the new school, in order to allow that school to build on former experiences of teachers and student (e.g. whether someone is dyslectic and what has been done to remedy that). On the other hand you want students to get the opportunity for a 'fresh start'. There are experiences with what is called a 'warm transition' of information between the two schools to solve this dilemma.

Follow up on good practices
Temporary budget for projects to combat and prevent ESL create a dilemma. With the budget there is room to experiment and to develop good practices. But when the budget stops, many a time also the practice needs to stop because there is no alternative budget. This leads to a merry-go-round of temporary projects, and professionals are constantly busy with applications for new money, while the serious problems ask for structural budgets. Another consequence is, that utilization of methods and results of evaluated good practices, including dissemination to other municipalities, is problematic. Apart from dissemination adaptation to the specific local situation (including local policies) is also a bottle-neck.

Cooperation between schools/partners
Preventing and combating ESL asks for cooperation of all actors involved. In the current period of decreasing budgets and student numbers that becomes more difficult.

Transparant and consistent policies
The example of the city of Den Bosch shows the importance of transparent and consistent policy development and implementation. No exceptions, direct response. In the region of Ede it is reported

that some parents moved their children to schools outside the region, where the rules for absenteeism and ESL were less strict.

Mismatch between system and students?
In part absenteeism and ESL has to do with students that do not fit easily into the educational system and day to day school practice. A closer look into that matter might help to get more grips on what we can do to prevent ESL.

Trainee posts
To find enough good trainee posts in vocational education is a problem in the Netherlands. In general finding a post is the responsibility of the students. Schools have a list of qualified posts, but informal networks are important to get a post and some say that students with a Turkish background have stronger networks and find a post easier than students with a Moroccan background. Others say that at the macro level there are enough qualified posts and the problem is in finding the good local match.

Qualities of teachers and teams
Teaching students with diverse backgrounds requires specific expertise from teachers and school teams. The initial training and further training need to be more focused on that expertise, for instance on dealing with cultural differences in the classroom and school. In bigger cities the problem is smaller than elsewhere.
In the Netherlands teachers may choose to work at the school of their preference (contrary to France). The impression is, that the best teachers are choosing the better performing schools. From a macro point of view, however, one might want the best teachers at the schools that need them the most, for instance schools with students at risk of ESL that need the best support we can find. The balance between micro freedom of choice for teachers and the macro wish for the best support needs further attention.
Another aspect in that regard is the minority background of teachers and the wish that school teams mirror the diversity of society. That might be important for identification processes of students and we know that role models are a key factor in what students expect for themselves.

Relations between school, parents and students
In as far as school success is a shared responsibility of school, students and parents, we need to take the role of each of them seriously by focusing on communication and motivation.

What role for ethnicity?
In the bigger cities the importance of differences in ethnic or cultural backgrounds tends to diminish, since in super-diverse cities all inhabitants are part of a minority. Here the focus is on problems related to learning and other domains. In other parts of the country ethnic differences are still more important. For instance in the region of Ede student behavior is sometimes misinterpreted due to deficient knowledge of soft cultural rules of behavior (from both sides). Open communication is a key to improvement, a learning process for all.

New migrants

The last years there is an influx of new groups of migrants in the Netherlands, especially from the new EU members in Eastern and Middle Europe. This is a new challenge for educators in dealing with cultural-ethnic differences. With both familiar questions (e.g. how to learn a new language, or how long will the students and parents stay here) and new ones (e.g. does it make a difference that many Polish migrants are Catholic). The new influx is also an opportunity to adapt what educational professionals have learnt from earlier groups of incoming migrants tot the new groups.

What factors contribute to the success of the Dutch practice?

The idea of the Dutch ESL policy is, that the general national framework allows regions and municipalities to develop policies and programs tailor made for the local situation, including minority groups.

In the case of ESL the social-economic status is significant, not ethnicity – although professionals need to be sensitive to the cultural background of all students. Is it not somewhat odd to keep on talking about ethnic backgrounds when students are from the third generation living in the Netherlands (and official statistics only look at the country of origin of the parents)?

