Does the Dutch Education Model Still Make Sense?
Charles L. Glenn, december 2019

One hundred years ago, the United States and The Netherlands came to fundamentally different resolutions of what had been a much-debated question in both countries: what should be the role of schools in dealing with the social tensions and cleavages arising in their fastchanging societies? Should the provision of schooling be pluralistic, reflecting the cultural and religious diversity of society, or should it so far as possible reduce that diversity in the rising generation by providing a uniform "common school" experience designed to limit family influence?

The social challenges to which educational policy decisions responded a hundred years ago were, of course, quite different in the two countries, though in both cases marked by the concern to overcome what were perceived as dangerous social divisions. In the United States, these focused above all on the presence of millions of immigrants and concern that their children would not become loyal and contributing Americans. In the Netherlands, the divisions were based upon deeply-rooted religious convictions and associated cultural and social practices among the native population, and concern to protect these from the leveling effects of modernity.

Both strategies appear to have been successful. The European immigrants who flooded into the United States between the Civil War and the First World War were fully integrated in their second and third generations, with only residual traces of ethnic distinctiveness. The Dutch *Pacificatie* brought an end to seven decades of conflict over religion and culture, resulting in markedly less controversy over schooling than occurs in the United States.

Today, the challenge faced by The Netherlands is no longer divisions among Catholics, conservative and liberal Protestants, and secularists, but the presence of more than a million post-war immigrants and their descendants. There is no need for me to point out the widespread concern across Western Europe about whether the growing Muslim population, in particular, will accept democratic norms and become useful and productive citizens.

Should you Dutch respond to changed circumstances by abandoning your commitment to educational pluralism and adopt an American-style common public school? That's what the Vereniging voor Openbaar Onderwijs was urging 35 years ago, when I first became involved with Dutch educational policy (I still have their iconic Dick Bruna *Niet apart maar samen* poster!).

Treating the immigrant presence as a cultural challenge

In the 1980s, it was common in Dutch policy circles to say that *Nederland is een multiculturele samenleving*, and to assume that the traditional tolerance of Dutch culture would facilitate the gradual integration of immigrants or at least their children. Despite research by sociologist Mart-Jan de Jong and others concluding that the lag in academic outcomes of the children of immigrants had more to do with the social class and other characteristics of their families than with their cultural background, large amounts of public funding were dedicated to providing supplemental classes (OETC, later OALT) in the languages and cultures of immigrant children.

In 1990, I spoke at a conference in Rotterdam on Educating Immigrant Pupils. The speaker before me, Staatssecretaris Jacques Wallage, announced that The Netherlands would be experimenting with the American model of instructing the children of immigrants primarily through their home languages for three or more years; if he had stayed for my talk, he would have learned that, after two decades, we Americans had come to have grave doubts about the wisdom of focusing on home language and culture rather than on the skills needed for success!

It is striking, to an outside observer, how the focus of concern about the immigration-derived population in The Netherlands (and in other European countries) has shifted since the eighties from language and culture, seen as a single package, to the issues of underachievement on the one hand and, on the other, of religious alienation or, to speak frankly, the influence of Islam.

If Dutch policymakers were to adopt American prescriptions for these quite disparate issues, as was under consideration with respect to language and culture, what would that look like?

Addressing underachievement

With respect to the underachievement of youth from the minority communities (the primary focus of my work for fifty years in government and academia), adopting the American model would involve massive additional public funding to provide targeted programs – carefully designed to "supplement, not supplant" regular school budgets – in schools with above-average proportions of low-income pupils. We have been doing this for more than fifty years, since Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and the results have been disappointing, to say the least. If I have learned anything from my responsibilities in this area, it is that there are no "magic bullets," no quick solutions, least of all simply throwing additional funding at an educational problem.

I have also observed, however, that where there are strongly positive results, it is generally because of individual schools with strong leadership but also with a clearly-focused mission. Higher authorities may impose curriculum reforms or new methods of teaching and assessment, and these are sometimes helpful but are more likely to interfere with the strong school culture that supports achievement. This is particularly the case for at-risk students who receive little support for academic success outside the school and who may, as well, be especially vulnerable to the "great downward suck of the street" and of popular media. Only a school with a strong culture can help such youth to focus on and believe in the results of sustained effort.

In this respect, it seems to me that the Dutch are on the right track, with additional funds allocated to schools that serve at-risk pupils, but as part of the total budget package of such schools. This contrasts with the American practice of programs controlled from outside the school and the identification of individual pupils as targets of these services; while there is provision to use the funds for school-wide improvements, these must be supplemental, such as (usually ineffective and resented) after-school teacher training or purchasing electronic gear.

