

Netherlands

Nicole Swart
Melissa in 't Zandt
Joyce Gubbels

Dutch Center for Language Education

Introduction

One of the key features of the Dutch education system is freedom of education, which is guaranteed by Article 23 of the Constitution. It states that each resident of the Netherlands has the right to establish a school; determine the education, religious, or ideological principles on which the school is based; and organize instruction in that school. Dutch schools, therefore, have significant autonomy. Almost three-quarters of the students in primary education attend privately run schools¹ that are founded on specific religious or ideological beliefs (e.g., Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish) or pedagogical beliefs (also referred to as nondenominational schools, e.g., Montessori, Jena Plan, Dalton). In addition, local authorities must ensure there are sufficient publicly run schools in their municipality. Both public-authority and private schools are eligible for government funding, provided that they meet the statutory requirements on number of students and classroom hours, among other requirements. All education is free for all students up to the age of 16, although most schools ask for a voluntary parental contribution for additional services such as class outings and school trips.

The Dutch education system comprises several levels of responsibility. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (national government) sets the regulatory and legislative framework for education provision while also structuring and funding the system. Provincial and municipal authorities have jurisdiction over the education provided in their province or town. School boards and school principals are responsible for the financial, personnel, admission, and education policies of their school and the education it provides.²

The Dutch Inspectorate of Education monitors the quality of education by visiting schools periodically to observe compliance with statutory regulations, and reports its findings to the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science and the individual schools. These reports are publicly available. Schools that do not reach the expected quality of education are placed under close supervision, are visited more frequently, and receive additional support and funding to help them raise the level of education provided.

Overview of Education System

The Dutch education system is separated into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The Netherlands has no provision for formal education for children under age 4.

In the Netherlands, the same primary school offers both preprimary education (Kindergarten; in Dutch, *groep 1* and *groep 2*) and primary education (in Dutch, *groep 3* to *groep 8*). Most students start at age 4 in Kindergarten, although compulsory schooling does not start until age 5. When students are (almost) 6 years old, they start primary education (*groep 3*). Students automatically are promoted to the next grade in primary school; however, depending on academic progress, the school can decide (in consultation with the parents) on retention of students. Most students are 12 years old when they start secondary education.

Secondary education in the Netherlands consists of three tracks, which represent different education paths based on a student's academic level and interests. Recommendations from classroom teachers and test scores on an obligatory test in the final grade of primary school are considered when determining the most appropriate secondary school track for each student.

- **Prevocational secondary education (VMBO):** This track, which lasts for four years, offers basic vocational, middle management vocational, combined vocational and theoretical, and theoretical learning pathways. During the first two years, students follow a general curriculum, after which they choose an occupational sector with a view to further vocational education and training, and their future jobs. After completing prevocational secondary education, students may continue to vocational secondary education or senior general secondary education.³
- **Senior general secondary education (HAVO):** This track, which lasts for five years, offers three years of general education, after which students choose one of four specialized programs: science and technology, science and health, economics and society, and culture and society. Upon completion of one of these programs, students can continue to an additional preuniversity secondary education program or a higher vocational education program.⁴
- **Preuniversity secondary education (VWO):** This track, which lasts for six years, offers the same four programs as senior general secondary education. After completing a program, students may continue to higher education in a three-year bachelor's degree program at a university.

Tertiary or higher education is divided into two types of programs, both leading to a bachelor's degree: higher professional education programs (four years) and university education programs (three years). After receiving a bachelor's degree, students can continue with a master's degree program (usually one or two years).

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The government has funded the Netherlands' participation in international studies since the 1960s. The Netherlands participated in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)'s first international study of reading achievement, the Reading Literacy Study, in 1991; the country has been involved in its successor, PIRLS, ever since.