Career guidance is a factor in preventing ESL. Apart from students also parents need to be involved, they both might have images of professions that need not be correct (for instance that a plumber can earn a very good living). One of the reasons to drop out of school, for instance at schools for vocational education, is that students do not know what career perspective to choose. To find an educational perspective that matches both the capacities and the interest of students can help to prevent absenteeism and drop out.

Listening to students and parents and paying attention to them is important, we need to talk with them and not about them.

The knowledge of professionals working to prevent and combat ESL needs to be shared and made available in different ways for municipalities, schools and social work. That goes also for knowledge about cultural sensitive professionalism and the broader view of all problems students encounter in life (for instance regarding bonding with adults and school, or their situation at home).

The diversity among the student population of a school might at best be mirrored by the diversity in the school team. That can help mutual understanding and role modelling, it also allows for talking your mother tongue with some teachers.

Teachers need to be empowered to deal with changes in (the diversity of) the student population. Schools need to have clear rules and strict implementation.

4. Second plenary session

The discussion in the small groups was summarized and in that was also a way to reach the conclusions of the meeting.

Group 1 (Martine Soethout)
Teachers play a central role in preventing ESL. Part of the initial and further training of teachers should be to learn to deal with diversity among students.
The school also has an important role to play, as have parents. They all should be partners in the education of children and share a responsibility for the development for their talents and their school success.
One of the questions awaiting a satisfactory answer, is: should there be specific policies for minority groups that are overrepresented among early school leavers in a region? More research is needed into this matter.

Group 2 (Maurice Crul)
People attending this group did not agree on whether it is desirable to have policies for specific migrant groups regarding ESL. They did agree, however, on the importance of the school team and the knowledge and skills they need to have to address cultural differences among students – also for new groups of incoming immigrants.
The merry-go-round of projects is a problem. It is difficult to transfer experiences and knowledge form one project to another or to bring continuity into a program (instead of subsidizing new projects).
The transitions in the school careers of students are moments with risk of ESL that need further attention. An example might be the new possibilities to send students away from schools of lower vocational training, especially since it is unclear where they should go to.

Group 3 (Guido Walraven)
In order to prevent ESL involvement of parents is important, and liaison officers (with a minority background) between school and parents can be of help for communication, for instance about mutual expectations.
Teachers and school leaders need to be sensitive to the cultural background of students. Both initial and further training of teachers need to give more attention to knowledge, skills and attitudes in that field.
The example of Schiedam shows how effective it can be to have students at risk of absenteeism and ESL in special classes in a regular school. Bonding of students with teachers and school can be nurtured there.

Appendix: List of people attending the meeting

The Hague, December 4, 2013
At the Ministry of Education

Naam	Voornaam	Organisatie
Arons	Esther	Ministerie van OCW/VSV = MoE
Benrida	Monaïm	Ministerie van OCW/VSV = MoE
Bervoets	Sabine	Gemeente Schiedam = municipality
Celik	Mustafa	Jeugd en Onderwijs = local team
Crul	Maurice	EUR/VU = Erasmus University Rotterdam
Elaji	Latifa	Forum = minority organisation
Endendijk	Liesbeth	Gemeente 's-Hertogenbosch = municipality
Es, van	Wander	Sardes = private consultancy firm
Esajas	Mitchell	New Urban Collective
Gessel, van	Dennis	Ministerie van OCW/VSV = MoE
Hadioui el	Ilias	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Hajji	Mohammed	ROC A12 = school
Hoes	Hans	ISMH/leerplicht RMC = municipality
Lucassen	Paco	Kenniscentrum Gemengde Scholen, verslag = Knowledge Centre
Mager	Nadja	Projectleider schoolloopbaanteams Rijnmond = regional team
Ruiter, de	Taco	JOB = student organisation
Soethout	Martine	Ministerie van OCW/VSV = MoE
Stam	Talitha	aio EUR, verslag = PhD Student
Sterren van der	Marjolein	JOB = student organisation
Waal de	Marco	Gemeente Rotterdam jeugd en onderwijs = municipality
Walraven	Guido	Kenniscentrum Gemengde Scholen = Knowledge Centre
Warmels	Taco	Stichting LMC = school
Weger de	Jeroen	Ministerie van OCW/VO = MoE
Woltring	Naomi	Verslag = Knowledge Centre