

Research Article

Forum

At the gymnasium through your football buddy's aunt. Accessibility of classical education in the Netherlands

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Abstract

How accessible is the field of Latin and ancient Ancient Greek languages in the Dutch education system? In recent years this discussion has resurfaced in the light of societal developments which focus on equality of opportunities.¹ Moreover, our field faces the challenge to explain in both international and national discussions what makes its study so relevant in the current times, both in secondary and tertiary education.² This article provides a short overview of the current situation of Latin and ancient Ancient Greek education within the Dutch secondary education system before looking in more detail at its impact on Dutch students. It ends with directions for improving the accessibility of the field of Classics education. In order to illustrate the functioning and consequences of the current situation, in June 2021 a large-scale survey among 1,700 Dutch students of the gymnasium (secondary education with Latin and ancient Greek) provides us with interesting experiences, biases and thoughts about the accessibility of classical education. If we believe that knowledge of the ancient languages and literatures is a valuable resource for the younger generations of our modern society and in addition we see that our field, as any field, would profit from a more diverse group of researchers and teachers, the direction for future improvements is clear; but concrete steps in that direction should be taken at various levels. With this article, I hope to contribute to such improvements to the educational system and contemporaneously to our field.

Keywords: gymnasium, Classics education, inequality, Dutch school system

The Dutch education system

Around April each year, many Dutch children at the age of 11 go to school with a stomach ache because they have to take a national test that seems to determine their future. At least, that is what they gather from the nervousness of their parents and teachers. Some children get expensive tutoring to prepare for these national tests. The outcome ranges from 'low' to 'high' level, although there are growing voices calling for a move away from those words towards 'practical' and 'theoretical' schooling.³ I am all for the use of other terms, but actually they should also cover different content: if in practice all students take the same subjects (Dutch, maths, English, history etc) at different levels, then it is silly to speak of practical and theoretical. I therefore continue to speak of lower and higher in this article, as is still common use in the Netherlands, even though they are unkind terms of an equally unkind system. The highest level is pre-university education (VWO) and it has two variants: with or without the classical languages Latin and ancient Greek.⁴ The first option is called gymnasium and for some parents it is the

only desirable continuation of primary school, while other parents have never heard of it.

In theory, the Dutch system makes no distinction between ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender or any other physical or social characteristic when it comes to options in secondary education. Primary and secondary education is free and every child in the final year of primary school takes the same test in April, the outcome of which determines which school type a pupil will end up at after the summer holidays. And should the test not accurately reflect what a pupil can do, there is also the teacher of the last class of primary school; she gives an estimate of the pupil's level before the national test and that estimate serves as a lower limit. A higher test result can still override the teacher's estimate. A lower test result does not. So, in practice, the teacher of the last class also has a big responsibility in advising. This sounds logical because she knows the children well and sees them not only during the days of the test but a whole year or even years into their development.

Theory and practice, however, are two different things. Research shows that opportunity inequality does exist, especially in terms of socio-economic background.⁵ When test scores are equal, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are significantly more likely to receive lower advice from their teacher. And if children are given a VWO advice (highest level), the chances of the teacher subsequently pointing out to them the possibility of choosing the

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gymnasium are very low, because the teachers usually have no gymnasium experience themselves and because, on enquiry, they are also hardly professionally prepared for their advisory role. In interviews, they said they preferred to leave the choice for or against gymnasium to the parents.⁶

The question arises whether it is a real option for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds to get into the gymnasium. There are sociologists who argue that the gymnasium in the Netherlands perpetuates a class system and should therefore be abolished.⁷ On the other hand, there are voices from people who actually see the gymnasium as a route for social advancement.⁸ Ideally, of course, class should play no role, either to get there or as social capital for those who complete the education.

In this contribution, we let the gymnasium students themselves have their say to explore the extent to which their experiences support the views we find in the discussions about the role the gymnasium plays in Dutch society. 1,743 gymnasium students completed an extensive survey about their route to the gymnasium, the role of advisors, their experience at the gymnasium and their ideas about access to the gymnasium.

Students about their route to the gymnasium

Profile of survey participants

A survey was distributed in June 2021 through Latin and ancient Greek teachers asking their students to complete the online survey.⁹ The response rate was vastly higher than expected; more than 1,700 students completed the survey. About half of them were in classes 1 or 2 (860) and the other half were divided between classes 3 and 4 (484) and 5 and 6 (370). One of the most notable results was that half (865) said they were the first of their own family to attend the gymnasium. This fact makes the results extra interesting, as it became possible to compare answers of these first-generation gymnasium students with those of their peers who also had family members with gymnasium backgrounds. The survey was anonymous, but it was possible to enter a postal code, which most did. This showed that students were partly from large cities and partly from less urban provinces.