Of course additional funding can make a difference, but it is most likely to do so in schools with a clear and coherent mission, not distracted by interference from above, however well

meaning. The Dutch protection of school autonomy, and the steady development since 1996 of a variety of arrangements to make *openbare* schools semi-independent of local government, provides space to develop and maintain such a mission. This autonomy is rather parallel to that of public charter schools in the United States, and substantially more than is available to most American district schools. As with charter schools, it is important that government oversight not gradually undermine the *vrijheid van inrichting*, and thus undercut problem-solving at the school level.

Addressing alienation

And what about the threat of religious or cultural alienation? The anxiety about Islam is surely in part a consequence of the widespread abandonment by much of the European population of its own religious traditions. From the limited perspective available under these residual conditions, religion is no longer seen as a normal characteristic of individuals and of associations, to be accepted as part of the accommodation and even validation of the diversity of which progressive elites commonly boast, but is instead something unfamiliar and threatening. This has of course been reinforced by the unquestionable fact that a substantial share of the Muslim population has not integrated successfully into society and economy, and that there have been a number of incidents of jihadist violence across Western Europe.

The children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants in The Netherlands attend Catholic, Protestant, and local government-operated schools, as well as nearly fifty publicly-funded Islamic schools. Would their integration into the host society be more successful if they were obligated to attend common public schools with a resolutely secular perspective?

There are certainly voices within Dutch policy circles that urge such measures, as a welcome opportunity to press the case against educational pluralism that goes back many decades in secularist circles.

I am not aware, however, of any objective evidence that the pluralistic structure of the Dutch educational system contributes to tensions over the presence of immigrants. Studies by social scientists as well as by the *Onderwijsraad* (2012) that I am aware of have not found that the publicly-funded Islamic schools attended by a small proportion of youth from Muslim families have the effect of alienating them from adherence to Dutch society and its norms. The assassin of Theo van Gogh learned about Islam on the Internet, and a number of studies have found that few of the jihadists in the West had attended Islamic schools, and some had been alienated from the host society by their experiences in public schools.

The late Jaap Dronkers found, in fact, that the conservative instructional methods used by Islamic schools, with structured teaching and clear focus on basic skills (Dutch language; math; geography; history) compared with other Dutch schools serving students from similar families led to somewhat superior academic outcomes.

It is important to note, also, that the American common public school was never a universal prescription. Immigrant groups made great sacrifices to create their own parallel systems of schooling based on their religious convictions. Dutch Calvinists, German Lutherans, and of course Catholics from many countries created thousands of schools that continue to play an

important part in the provision of schooling, and these have been joined in recent decades by hundreds of Jewish and Islamic schools.

Despite what I have called "the Myth of the Common School" as uniquely qualified to form good citizens, there is ample evidence that schools with a distinctive religious character, including Islamic secondary schools (the focus of my recent research and book), do an outstanding job of nurturing civic virtue and linking it to deeply-rooted convictions. They do this by providing a coherent perspective on the virtues necessary to a flourishing life, by nurturing loyalties and shared responsibility, in a climate of trust. Crucially, they help their students to navigate between the norms of a particular community and those of the national community.

The inadequacy of lowest-common-denominator schools

Whatever the contribution of the common public schools to successful integration by the children of immigrants a century ago, it is doubtful whether they can operate as effectively today, either in the United States or in Europe, because of the loss of shared convictions. Braster and others have pointed out that *openbare scholen,* because required to be acceptable to all convictions and none, have difficulty presenting a coherent identity. As long ago as 1938, a Dutch school inspector and Social Democrat, I. van der Velde, suggested that a primary reason that the 'market share' of public schools had fallen to 31.9 percent was that "[i]n many cases the privately run schools show *greater unity from an educational perspective.* There is stronger leadership, more consultation between teachers, relationships that have a beneficial effect on results." The solution to the lagging popularity of the public schools was, not to reduce the autonomy and cohesiveness of the private schools with which they competed, but to enable and stimulate public schools to have the same qualities.

It is increasingly difficult to provide, within schools forced to reflect the broader cultural confusion, a true *education* in the sense of the shaping of character and of moral convictions on the basis of a coherent understanding of the world. In a world in which youth are exposed to the confused and cynical values presented by the media, many argue, it is all the more important to provide education rooted in a coherent worldview. Only schools whose distinctive character is purposeful and guided by such a worldview – whether it be religious or secular – are capable of giving a positive shape to the character of their pupils. Schools lacking such focus may *instruct*, but they do not truly *educate*.

