

## Citizenship Education in The Netherlands

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### Background information

Throughout the Dutch history government interference concerning citizenship education has been part of a larger debate about the freedom of education, guaranteed under article 23 of the Dutch constitution. The freedom of education consists the freedom to found schools, to organise the teaching and to determine the principles on which they are based. Within legal boundaries, both public and private schools are free to determine what is taught and how (Inspectie van het Onderwijs). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the catholic and protestant communities demanded the right to organise their own teaching and to determine the principles on which their education is based, and to get the same funding as state schools. Since the revision of the constitution in 1917 the freedom of education has been constitutionally guaranteed. The pillarized educational system (1917-1967) played a key role in the existence of the political and denominational segregation of Dutch society. This segregation separated the Dutch youth in different social circles and this lead to large differences in value systems (Lijphart, 1992). After the de-pillarization the denominational segregation rapidly declined, but the system of public and private schools organised under the freedom of education is still in place. Since 1968 the subject social studies (*maatschappijleer*) has been part of the common core curriculum, but it has only been taught at upper-secondary educational levels. In 2005 the Dutch parliament adopted the Law on the Enhancement of Active Citizenship and Social Integration that obligates primary and secondary schools to promote and stimulate active citizenship and social integration. Civic competences are included in the core objectives of both primary and lower-secondary education. These core objectives describe the desired results, for example 'the student has basic knowledge of the functioning of Dutch democracy'. The core objectives are included in subjects like geography, history or economy (Maslowski et al, 2012). Extracurricular activities focused on citizenship education contribute to civic competences as well.

### Definition

A formal definition of citizenship can be derived from the task given by the government to schools as described in the Law on the Enhancement of Active Citizenship and Social Integration: 'Education departs from the assumption that students grow up in a pluralistic society, aims to promotion of active citizenship and social integration, and is directed towards students' understanding of and acquaintance with the various backgrounds and cultures of their fellow students' (Staatsblad, 2005). In a letter to the Dutch parliament, State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Mr. Sander Dekker, writes that citizenship education is all about living together in an environment, a place and society with people you don't know and whom you don't feel connected with. 'Citizenship is about the knowledge of our political institutions, the applied rules of the game and the behaviour that fits' (Dekker, 2013).

An universal definition of non-formal citizenship education doesn't exist. The Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment together with the non-governmental organisation ProDemos published three core values of Dutch society: freedom, equality and solidarity

(Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2014). These core values can be found among the wide range of existing non-formal definitions of citizenship education in the Netherlands.

### **Ecosystem of non-formal citizenship education**

The Netherlands has a long tradition of non-governmental and other organisations which inform and educate both youth and adults about citizenship related issues. They develop their own extracurricular materials of citizenship education that schools can, but are not obliged to use, for example a school program on homosexuality or guest lessons about religious differences and tolerance. The target groups of these organisations vary from pupils, students up to adults. One of the largest organisations of this kind is the partially state-funded ProDemos ('House for Democracy and the Rule of Law'). Its main aim is to help explain the political system and the rule of law to a wide audience and to show what (young) citizens themselves can do to exert political influence. Other examples are the museum Humanity House (permanent exhibition for children and adults), Movies that Matter (an initiative by Amnesty International to promote human rights by movies), the Anne Frank Foundation, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) rights organisation COC, that advocates the rights of LGBT's among young people and adults. A special program for primary schools, The Peaceful School (De Vreedzame School), has been developed by an education service centre to promote social competence and democratic citizenship.

### **Legal environment**

The Law on the Enhancement of Active Citizenship and Social Integration was adopted in 2005 and implemented in 2006. Schools of all levels (primary, secondary and special education) have the task to promote active citizenship and social integration. Schools are obliged to promote active citizenship and social integration, both in their policies and in practice, as described above. However, the law doesn't prescribe in detail what schools exactly should do. This is a direct result of the freedom of education in the Netherlands, guaranteed by the Constitution; that gives schools the freedom to organise the teaching in their schools, including citizenship. The Dutch State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science underlines in a letter to parliament that he sticks to this freedom. 'This also relates to the way they want to pay attention to and to give substance to citizenship education. The identity of the school and the citizenship task are closely related. Moreover, it is of importance that the substance is tied to the situation the students of the school live in.' (Dekker, 2013). Schools are expected to have a systematic approach towards citizenship education including the incorporation of citizenship education in the curriculum of the school (Pertijs, 2014). In the longer term schools have to deliver evidence of the effects of citizenship education within their school.

### **Stakeholders**

As stated above many non-governmental organisation provide schools with extracurricular materials on citizenship education. Some organisations receive government funds to develop specific projects and materials, but schools always have a choice to use the materials or not. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science nevertheless legally obliges schools to pay for example explicit attention to sexual diversity, which is mandatory since 2012. School may use materials developed by non-governmental organisation or develop lessons themselves. Another example is community service-learning. In 2011 the law on mandatory community service-learning was introduced at secondary schools nationwide. Eighty one percent of the parents supported the mandatory community service-learning (Rijksoverheid, 2010). Three years later it was abolished as a result of a government change. Nowadays, many schools continue community service-learning voluntarily (Blankert, 2015). In both cases – the explicit attention to sexual diversity and the mandatory community service-learning – caused political and public debate with regards to the mandatory character and the level of state interference.

### **Challenges**

In 2012, media reports about the low levels of civic competences of the Dutch youth in comparison to teenagers in 37 other countries lead to a discussion about the causes of this backlog (Obbink, 2012). This is partly explained by the fact that the subject social studies is only taught at upper-secondary educational levels. The call for citizenship education has been risen since the heated debate on migration, the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn (2002) and film director Theo van Gogh (2004), and the polarised and fragmented Dutch political landscape. Even though citizenship education is prioritized, the debate about the implementation and the level of monitoring continues. As a direct result of the freedom of education Dutch schools are individually responsible for the development of their own vision statement and their own curriculum of citizenship education. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education is responsible for the inspection and review of schools, but as a result of the freedom of education the differences between schools can vary tremendously. Nevertheless the Inspectorate of Education does control for example if schools apply the minimum conditions, for example the development of their own explicit vision. One-third of the schools doesn't have an explicit vision on citizenship or insight in the social and civic competences of their students (Dekker, 2013). The problem is not that schools don't promote active citizenship, but often they don't know exactly how to incorporate their citizenship activities in a comprehensive school program as requested by the law. The national institute for curriculum development in the Netherlands (SLO) provides schools with information and tools to develop a vision statement and a citizenship education program. Another challenge is the measurement of civic competences and behaviour. A special instrument has been developed by the University of Amsterdam (Burgerschap Meten), but this instrument only concerns pupils ages 11 to 16. But the main challenge will be the overall increase of civic competences among young Dutch people.

*The article is based on a literature review, on interviews he conducted as the editor in chief of Maatschappij & Politiek (Society & Politics), and on his experiences as a teacher of social studies at the Katholieke Scholengemeenschap Etten-Leur, being intensively involved with the implementation of the citizenship education policies at this school. This article was proofread by Ingrid Faas.*

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