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Rise and fall of the comprehensive school idea in the Netherlands. Political and educational debates on the Middle School project (1969–1993)

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eerj.sagepub.com **Linda Greveling**

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Abstract

Dutch comprehensive education eventually failed on a political level, despite support from many politicians, labour unions and branches in the educational practice. In the early 1970s denominational political parties strove for a Middle School to provide equal opportunities of all children by postponing school choice. From 1973 onwards, however, the Middle School was given a socialist appeal, which led to strong critique from both the right-wing Liberal Party and teachers in higher secondary education united in The Dutch Association of Teachers. By resisting, the right-wing Liberals struck a chord with the denominational parties over their fear of indoctrination and the threatening of the constitutional freedom of education. The many proponents, including those from the field of education, tried to influence the political debate by publishing their ideas on the Middle School, but their efforts were to no avail. The outcome, therefore, was that in 1993 there were to be no Middle Schools, only the realisation of a common curriculum for the first phase of secondary education.

Keywords

Comprehensive education, Middle School, educational innovation, secondary schooling, educational policy, political debate

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Introduction

Cumulative selection on schools constrains children's educational chances. In deciding about transitions, the interests of the child must be leading instead of the school's output. (Onderwijsraad, 2014a: 1)

This is the heading of a press release about recent research by the Onderwijsraad, the Dutch Education Council. The research shows that primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands create barriers for children by using more and more stringent selection criteria due to increasing pressure on improving the success rate of those schools. In their report the Education Council cautions against the use of cumulative selection, which could be harmful to children from lower social classes, to late developers and to children with a language deficiency. In the existing strongly segmented Dutch secondary school system, this is seen as more problematic, because school choice already takes place at the age of 12. Therefore, the Education Council states that children should have the opportunity to switch easily between levels of education, because: 'good transitions between educational levels give children optimal chances to develop their talents and to build a successful career (Onderwijsraad, 2014b: 2).

The Education Council suggests two ways to improve the transition between Dutch primary and secondary schools. First, the accuracy of school advice at the end of primary schooling should improve, because: 'a more accurate school advice gives children with equal talents equal educational chances' (Onderwijsraad, 2014a: 1). According to the Education Council, more accurate school advice also has economic benefits, because it diminishes school dropouts, prevents delays in finishing secondary school and reduces the amount of unutilised talent in children. Second, those children whose talents are not yet fully developed should receive a tailored approach to make up for any arrears before they go to a secondary school, e.g. by attending a summer school or by extending primary school by one year (Onderwijsraad, 2014b). This was not the first time the Education Council expressed their concern. In 2007 they published a report about moving up in education and the development of children's talents (Onderwijsraad, 2007), and in 2010 they published a further report about early selection (Onderwijsraad, 2010). The same concern was voiced on an international level, for instance by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), criticising the Dutch early selection at the age of 12, because it could limit the development of children's academic abilities (Amsing et al., 2013; Marginson et al., 2008).

This concern is not new. In the 1970s and 1980s, problems of early selection, the wasting of talent and the inequality of opportunities also existed in educational practice. While nowadays the solution is to be found in creating a tailored approach for children lagging behind and thus postponing school choice for individual children, at that time an institutional solution was sought by the introduction of comprehensive schools which were emerging in several Western European countries. The discussion on comprehensive education actually started immediately after the Second World War when 'going comprehensive' became the leading ideal in various countries, leading to the establishment of several versions of comprehensive education across Western Europe (see, for example, Campbell and Sherington, 2006; Henkens, 2004; Wiborg, 2009, 2010). Comprehensive education was seen as 'the wave of the future', providing equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background (Campbell and Sherington, 2006: 1). A group of Dutch school reformers studied these foreign solutions for comprehensive schooling with the same intentions, namely reforming the segmented Dutch educational system in order to reduce class-based inequality. The Dutch comprehensive school was known as *Middenschool* or Middle School. Although supporting the international debate on 'going comprehensive', the Dutch Middle School was never realised, with the exception of some experimental ones (Amsing et al., 2013; Greveling et al., 2014).

In this article we discuss the rise and fall of the Dutch Middle School project and point out crucial moments in its development. In doing so we take into account the perspectives of three important stakeholders in this educational innovation: the government, parliament and the field of education. The governmental position was studied by looking at the educational policy plans on comprehensive education. Its reception was studied by reviewing the Parliamentary Proceedings, which show the opinions of political parties on comprehensive schools. Attitudes in the field of education were studied using publications on the subject from various actors and institutions, such as labour unions and teachers' associations.¹ The historical analysis of these sources shows which versions of the comprehensive school emerged in educational policy, by whom these schools were promoted and by whom they were contested.

