

The 6-minus mentality in Dutch education

Today I will present a short introduction on the so-called 6-minus mentality ('zesjescultuur') in Dutch education. My audience will consist of highschool teachers from Belgium, Sweden and the Netherlands. They are taking part in an international project on talent development. I am not familiar with the Belgian or Swedish educational system. The Dutch Wikipedia says that Swedish teachers give no marks at all, because marking would make students unnecessarily nervous.¹ So I will address my audience as if I were a cultural antropologist addressing foreigners coming from Mars. Then, first it's important to note that Dutch teachers use a ten-point scale: 10 represents the highest mark, 1 the lowest, 5 is a fail, 6 is just enough to pass an exam. I will explain why Dutch students are not eager to get high marks; and why it is not easy at all for Dutch students to get high marks.

Yes, it is a fact. American teachers would be highly amazed that so many Dutch students get marks as low as D or D-minus (or even F), when graded on a ABCDF-scale. Dutch students are happy when getting a 6-minus mark. The Belgian and French equivalent is 10 out of 20. Dutch teachers, when asked about it, complain that the youth, nowadays, have a calculating, six-minus mentality. They are infected by a 6-minus culture (zesjescultuur). Time and again, students will barely leap the ditch: they barely reach the other side of the ditch with dry heels, as we say in Holland. But Dutch teachers are wrong. They should not blame their students, but they should hold the Dutch educational system responsible. I will indicate nine factors that produce low marks in Dutch secondary schools.²

1. Dutch marking system is essentially: Pass or Fail

In Holland student performance is marked in a dichotomous way: Pass or Fail. However, these two marks are differentiated on a ten-point scale. A Pass may be marked as:

6 = satisfactory, 7= more than satisfactory, 8= good, 9= very good, 10= excellent.

And a Fail is differentiated as well:

5 = questionable/unsatisfactory, 4= quite unsatisfactory, 3= bad, 1/2= very bad.

So, marks higher or lower than six are not meant to indicate how much the student has learned or achieved in an absolute sense, but only how much the achievement is beyond or below the 'satisfactory'-level. Thus, the Dutch ten-point scale is only an ordinal scale around the 6-score. Moreover, students are not being 'graded on the curve' (according to a normal distribution): marks do not indicate how well this student has achieved in comparison with the other students in his or her class.³

2. A Dutch Pass is fully sufficient for a succesful school career

An American student who has an average mark (GPA) of D-minus is performing very badly. He won't get very far. But a Dutch 6-minus student is performing satisfactorily: he or she will pass to the next school year and in the end he or she can pass to university. In an economic sense, a Dutch mark beyond 6 has no surplus value. A mark beyond 6 is meant as a positive incentive, but it ads no extra value to one's educational career.⁴

3. It is not the marks that count but the school-type you are in

At the end of primary school, 11-year old pupils have a nation-wide achievement test in Dutch and Arithmetics (the so-called CITO-test):

- students with the best scores can go to the six-year Independent Grammar School ('Gymnasium' with Latin and Greek in the core curriculum), preparing for university;⁵
- the somewhat lesser scores go to the six-year VWO-department (with Latin and Greek as optionals), preparing for university as well;
- students with lower scores go to the five-year HAVO-department, preparing for the professional schools (such as the non-university polytechnics);
- or else you go to the four-year pre-vocational VMBO-department (either the 'high' theoretical or mixed stream, or any of the two 'lower' streams), preparing for the vocational schools.

		post-secondary education					
primary education (age 4-11)	VMBO: age 12-16 (pre-vocational)	mbo1					
		mbo2 (2 yrs)					
		mbo3 (3 yrs)					
		mbo4 (4 yrs)					
	HAVO (pre-professional)	professional school (HBO)			master's degree (1 or 2 yrs)		
VWO (pre-university)	university (bachelor's degree)						
VWO: independent gymnasium							
		secondary education					

So, after primary school you try to get admission to a school-type as high-ranking as possible (eventually via the first transition year, which is meant to be a selection and allocation period). Once you have been admitted, you try to cling to that school-type. If your marks will drop below the 6-level, you risk a degradation to a lower-ranking school-type. But higher marks won't promote you to a higher-ranking school-type.

4. Holland is a class-ridden society

Dutch upper-middleclass and upperclass want their children to go to the Independent Gymnasium or to the VWO-department (and afterwards to the university), even if they have barely enough talent for such a school career. They prefer their children to repeat a year, rather than to be degraded to HAVO or VMBO. So, 6-minus students may be upper-middleclass or upperclass students who do their utmost to stay in their high-ranking school-type.

5. Dutch post-secondary education has no entrance examinations

After the transition from primary to secondary education, there are no strict entrance examinations.^{4, 6} Secondary education concludes with a final examination and if you pass that examination you are automatically admitted to university or professional school or vocational school (provided that you have passed the required subjects). Each school-type has its own nation-wide final examination. To a certain extent students can choose their own subjects, but the minimum-level to be reached is fixed. If you don't reach that level you will fail the exam and then you have to resit the whole exam the following year.

6. Continuous selection

As a fixed minimum-level of performance is required at the final examination, entrance to the intermediate years is restricted. Students are not admitted to the next year within their school-type unless they have reached the level that is required to start in that next form. If they have not reached that level, they have to repeat the year they are in, or they will be degraded to a lower school-type.