In addition to often being ineffective as nurseries of character and purposeful living, schools without a distinctive ethos violate the religious freedom rights of parents whose children are compelled to attend them over the religiously-motivated objections of their families. Religious freedom, freedom of conscience, secularity rightly understood as the neutrality of government among religious and nonreligious worldviews, necessarily demand educational freedom. In a society in which individuals are free to seek to live by their deepest convictions – whether religious or not – and to raise their children accordingly, it is intolerable that they be required to send their children to schools which, explicitly or implicitly, dismiss those convictions as meaningless. Only by permitting and supporting a variety of educational options, each reflecting in every aspect of its functioning a coherent understanding of the goals of education and of a flourishing human life, can freedom of conscience be protected.

Continuing and strengthening the Dutch educational model

This suggests that the Dutch would be wise to continue their pluralist provision of schooling, leaving room for a rich variety of schools free to offer distinctive education based on differing worldviews by protecting *vrijheid van richting*, while continuing to hold them accountable for academic outcomes and intervening when these are unsatisfactory. This public supervision should ensure also that no schools are teaching in a way that alienates pupils from appropriate participation in Dutch society.

Please note: this reliance on initiatives at the school level (increasingly characteristic of *openbare* as well as of *bijzondere* schools) would not be to abandon the role of government in promoting the successful integration of newcomers into Dutch society. It would simply recognize that this will be most effectively achieved by drawing upon the Dutch tradition of empowering civil society institutions to serve common societal goals, thereby reducing conflict over cultural differences and the alienation that arises from treating the convictions of a religious minority as unworthy of animating civic virtue.

Surely the appropriate goal, with respect to the growing number for whom Islam is a central aspect of identity and moral orientation, is that, by being allowed space and respect for the expression of that identity, they no longer feel under attack or marginalization. That their children develop the virtues of critical reflection, tolerance of differences, and commitment to working with others for the common good. Only through such respectful but also demanding acceptance as Muslim citizens will they take their place as contributing members of European societies. As one of the youth we interviewed in an Islamic secondary school in the United States told us, "being Muslim is my way of being American!" Forcing young Muslims to choose between religious conviction and civic engagement is more likely to produce alienation than productive commitment to Dutch society.

Policies supporting structural pluralism in schooling as in other spheres are not just a way of avoiding conflict over fundamental differences; they are importantly a way of showing respect for citizens for whom those differences are life-defining, and for the associations and institutions which give them expression and continuity. Public policies that seek to nurture the health of civil society in one of its key sectors, that of educating the next generation, should go beyond hands-off restraint, and instead value and promote structural pluralism through continuing to provide public funding for a diversity of schools, including Islamic schools, that respond to the divergent beliefs and educational goals of parents. It is in such schools that the trust is nurtured which sustains civic life.

This requires confronting the common but mistaken assumption that national and social unity require cultural uniformity. In fact, efforts to impose such uniformity have often been the cause of bitter conflict in many countries, all the more bitter because it asks individuals and groups to surrender essential aspects of their identity. Surely The Netherlands should not repeat the arrogant folly of Kappeyne van de Coppello's Liberals, in 1878, when they set off the most bitter phase of the *Schoolstrijd* with their attack on confessional schools, arguing that these "stunted the full development of the individual and of the nation." It is disappointing to hear such charges made again in some quarters, against all evidence to the contrary.

Democratic pluralism is not a flaccid "anything goes," nor does it seek to impose a relativistic understanding of morality and the nature of a meaningful human life; rather it allows space for contrasting worldviews to be lived out with full integrity, subject only to the norms of common life, such as treating both the laws and fellow citizens with respect, while challenging either when they act contrary to fundamental human rights.

Dutch education law and policy allow schools some flexibility to adopt educational goals that differ from but are equivalent to those prescribed by law, but since 2006 they have appropriately been expected to promote "active citizenship and social integration." Posing this requirement but (subject to effective accountability) allowing flexibility in how it is met is entirely consistent with democratic pluralism, and offers the best conditions for encouraging school communities in which the desired qualities of character develop because based upon trust among pupils, families, and educators.

The development of healthy institutional life, including publicly-supported and regulated schools, within the Muslim community, as is occurring in the Netherlands, seems to me to offer hopeful prospects for integration without forced assimilation and thus without the conflict and alienation which has occurred
in France and the United States over efforts to make the common public school a sphere within which the expression of religious distinctiveness and convictions are forbidden.

Conclusions

Thus my recommendations would be that The Netherlands build on its strong tradition of democratic pluralism and educational quality by continuing, with renewed conviction,

• to address the achievement gap by maintaining and strengthening school-level problemsolving through *vrijheid van inrichting*, accompanied by strong accountability for results and special recognition for teams of educators who develop effective ways of challenging and supporting at-risk youth, and

• to address the threat of religious alienation by generous support within a framework of public accountability for those schools that make use of their distinctive *richting* to convince youth with immigrant backgrounds that their identities and convictions can play a positive role in Dutch society, and equip them with the skills and character to do so effectively.