

This year, all around the country, teachers from most secondary schools attend special information-sessions concerning the implementation of "Basisvorming", the new legislation project concerning the reform of the first three years of secondary education.

Next year schools may already start offering the "Basisvorming"-curricula to their pupils, a year later they will be obliged to do so.

Special in-service training programs are offered to help principals and teachers to get familiarised with the new ideas and objectives targeted for "Basisvorming".

Yet, this ambitious educational reform plan, being the end-product of a long standing, exhaustive political and educational discussion, is rather received with apathy than enthusiasm.

In this contribution I will try to give you some idea about "Basisvorming" in general, about its meaning for the future of the Dutch educational system, and in particular about its importance for the teaching of history and civics. Although "Basisvorming" in history and civics implies that teachers adopt many of the new concepts that were conceived by "didacticians" during the last fifteen years -heyday of the trade- I will end by pointing out that teachers confronted with the task of implementing "Basisvorming" will find themselves confronted with a lot of development-work still to be done.

THE SECONDARY SCHOOL SYSTEM

The secondary school system in the Netherlands has always been a categorical system, that is, it consists of separate types of schools. The system is selective: after primary school it sorts children into separate types of secondary school, according to their academic ability.

There are four types of schools:

- junior vocational education (*LBO*, three levels)
- junior general secondary education (*MAVO*, two levels)
- senior general secondary education (*HAVO*)
- pre-university education (*VWO*, two types: *Atheneum*, *Gymnasium*)

The first two schooltypes, *LBO* and *MAVO*, take four years, the last two take five and six years. All types of schools are rounded off by an examination. The examination consists of a compulsory and uniform nationwide component and a school-based component. Both contribute in equal measure to the final mark.

Historically there used to be a correlation between these types of secondary schools and the social status of the children attending them. Left-wing educators and politicians attacked the system on that ground, pleading in the seventies for "Middenscholen", comprehensive secondary schools. Time and again their proposals for a more comprehensive system were denounced by their opponents as leading to a "sameness" in which gifted pupils would not come to their own, while it would simultaneously be too demanding for the less talented pupils.

In order to improve the internal cohesion of the secondary education system and postpone a definitive choice of type of school, provisions were made concerning the first year of secondary school that facilitate an easy transfer to the second year of more than one type of school: the so called "transitional class". It was also made possible to form "combined schools" with one school board and one principal, consisting of several types of schools.

Critics, educationalists and politicians, continued to point out that the existing segmentation was detrimental to social emancipation and also far from efficient. A large percentage of pupils stays down one or two school years. The choice/selection at the age of 12 continues to be crucial, and regularly turns out to be fatal -causing loss of time, talent, effectiveness, pupil motivation and last but not least (!) loss of public money. Yet, the experiments with "Middenscholen" during the seventies did not inspire fundamental changes in the system.

Why then, were the new Basisvorming proposals eventually accepted?

Contrary to the previous middenschool-projects from the seventies, the present Bill emphasizes a renewed, adapted *content* in the first three years of secondary school. Structural changes towards a more comprehensive system have more or less been shelved -although the government uses strong financial incentives for smaller categorical school to merge into larger communities with other school-types.

The Bill covers the introduction of a *common core curriculum* in the first three school years of all four categories of school mentioned above. In addition the Bill provides -in a more general way- for primary education (which I will not discuss in this article).

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF BASISVORMING

The Basisvorming Bill is rooted in a thorough reflection which took place in the Netherlands, as in so many industrialised countries, on the nature and extent of the knowledge and skills required of every individual to function in contemporary society. The Dutch government holds the following factors to be of particular importance in this respect:

- *the need of a general raising of standards in schools*
- *the need to avoid specialisation at too early an age and to strengthen the common cultural basis imparted by education*
- *the need to encourage equal opportunities for both sexes.*

Basisvorming is to comprise a compulsory core curriculum consisting of 15 subjects for all pupils (to be taught during 80% of the total teaching time). These subjects are held to be of such importance that they should be studied by all pupils. In order to make this possible the number of weekly teaching periods in the first three years of secondary school will be increased from 30 to 32 hours.