Nudges and advice on the way to the gymnasium

A key question was by whom the pupil had heard about the gymnasium option. Multiple answers were possible, including the primary school teacher, parents, a high school teacher, friends and acquaintances or alternatives to be filled in by themselves. Since the primary school teacher's formal role is to advise pupils on subsequent education, one would expect most pupils to mention them at least. However, this turned out not to be the case. Less than half (760) mentioned the primary school teacher, which is remarkable considering that these students did end up at the gymnasium, but without their own teacher ever suggesting it. Within that group, there was no significant difference between the first-generation gymnasium students and the others, which at least does not indicate a bias from the teacher based on parents' education. Just over half mentioned parents as a source for their choice, and, unsurprisingly, this option was mentioned significantly less often by first-generation gymnasium students. This difference became even more pronounced when it came to the option of mentioning family members other than parents: students who were not the first in their family to go to gymnasium were more than three times as likely to be pointed to this route by family members.

First-generation students mentioned a variety of persons who had pointed them the way to the gymnasium. To quote just a few: 'the sister of my best friend', 'friends at Boy Scouts', 'the aunt of my football buddy'. Perhaps most shockingly, a large number of students mentioned explicitly and non-prompted that no-one had ever told them about the gymnasium. Their route to this school type seems to have been a series of coincidences. The conclusion cannot be other than that large groups of students who do not happen to have a friend's sister, a friend in the Boy Scouts or an aunt of a football friend who see in them a potential gymnasium pupil, will not have a chance to get gymnasium education. In spite of the absence of any formal barriers, a mechanism of self-selection and self-exclusion seems to play a large role; this is unacceptable, especially because we are talking about children.

Best practices to counter self-exclusion

That (self-)exclusion or the lack of any nudge to choose a gymnasium education is such a wide-spread phenomenon is of course problematic and some schools or individual teachers, aware of this problem, have designed successful 'nudges' for those children who would not usually receive them otherwise. A good example is the organisation of trial lessons of Latin and ancient Greek in primary school, given by either teachers or gymnasium students, preferably to pupils of their own old primary school.¹⁰ Another example is the choice by secondary schools to offer Latin and ancient Greek to all of their first-year students (including those who did not choose gymnasium and sometimes even those who will not continue with pre-university education (VWO)). And still other schools offer the possibility to students of the second or even the third year to start with Latin and ancient Greek which increases the possibility to receive nudges from secondary school teachers.¹¹ However, these solutions depend heavily on individual, usually extracurricular efforts, whereas the problem is structural and nation-wide.

Who goes to the gymnasium and studies Latin and ancient Greek?

The link between secondary and tertiary education in Latin and ancient Greek

A second problematic consequence of the Dutch school selection process is that the academic field of Latin and ancient Greek is not as diverse as it could be, because only students with a gymnasium diploma have access to the Classics curriculum and, as we have seen, the choice for the gymnasium is made at an early age by pupils (and their parents) who are underinformed and often even unrecognised as potential students for pre-university education. The popularity and student diversity of a curriculum like Ancient Studies in which either Latin or ancient Greek (not together) can be studied without any previous knowledge shows that the field in itself is attractive for a much broader range of students than we currently admit in our Classics programmes.¹² Admission rules are usually well grounded in academic experiences: the Classics programme leads to a level of mastering the classical languages and literature which is difficult to attain if you have to start at beginner's level. Solutions in other countries, however, could be of inspiration to the Netherlands: in some countries, the curriculum was extended by six months; in other countries, intensive summer schools are offered before the academic year starts, and, in still others, students without any previous linguistic knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek get extra tutoring (and have to work

harder in the first year). In all cases, the end level of the curriculum was kept more or less as it was.

So where do we go from here? Of course, the gymnasium education is not meant as an introduction for an academic degree in Classics, just like mathematics at school is not designed to prepare students for a Bachelor in this field. Secondary education aims at forming citizens who are capable of making conscious decisions and finding creative solutions in healthy collaboration with others. Is Latin and ancient Greek a useful contribution to this aim? We have asked the students themselves whether they find it valuable and for whom do they think the gymnasium is suitable.