Although student performance has been stable between 2006 and 2016, the Netherlands is steadily falling in the rankings (2nd in 2001, 14th in 2016). In addition, Dutch students are only a little engaged in the reading lessons at school and students generally do not like reading. These results, together with a declining reading performance of 15-year-old students reported in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018,^{5,6} have led to several initiatives to increase reading motivation and reading performance of students in both primary and secondary schools.^{7,8,9}

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

To ensure a high quality of education in primary schools, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science prescribes a number of core objectives, established in 1993 and revised in 2006, that students are expected to master before they enter secondary education at age 12.¹⁰ The 58 core objectives cover Dutch language, English language, Frisian language (only for schools in the province Friesland), arithmetic and mathematics, personal and world orientation, art, and physical education. The freedom of education principle guaranteed by the Dutch Constitution allows schools to determine which curriculum subjects they will teach, the content of those subjects, how much time students will spend on each subject, and when and how the students will be assessed. Thus, the core objectives describe attainment targets only; they neither describe how these targets should be reached nor prescribe any didactics.

Summary of National Curriculum

Core objectives describe in general terms the skills and knowledge a student must have acquired by the end of primary school. The 12 core objectives for the area of Dutch language are divided into three sections: Oral Education, Written Education, and Linguistics.¹¹ In the Oral Education section, students learn to:

- Acquire information from spoken language while simultaneously reproducing this information orally or in writing in a structured way
- Express themselves in a meaningful and engaging manner when giving or requesting information, reporting, giving explanations, instructing, and participating in discussions
- Assess information in discussions that is informative or persuasive and learn to respond with arguments

In the Written Education section, students learn to:

- Retrieve information from informative and instructive texts (e.g., diagrams, tables, and digital sources)
- Write meaningful and appealing texts with different functions (e.g., informative, instructive, convincing, and enjoyable texts)
- Structure information and opinions when reading instructional texts and systematically structured print and electronic sources
- Compare and assess information and opinions in different textual forms
- Structure information and opinions when writing a letter, report, form, or paper, paying attention to syntax, correct spelling, legible writing, formatting, images, and, in some cases, color
- Derive pleasure from reading and writing stories, poems, and informative texts

In the Linguistics section, students learn to:

- Recognize, express, use, and assess strategies for oral and written language education
- Use linguistic principles and rules (e.g., distinguish between the subject, verbal predicate, and predicate components of a sentence; understand spelling rules and proper usage of punctuation marks)
- Acquire an adequate vocabulary, strategies for understanding unknown words, and the ability to use terms allowing students to think and talk about language

Since 2010, reference levels have specifically prescribed the level of knowledge and skills that students must attain in Dutch language and mathematics in any given year of schooling (primary, secondary, and tertiary).¹² This framework of desired learning results aims to increase the level of education generally and to improve alignment among primary and secondary education.¹³ For Dutch language, three main domains are distinguished (oral proficiency, reading, and writing) on four different fundamental levels (1F, 2F, 3F, and 4F). For reading, a distinction is made between reading informational texts and reading fictional, narrative, and literary texts. For both text types, it is described what students need to know and be able to do with respect to understanding, interpreting, and evaluating texts. The framework also describes what students should know and be able to do with respect to summarizing and looking up information in informative texts. At the end of primary school, students should at least master the first fundamental level (1F); however, the aim is for as many students as possible to reach the second fundamental level (2F). In 2019, 78 percent of students reached 2F at the end of primary education.¹⁴ Together, the core objectives and these reference levels provide teachers, method developers, and other education professionals with tools for shaping reading education in the Netherlands.

Formal reading and writing instruction begins in first grade (UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] level 1, Dutch *groep 3*) when children are age 6.¹⁵ Preparatory instruction in Kindergarten provides an introduction to phonemic awareness and

grapheme identification, which is used in instruction in the upper grades. Although the first year of reading instruction in first grade includes reading stories, few instructional activities are aimed at developing reading comprehension; rather, instruction at this grade level emphasizes the acquisition of accurate and automatized decoding skills. Most schools adopt a curriculum for reading comprehension instruction beginning halfway through second grade, when most students have mastered the alphabetical principle and decoding becomes more and more automatized.