Also, when you have passed the final examination, you are admitted to university, or professional school or vocational school (provided that you have passed the required subjects). But there again you study at your own risk. You don't get any assurance that you will succeed, for you have to reach a fixed final minimum-level.

7. No restrictions on study duration

As you have seen, Dutch students are allowed to repeat a form. They are allowed to be lazy in one school year and repeat the form in their next school year. So, getting low marks in one school year is no problem, for the student can take a second chance next year. This a dominant characteristic of the system of secondary and post-secondary education in the Netherlands: final requirements are fixed and study duration is more or less free.⁷ If the teachers cannot count on the diligence and good will of their students, they tend to get demoralized. Students as well as teachers lack the framework provided by Anglo-Saxon systems: try to reach a level as high as you can (and marks as high as you can get) within a fixed study duration.⁸

8. No honours programs, no advanced placement

Students who achieve high marks, are not rewarded with an advanced placement or with placement in a more challenging honours course.⁹ Every student within the school-type follows the same track, however boring that may be for highly talented students.¹⁰ Still, boredom is not widespread in secondary and tertiary education, for the pace of instruction is attuned to the better students, - say to the 75th percentile of the ability ranking in a class. Students of lesser ability have to work very hard to keep up with the teacher's pace and they will earn no marks beyond 6 or 7.

This exacting school climate in each of the departments is brought about by the Dutch class society: the highest diplomas are an entrance ticket to the intellectual elite and to the higher social classes. But also, it is being continued by the competing subsystems of tertiary education. The universities (e.g. the department of pharmaceutical sciences) have to set very high standards in order to exceed the professional schools (e.g. the higher schools for medical analysts). And the professional schools have to set high standards in order to exceed the diploma requirements of the vocational schools (e.g. the school for pharmacist's assistants).

9. The Peter Principle

Do you know the Peter Principle? It says that *in a hierarchy every employee tends to be promoted until he has reached his level of incompetence*. This principle fully applies to the hierarchical structure of Dutch education. Every student tries to reach the educational level in which he or she is bound to fail. Or at best: he or she tries to attain the educational level in which he or she can only achieve 6-minus marks.

Conclusion

You might conclude from my observations that the Dutch educational system has to be reformed, as it appears to hamper talent development. That is not my conclusion. The Dutch system does not promote *high marks*, but it promotes students to reach *high educational levels* and produce *satisfactory* marks there. The Dutch system is rather expensive, it does not promote that each student achieves up to his or her full potential and it certainly does not make the top 10% of students achieve their full potential. According to a Dutch student leader this is not due to a *six-minus mentality of students* but to the *six-minus structure* of the Dutch educational system.¹¹ I agree with him and in this paper I have tried to elucidate the structural constraints in which the Dutch system is operating. Given this six-minus structure, it will take great efforts to encourage each student to excel up to his or her potential, but it is worth trying.¹²

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<http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl>

¹ <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cijfer>. See however: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Sweden. See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grade_\(education\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grade_(education)).

² A couple of years ago I published blogposts (in Dutch) on the alleged 'zesjescultuur' in Dutch university education: <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/?p=103>, <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/?p=207>.

³ When *grading on the curve*, the teacher uses a *relative* grading rule, f.e.: to the students whose performance is in the top 10% of the class, an A is assigned; B: the top 33%; C: the mediocre 33%; D: the worst 33%; F: the very worst 10% of the class.

⁴ There are some exceptions. F.e. vocational schools, medical schools, art schools have special admission policies. Also VMBO-graduates who want to transfer to HAVO are subject to entrance selection.

⁵ A modern alternative to the elitist Gymnasium is the Bilingual VWO-department (TTO), where part of the courses are taught not in Dutch, but in English. At the end of their secondary school, students in this department are offered the opportunity to earn a certificate of English Language Proficiency which exceeds the regular diploma requirements. Another alternative is the Technasium: its VWO- and HAVO-curriculum includes Research & Development (Onderzoeken en Ontwerpen) as an additional subject.

⁶ Only after the first cycle of university education (the bachelor cycle), students are being subjected to entrance selection for the master cycle. But usually only the bachelor courses that have been completed, are taken into account and not the marks earned in those courses. Yet, since 2002 (when university was split into a bachelor and a master cycle) many universities have introduced honours programs into the bachelor cycle, in order to promote the transition of talented students into the master programs of the university. See: <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/?p=2110>.

⁷ Some enlightened schools even offer five-year programs for four-year VMBO-courses (and six-year programs for five-year HAVO-courses) in order to lead slower students in the most efficient manner, without repeat years, to their final exam.

⁸ <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/?p=2135>.

⁹ Some universities, however, offer 'pre-university programs' (especially in science subjects) in collaboration with secondary schools. See: Ria Bronneman-Helmers, *Investeren in getalenteerde jeugd*. In: *Investeren in Vermogen* (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau 2006, p.53-89). URL: http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2006/Investeren_in_vermogen.

¹⁰ However, there is one exception: gifted students are allowed to take additional subjects in their final years (in VWO: the 8th or 9th subject to be examined).

¹¹ <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/?p=2082>.

¹² As to the special programs mentioned in note 5, it might be considered if they should be transformed into real honours programs, i.e. programs where students are not allowed to repeat any form (if honours students cannot make up the pace, they should demote to the regular VWO-program). C.f.: <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/?p=1321>.