The gymnasium and its students

When we ask the students about their motivation for the gymnasium and the type of student who thrives at this type of school, the answers turn out to be pretty clear and unambiguous: the curious, inquisitive student is right at home here. This is how a large group describes themselves and the type of student to whom they would recommend the school. The gymnasium, they say, is for students who want to be challenged. Other reasons mentioned are an interest in antiquity, languages or reading literature. Responses showed no difference between first-generation learners and the other group. Primary school teachers could benefit from this insight: they can recognise these types of pupils and at least recommend them to check out a gymnasium at the school selection stage.

Some direction for improvements

The survey confirmed the idea that first-generation gymnasium students find their way to this school type in spite of the biases and challenges they often face, when their socio-economic background is below average. The high percentage of first-generation gymnasium students is in itself a reason to believe that this school type does not perpetuate a class system, as some sociologists claim, but rather facilitates social ascent through the accessibility of the school type and the openness of the gymnasium themselves to a diverse range of students. On the other hand, the survey responses also show that the path to the gymnasium for first-generation gymnasium students is in many cases based on chance. There is clearly still a task there in terms of information and advice.

The survey showed that almost all gymnasium students felt that there should be more information about the gymnasium at primary school, for instance in the form of taster classes. As we said before, various kinds of initiatives for this have been developed by schools and teachers, but there is no structural or shared form to build a bridge between primary schools and the gymnasiums in the neighbourhood. Although organising this could be supported by teachers at gymnasia, primary school teachers need information not just about gymnasia, but about all secondary school types and about the difficult task of matching their pupils to a school type. In short, an effort is needed in coordination with other schools or, even better, at the national level to professionalise and support the task of school advising.

When we ask students to describe a 'typical gymnasium student', there appears to be no difference between what first-generation students answer and the answers of their peers. So the good news is that students themselves do not seem to relate school type to class or background in any way.

What the survey indirectly confirms is that there is a large group that missed the gymnasium as an option and realises this when it is too late, after the crucial choice moment around 11. Potential

Classics students within this group cannot study Classics, simply because they can no longer get a gymnasium diploma which is an entry requirement. Dutch universities with a Classics Programme (Amsterdam, Groningen, Leiden and Nijmegen) could collaborate in a preparatory language programme to increase the accessibility of their Bachelor programmes.

Conclusion

This article briefly discussed the results of a survey of the gymnasium students on the questions of how they themselves had arrived at that school and how they would characterise a gymnasium school student. An underlying question was to what extent pupils who attend the gymnasium for the first time in their families are given the same opportunities to attend this type of school. Unfortunately, the conclusion is that there is a lot of chance involved in the route to the gymnasium and that the role of the primary school teacher in particular as advisor of the school type should be better supported.

Notes

- 1 See Merry and Boterman (2020) for recent discussion. A website of the Ministry of Education on equal opportunities is <https://www.gelijke-kansen.nl/>. Van Gils (2021) is a short videoclip with interviews on the accessibility of Classics Education, made in preparation of the conference Monsters in the Classroom in 2021.
- 2 See McDonagh (2021), Remie (2022a, 2022b), Van Tuijl (2022), Eccleston and Peralta (2022), Fregonara and Riva (2023) and Oshokha (2023) for some examples in various countries of the discussion on relevance of education in Classics.
- 3 For recent proposals to use theoretical and practical education instead of higher and lower, see Huygen (2016), Visser (2022) and Pleijers and de Vries (2021).
- 4 See <https://www.government.nl/topics/secondary-education> for more information on the Dutch system of secondary education.
- 5 For opportunity inequality in education because of unconscious bias, see Hartgers *et al.* (2021) which is a report of the Dutch statistical research center (CBS) on school types and social factors like gender, migration-background and socio-economic background.
- 6 The outcome of the survey of students (see below) gave rise to interviews with primary school teachers about their role as formal advisor for secondary education. These interviews were part of the Workgroup *Classics in Primary Education* (2021–2022) under guidance of Dr. L. W. van Gils.
- 7 Merry and Boterman (2020).
- 8 See Thomas (2016), Crul *et al.* (2016) and Remie (2022a, 2022b).
- 9 The teachers were reached via the large professional network of the author of this article who generated a QR-code for the survey which was shared via LinkedIn and Twitter.
- 10 For instance, Classics teacher Alette Rosing at the Cygnus gymnasium in Amsterdam.
- 11 For instance, het 4^e Gymnasium in Amsterdam: <https://www.het4egygnasium.nl/home/nieuws/starten-in-klas-3>.
- 12 See Schulz *et al.* (2023) for an overview of interdisciplinary programmes like Ancient Studies at the University of Amsterdam.

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