Over the eight years of schooling at the primary level, schools must provide 7,520 teaching hours with at least 3,520 hours in the first four years and at least 3,760 hours in the last four years. Schools are free to divide the remaining 240 hours themselves between the lower and upper years. Primary schools are free to determine the length of a school day so the timetables can be adjusted to the needs of the school, the students, or parents. There are no official guidelines as to the number of hours schools have to spend on teaching language and reading. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education, however, advises spending at least 8 hours a week on lessons related to language and reading; for schools with a relatively large number of students with a language deficiency, this should be 9 to 10 hours a week. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science determines the dates of the beginning and end of the school year and the length and dates of the summer (six weeks), Christmas (two weeks), and May (one week) holidays; all other vacations are decided by the schools (although advised dates are given for the holidays in the fall and spring, schools can differ from these dates when the school's participation council agrees).

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

There are three different training options for future primary school teachers: a higher professional education program, a combination of a higher professional education program and a university program, and a university program. All programs consist of a combination of theoretical education and practical work experience in primary or special education (at least one day a week).

Primary school teacher education colleges (higher professional education) provide four-year preservice programs for students who have finished vocational secondary education (level 4), senior general secondary education, or preuniversity education. After completion, students receive a bachelor's degree that qualifies them to teach all subjects across the primary school curriculum. Students entering teacher education colleges after completing vocational secondary education or senior general secondary education have to pass a geography, history, and nature & technology test; this is not required for students having a preuniversity diploma.¹⁶ During the first year of teacher education college, students have to pass a test of mathematics skills to guarantee standards of competency. If they have not passed, they cannot continue to the next year. In addition to testing mathematical skills, some schools also test Dutch language skills. Students not passing the test cannot continue to the next year.¹⁷

Since 2008, four-year programs combining higher professional education programs for primary school teacher education colleges and academic teacher education courses at university level have been available. These combination programs were created to increase teachers' academic potential and are only accessible for students with a preuniversity degree, a bachelor's degree, or after completing the first year of primary school education college. Since 2017, full university-level three-year programs have been available. These programs are also only available for students with a preuniversity degree, a bachelor's degree, or after completing the first year of primary school education college. The majority of primary school teachers still start working with a higher professional education degree after completing primary school teacher education college.

Additional noncompulsory training is available to teachers in various fields through teacher education colleges and institutions such as school advisory services. Teachers can decide whether they want additional education and in what subject (e.g., language and arithmetic seminars, coaching of teachers, inclusive education, and children's behavior).¹⁸ Training is provided for primary education professionals taking on new roles, such as internal student counselors, arithmetic and language coordinators, junior and senior department coordinators, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) coordinators.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Since the 2014–2015 academic year, primary schools have been required to use a student monitoring system to assess the reading ability of students in primary education (Kindergarten and Grades 1 to 6).¹⁹ These student monitoring systems use standardized tests and allow teachers and schools to monitor the development of individual students and entire classes throughout primary education. In addition to these standardized skill tests, schools often also administer mastery tests to determine the extent to which students know the specific educational content taught over a set period of time (usually around 4 to 6 weeks). Where skill tests are used to monitor development and contain questions that are easier and more difficult than the teaching materials offered, mastery tests are used to evaluate whether specific educational objectives have been achieved and only contain questions about the teaching material during that period. Parents usually receive a report detailing their child's progress two times a year. Because tests are administered on a regular basis (at least two times a year), problems usually are identified at an early stage and subsequently are analyzed to devise a remedial action plan.

In the final grade of primary school, all students are required to take a final test to determine their individual reading skills. These tests are subject to approval by the Dutch government. Currently schools can choose one out of five possible tests. Results are used to determine the appropriate secondary education track individual students move on to after primary school, monitor the school's education quality, and monitor Dutch national education quality.