The establishment of broad-based combined schools providing all four types of secondary education (LBO, MAVO, HAVO, VWO) will be encouraged. At the same time a limited length of attendance in the first stage of secondary education has been fixed. Pupils may spend a maximum of 4 years on the first (Basisvorming) stage of secondary education. Some pupils may, on the other hand, reach the attainment targets of the compulsory subjects within two years. It is expected that this will be the case particularly in the higher types of schools (HAVO, VWO). It is up to the individual schools to decide upon the organisation of the Basisvorming-curriculum within their own categorical structure....

Important in the introduction of Basisvorming were:

- *nationwide attainment targets for each of the 15 subjects (Dutch, Foreign Languages -elementary English, French and German-Mathematics, Natural sciences and Chemistry, Biology, History and Civics, Geography, economics, Technical education, computer education, musical education, artistic education (music, the arts) and personal health and home care and physical education) in*

the core curriculum. These targets were to be set by experts from the world of education and from society at large and they were to be formulated at *two ability levels* that should be within reach of at least 80% of the total age-group. It was again and again stressed that these attainment targets were to contribute to a common national educational culture and to the individual and social development of the pupils as future responsible and skilled members of society. Subject-knowledge as a value on its own was definitely out of the question. Within the Basisvorming-subjects attention was, wherever possible, also to be given to topics like environment, job-orientation, emancipation and social roles, multi-culturalism...

- *government provided tests, to be developed on a nationwide basis*, to safeguard the quality of education and to ascertain that the promised (by the department of education) improvement of the quality of education would indeed take place.

Schools were to be obliged to make use of these as part of the determination process to ascertain whether or not their pupils had reached the attainment targets. Denominational schools, of which there are a lot in the Netherlands, could apply for exemption and formulate their own targets in consultation with the National Education Inspectorate. Additionally they might, if that would appear to be necessary, provide for their own Basisvorming-tests.

Work on the attainment-targets, intended to be the cornerstone of the proposed Basisvorming Bill, started in 1987. As representative of the National Institute for Educational Measurement and Testing (CITO) I joined after some months the initial working party on the development of these targets for history and civics; during the Basisvorming years they had to be taught for 200 hours. As it turned out, we were beginning a long and strenuous journey. Only now are we witnessing the end of the process.

Not only in the Netherlands legislative projects like Basisvorming have been started; therefore I thought it would be interesting for the readers of "Mitteilungen" if I described the broad outlines of the process by which the attainment targets for basisvorming eventually were developed. This may also help you to understand some of the problems awaiting schools and teachers during next years of Basisvorming implementation.

1987-1992, ATTAINMENT TARGETS FOR HISTORY AND CIVICS - A SHORT HISTORY

1987-1989:

The first draft document was, like those for the other Basisvorming subjects, published in January 1988. It was a complex, oversized -and not very balanced- compromise between the different group-members. It was the result of a often heated discussion between the more academically minded members concentrating first and for all on a well defined amount of established traditional historical content and the more educationally minded who rather put their priorities on more general pedagogical principles and ideals to be realised with whatever history came to hand. The document was widely published and raised a storm of criticism especially from history teachers and their association, the

VGN. Especially for LBO pupils (to whom today in most cases hardly any history is taught at all) the targets were considered absurd. They were labelled as over-demanding, over-intellectual, far too detailed, and not at all fit for pupils of average and lower than average ability-levels (the ones Basisvorming was explicitly intended for).

With many other Basisvorming-subjects comparable problems existed.

Eventually all working parties were instructed to start again and rewrite their targets in a more general, less prescribing way, so as to give teachers more leeway to adapt them to their own circumstances and pupils and to give the politicians the chance to point out that they respected the constitutional right of freedom of education. That had become more and more an issue in Parliament since the almighty Christian Democrat fraction became more and more unhappy with the idea that Basisvorming might undermine the position of private denominational schools.

In the autumn of 1989 the second sets of objectives for all subjects were published. What had become of the first, ill fated history proposals?

After a lot of skirmishing, a compromise solution had been unanimously accepted by our working party.

A reasonably well defined, but much more limited, basic amount of specific historical content was agreed upon, while on the other hand its general structure was organised in such a way as to make also clear that all the implied knowledge was to be made subordinate to the social and personal development of young adolescents. Plain, traditional, subject bound knowledge could no longer be looked upon as a goal and an educational value on its own right.