Special Reading Initiatives

The Dutch Reading Foundation (*Stichting Lezen*) was established in 1988 to promote reading for pleasure and to foster a strong reading culture. The foundation supports the reading policy of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science by allocating funds and stimulating projects that encourage and support reading. It initiates projects that, among other activities, promote reading and fund research. Examples of such projects are BookStart (*BoekStart*) to promote reading aloud at home; Library in School (*Bibliotheek op school*) to enhance collaboration between local libraries and schools to promote reading; and Reading Monitor (*Leesmonitor*) to examine reading, reading education, and literature education.²⁰ In 2019, after various alarming reports and studies on the reading skills of Dutch students, the Reading Coalition (*Leescoalitie*, which the Dutch Reading Foundation is part of) presented a manifest titled *Call for an Ambitious Reading Offensive*.²¹ With this manifest, they made an urgent appeal to the Education and Culture section of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science to arrive jointly at an active and inclusive reading policy, in which reading pleasure plays an essential role. Since then, various national, provincial, and municipal activities have been undertaken. In addition, a committee of ministers from both the Netherlands and Flanders (Belgium) instituted the Language Board (*Taalraad*) in 2018. Fourteen experts from Flanders and the Netherlands were appointed to work together on an action plan to increase the level of reading comprehension and the reading motivation of students in primary education. In 2020, the institution of this board was continued.²² Tasks of the board include following up on all developments with regard to reading comprehension and reading motivation, propagating the vision of effective reading comprehension education, and codeveloping guidelines for the implementation of effective reading education.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The national government was responsible for regulations regarding closing and reopening primary/elementary schools. In the period between March 2020 and June 2021, there were two government-imposed school closures. The first closure of all primary/elementary schools occurred on March 16, 2020, and lasted until May 11. From May 11 to June 8, all primary/elementary schools were reopened at half capacity: Students went to school for 50 percent of the time. It was up to the schools to decide on the procedures for this period. Some schools chose to have half of the students in the classroom while the other half followed the lesson online. In other schools, all students from, for example, Grades 1 to 4 were allowed to be at school on Monday, students from Grades 5 to 8 on Tuesday, etc. From June 8, 2020, to the summer holidays and from the summer holidays to December 16, 2020, primary/elementary schools were open as before the pandemic, with the exception of students or teachers who stayed home when they experienced any COVID-19 symptoms. Then primary/elementary schools were closed once more from December 16, 2020, to

February 8, 2021. After that, there were no more government-imposed school closures. However, complete classes had to stay home for five days when a student tested positive for COVID-19.

During the closure of primary/elementary schools, all students were obligated to stay at home. The only exceptions were made for children who had both parents working essential occupations (e.g., police, healthcare, teachers) and children who were in a vulnerable situation (e.g., no device due to poverty, unsafe home environment).

There were no official guidelines for the format of remote instruction. Schools were allowed to make decisions about remote instruction individually. Some schools handed out printed materials to all students; other schools switched to online education completely. The national government provided devices (e.g., laptops, tablets) to primary/elementary schools when necessary to allow for remote education for students who did not have these devices themselves. In addition, teachers could get a laptop from schools for remote instruction.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The government started a monthly evaluation of the continuity of education considering the disruption in classes and examined whether tests and examinations were still taken. An overview was made of how many schools closed due to a COVID-19 outbreak on which days and for how long they closed.

Moreover, a questionnaire about the type of education and experiences with it during school closures was administered to students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. Researchers also analyzed existing data about reading performance from the national monitoring system. In addition, inspectors observed several online lessons from multiple primary/elementary schools and they spoke with students, teachers, school leaders, and school management to get an idea of the organization and quality of online education.

Policy and Practice Changes

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more education settings continue to use online instruction. Before the pandemic, all classes and courses took place in schools, but now, for instance, universities are administering several classes online to their students. For fourth grade students, there are no enduring changes in their education. However, the national government created a national program (*Nationaal Programma Onderwijs*) for schools to handle the deficiencies and delays students experienced due to the pandemic. From a series of preselected interventions by the government and experts, schools can select an intervention to implement that the government funds. This is a two-year program rather than a structural change in education, but it is a solution for some of the problems students have experienced in relation to their education due to the pandemic.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the second school closure (December 2020 to February 2021), it was nearly impossible to reach schools to discuss their participation in PIRLS 2021. In addition, a number of schools that initially agreed to participate declined participation during the school closure or reopening period. After the school closure, most participating schools asked to delay participation from April to June, and some schools chose to do the data collection themselves. In the vast majority of the schools, however, a test administrator from the national center went to the school for data collection. Due to the strict COVID-19 measures, students and teachers with COVID-19 symptoms had to stay home, which caused some last-minute cancellations or low response rates within classrooms. In an attempt to reach the overall response rates, an additional data collection was done in the fall of 2021 with students in fifth grade.

Suggested Readings

Inspectorate of Education. (2022). *State of education: System section*. Utrecht: Inspectorate of Education.

Pulles, M., & Prenger, J. (2019). *Leesvaardigheid in het basisonderwijs: domeinbeschrijving ten behoeve van peilingsonderzoek* [Reading skills in primary education: Domain description for poll research]. Enschede: SLO.

References

- ¹ Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Educational institutions; size, type, philosophical basis*. Retrieved from <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/03753/table?fromstatweb>
- ² Government of the Netherlands. (2022). *Public-authority and private schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education/public-authority-and-private-schools>
- ³ Government of the Netherlands. (2022). *Pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO)*. Retrieved from <https://www.government.nl/topics/secondary-education/different-types-of-secondary-education/pre-vocational-secondary-education-vmbo>
- ⁴ Government of the Netherlands. (2022). *Pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO)*. Retrieved from <https://www.government.nl/topics/secondary-education/different-types-of-secondary-education/senior-general-secondary-education-havo-and-pre-university-education-vwo>
- ⁵ OECD. (2019). *Programme for international student assessment (PISA) results from PISA 2018: Country note the Netherlands*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_NLD.pdf
- ⁶ Gubbels, J., van Langen, A., Maassen, N., & Meelissen, M. (2019). *Resultaten PISA-2018 in vogelvlucht* [PISA-2018 results in a bird's eye view]. Enschede: Universiteit Twente.
- ⁷ Council for Culture & Education Council. (2019). *Lees! Een oproep tot een leesoffensief* [Read! A call for a reading offensive].
- ⁸ Reading Coalition. (2020). *Oproep tot een ambitieus leesoffensief* [Call for an ambitious reading offensive]. Retrieved from <https://tijdvooreenleesoffensief.nl>
- ⁹ Language Board. (2018). Retrieved from <https://taalunie.org/informatie/37/taalraad-begrijpend-lezen>

-
- ¹⁰ Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. (2006). *Kerndoelen primair onderwijs* [Core objectives primary education]. The Hague: Author.
 - ¹¹ Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development. (n.d.). *Appendix: Core objectives primary education*. Retrieved from http://www.slo.nl/primair/kerndoelen/Kerndoelen_English_version.doc
 - ¹² Expert Group Continuous Learning Lines Language and Math. (2008). *Over de drempels met taal en rekenen* [Crossing the thresholds of reading and mathematics]. Enschede: Author.
 - ¹³ Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development. (2009). *Curriculum in development*. Enschede: Author.
 - ¹⁴ The Dutch Inspectorate of Education. (2020). *Peil. Taal en rekenen einde basisonderwijs: 2018-2019* [Level. Language and mathematics end of primary education: 2018-2019]. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education.
 - ¹⁵ UNESCO. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-2011-en.pdf>
 - ¹⁶ Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. (2014). *Nieuwe toelatingseisen voor de pabo* [New admission requirements for teacher education]. The Hague: Author.
 - ¹⁷ Government of the Netherlands. (2022). *Taal en rekenen op de pabo* [Dutch language and mathematics in primary school teacher education colleges]. Retrieved from <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/taal-en-rekenen/taal-en-rekenen-op-lerarenopleidingen>
 - ¹⁸ ResearchNed. (2015). *Vraag en aanbod nascholing voor leerkrachten in het primair onderwijs* [Supply and demand continuing education for teachers in primary education]. Nijmegen: Author.
 - ¹⁹ Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. (n.d.). *Hoe legt de basisschool de prestaties van mijn kind vast?* [How does the school determine the performance of my child?]. Retrieved from <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/basisonderwijs/vraag-en-antwoord/hoe-legt-de-basisschool-de-prestaties-van-mijn-kind-vast>
 - ²⁰ Dutch Reading Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.lezen.nl/dutch-reading-foundation/>
 - ²¹ Reading Coalition. (2020). *Oproep tot een ambitieus leesoffensief* [Call for an ambitious reading offensive]. Retrieved from <https://tijdvooreenleesoffensief.nl>
 - ²² Language Board. (2020). *Instellingsbesluit ten behoeve van een Taalraad Begrijpend Lezen* [Decree establishing a Language Council for Reading Comprehension]. Retrieved from <https://taalunie.org/informatie/37/taalraad-begrijpend-lezen>