It was stressed that *Basisvorming-history and civics should be taught in such a way that the subject would primarily contribute to the development of the children as "members of social communities, as consumers and producers, and as citizens of their national and of the world community"* -as it was literally put in the opening paragraph of a still later version of these targets. In order to achieve these ambitions a lot of emphasis was (like in other Basisvorming-subjects) put upon the development of:

- *general and also more subject-specific skills and abilities,*
- *the ability to recognise and evaluate values and value-judgements*
- *the ability to develop and formulate ideas and values concerning their role and position in society and the aptitude to put these plans and projects into some real, tangible practice.*

As compromising part of the proposal it was surmised that this educational and pedagogical orientation into the social-economic, cultural and political aspects of modern social life coincided by and large with the accepted orientations of mainstream modern academic historiography: social and economic, political and cultural history -thus making common ground for the more academically minded historians and those among the working party that had a more educational and pedagogical turn of mind.

Subsequently these elements were subdivided into the following sub-categories in which the eventual attainment targets were organised:

- *livelihood and environment, social relations, family relationships*
- *inner political relations en developments, international political relations and developments*
- *material culture, religion and philosophy of life.*

To this a separate subset of targets regarding *skills and abilities* was added, as well as a set dealing exclusively with *civics*.

Civics became defined as a subject being as well entwined with history as also something separate: its object being the organisation and actual functioning of the political system in society.

The specific attainment targets within this framework numbered 56; about one third from those in the original, so unfavourably received, draft. As far as their specific content was concerned: compared to the traditional secondary-school curriculum the bulk of ancient history and the history of the middle ages had gone. What remained were the elementary outlines of social-economical development in world history and a some topics taken from ancient classical cultural history. In the political, cultural and social-economic history since the 16th century the national element was strengthened; in 20th century history attention was also focused on the second world war and, quite extensively, on international political developments in the second half of the century. European 18th and 19th century history had by and large faded into the background.

This time, the reactions were far more favourable, as at least the criticism that it would be impossible to teach LBO and most MAVO pupils all of the old curriculum had been seriously taken into account. The Association of History Teachers welcomed the new educational orientation of the subject; some LBO and MAVO teachers feared that still too much academic history had been spelled out, others thought that the separate section on skills and abilities were too ambitious for their less gifted pupils. Many VWO teachers felt reassured that for their pupils enough time would remain to cover more traditional history than the elementary Basisvorming-program implied. On the whole it appeared that the new targets pointed in the right direction. Now it was up to parliament to decide.... it seemed.

1989-1992:

Then in the autumn of 1989 the government-coalition fell apart (though not on its educational policies). After the elections the centre-right coalition was replaced by a centre-left coalition. It stuck to Basisvorming but set out to make some important changes in the original concept.

The former two ability-levels approach was abolished. A new working-party, with some heavy-weight educationalist in it -no members of the groups that were responsible for the first two drafts were invited- was appointed in the spring of 1990. To accommodate the fear of the Christian Democrats in parliament, that -from the point of view of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of education- the original Basisvorming attainment targets had been made far too specific, it was given the task of revising and globalizing the targets for *all* (!) Basisvorming-subjects. Their total number was to be severely reduced and each target should become far less specific than in the original first two drafts of the professional specialists.

This new working party was also asked to take into account the possibility of a future more or less structural combination or even (facultative) merging of different school-subjects or aspects of them (for example regarding environmental topics). Especially history, economics and geography, were singled out for this approach.

The new targets were finished in the autumn of 1990.

The 14 attainment targets spelled out for History and Civics were essentially a generalised abstract of the former second version, with only some relatively minor changes.

The new targets did not raise many reactions from the teaching community, publicity for them was really low key. The preparations for Basisvorming were demanding so much backroom-political finesse and taking so much time that the initial public interest had waned and made place for a far more sceptical and complacent wait and see attitude.

Then -at last- in the summer of 1991, Basisvorming did get the green light from the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament, pending new arrangements on the still not definite attainment-targets and more clarity about the final tests that pupils had to pass at the end of Basisvorming. These crucial details had been left out of the parliamentary debate -probably as a political precaution. The

secretary of education promised extra consultations and more definite statements at a later moment...

So, yet another revision of the attainment-targets got on its way, this time as a consequence of severe criticisms from the important National Advisory Body for Education. These revisions were published at the end of last year. On them the government-provided "information-sessions" mentioned at the beginning of this article were based.

At this moment (January 1992) the department of education has not yet made public its ideas about the status and possible function of the Basisvorming tests it had proposed to make available to the schools at the end of the Basisvorming-period. Given the example by the first parliamentary discussions it can be expected that nothing specific is to be expected until after the upper house of Parliament has in its turn discussed and accepted Basisvorming (which is expected to happen next month).

All this, of course, goes a long way towards explaining the lukewarm reception of Basisvorming in the schools. Yet, there are more fundamental difficulties to be dealt with than the subtleties and delays caused by the political rules of the game.

- it will take both time and good examples to make clear that the new educational orientation of history-teaching does not amount to some kind of well intended social-indoctrination. The already existing swing from a mere chronological school-curriculum to a far more thematic approach has to gain even more momentum.

- although a skills and abilities based textbook has been available and became more and more popular during the last decade, many teachers are still unfamiliar with the idea of systematically paying attention to and improving their pupils skills and abilities.

In this respect a lot of extra work has to be done in all categories of secondary education where history and civics are an examination subject. CITO's national examination-tests for MAVO, HAVO and VWO, will in the second half of the nineties put an increasing amount of emphasis on subject-skills. An extensive in-service training program is planned for the coming years. That may also prove to be beneficial to the development of Basisvorming-teaching.

- especially LBO-teachers -many of them the least academically trained and schooled- will have to invest a substantial effort in structuring a history and civics curriculum for their pupils. They will often be covering new ground as the subject is, in many LBO-schools, until this moment hardly taught at all and if so, enjoying the dubious reputation of being far too verbal a subject to inspire any interest to the pupils.

- there will a textbook problem, especially during the first formative years of Basisvorming. Our National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) is working hard on proposals for radically new Basisvorming-curricula. It has yet to be seen if they will manage to lure market-conscious publishers to rush to these examples and copy them for their new textbooks.

- the certainty that there will be Basisvorming-tests and the uncertainty about their status and exact function and scope do not improve the conditions for early test-construction.

For the time being, emphasis is, at the CITO institute, put upon on the skills and abilities section of the attainment targets. I am trying hard to learn from the examples and information that colleagues in England, Scotland and Ireland were good enough to send me.

THE FUTURE OF BASISVORMING

As it appears at this moment, the attainment targets for Basisvorming are set, but and also far more vaguely than originally intended.

To what use will they be put? Will they really inspire quick and radical changes in the teaching of history and civics during the first three years of secondary education?

In inservice-training programs attention is duly paid to the new educational and pedagogical orientation of the subject. But, as there is yet so little established practice on how to teach (and test) these niceties to 12-15 old pupils of such a wide intellectual and social potential, a lot of uncertainty, or -if you'd prefer another word- "challenge" remains.

Added to that, the most recent revision of the attainment targets is not always very happy, especially in the case where additions were made.

This brings back the old problem of overburdening the less able pupils.

The committee responsible for the last revision also understood this and indicated that some of the extra's they added to the previous version, were to be "just basically known" by the pupils.

Teachers, it added, should bear in mind that not every target was to be studied in the same depth and detail. But, no indication has been given as to how to distinguish between the more fundamental and the more "just-knowledge-like" targets.... Their last word on this matter was that it would become clear in daily practice whether the targets set were to demanding, or not...

Is this optimism good enough?

At one of the information-meetings mentioned at the beginning of this article one smart question really roused interest: "who is checking me when I teach Basisvorming? What if I don't?"

If anything new or better is to be achieved during Basisvorming it is, in my view, essential that in the near future its structure and targets should become clearer and more school-based. It should be taught, tried and tested and consequently, if necessary, changed and revised. Not only, not even in the first place, by the authorities, but first of all by the teachers themselves.

We find ourselves at this moment only just at the beginning of a challenging and demanding -may be also of an extremely frustrating- process.

As we all know, time will tell -and I will keep you informed!