We present the history of the Dutch Middle School in five consecutive phases.² During the first phase, c.1950s–1968, the comprehensive school idea surfaced among Dutch school reformers and educational scholars. During the second phase, 1968–1973, comprehensive schooling was placed on the political agenda. In the years 1973–1977, the third phase, the Middle School project started with a few experimental schools. This continued the fourth phase, 1977–1981, but now the project became only a minor feature in governmental policy. In 1981, the start of the fifth phase, a new plan for the introduction of comprehensive schools was presented by the then government. But in 1993, with consensus having been reached about the introduction of a core curriculum at all levels of secondary education, instead of implementing comprehensive schools for all children from age 12 to 16, the Middle School experiments officially came to an end. Since then, discussion about the first phase of secondary education and the issues of early selection and equal chances has not stopped.

Phase I: The comprehensive school idea emerges among scholars c.1950s–1968

During the first half of the 1950s Dutch educationalists, although aware of the inequality of chances in the existing school system, regarded differentiation of 12-year-old pupils in different schools along the lines of gender and social class as a wise thing to do. They believed that a child's destiny determined their different educational needs. In the latter half of the 1950s the idea of comprehensive schools was at the forefront among Dutch educationalists (Bakker and Amsing, 2012). In 1957 the educationalist professor Hendrik Nieuwenhuis observed that: 'the comprehensive school idea "is brewing"' (Nieuwenhuis, 1957: 193; Schreuder, 2014). The main argument for introducing comprehensive schools was to create equal opportunities in education for all children regardless of their socioeconomic roots. Through postponed selection, school choice could become more consistent with children's talents and interests (Amsing et al., 2013). Next to social justice it was recognised that the inequality of chances for working-class children was also an economic problem (Bakker and Amsing, 2012). While in 1945 the Netherlands was deeply impoverished, by 1948 an 'economic miracle' had started. Until 1973 the economy grew nearly uninterrupted and with full employment rates, despite considerable population growth. The Dutch resurgence could almost be understood as a planned economy, e.g. by supportive industrial policy, taxation and social policy. This society needed all available talents, including bright children from working-class families (Schuyt and Taverne, 2004). In line with those developments, Dutch educationalists of the late 1950s were interested in helping working-class children to develop their talents. The comprehensive school idea fitted the optimistic belief that society could be engineered and the academic field of educational sciences should provide scientifically founded recommendations for educational policy and educational practice to improve education (Amsing, 2014). The educationalists found

inspiration for their plans to change the Dutch school system in the foreign systems of comprehensive schooling in Great Britain, Sweden and Norway (Greveling et al., 2014).

The 1960s and 1970s saw various versions of comprehensive school systems being implemented in Western Europe, e.g. in Sweden, Great Britain and Germany. In the Netherlands a new law to reorganise secondary education, passed in 1963 and implemented in 1968 and covering both the general and vocational tracks in secondary schooling, ended a period of discussion about renewing the structure and curriculum of secondary education that had started at the beginning of the 20th century (Amsing, 2002; Dodde, 1981). As a result of this wide scope, the law was called the 'Mammoth Law'. It introduced a one-year comprehensive phase to postpone school choice. The law also brought about the formation of schools with pre-university, general and lower vocational secondary education tracks within one single institution to make it easier for children to switch between tracks. From an international perspective, however, the law was less innovative than it seemed to be. The impact of the one-year comprehensive phase, the so-called 'bridge-year', was rather limited because of the distinction between a 'bridge-year' for pre-university, and general and vocational secondary education tracks. Moreover, almost no secondary schools were formed which combined pre-university, general and vocational education tracks. The result was that the existing hierarchical system of secondary school tracks did not disappear (Amsing et al., 2013; Deen, 1971).

In 1965, two years after the Mammoth Law was passed, the research committee of the Nederlandse Onderwijzers Vereniging (NOV) (Dutch Schoolteachers' Society) and the research committee of the Wiardi Beckman Stichting (WBS) (Wiardi Beckman Foundation), the scientific research institute of the Social Democratic Party, proposed a more radical solution. Both committees blamed the segmented school system for the creation of unequal opportunities between social classes and also for the problem of early selection, the strong focus on cognition and the lack of possibilities to move up to a higher level of secondary education. The solution was seen as lying in a comprehensive phase of at least two years, a solution based on their study of foreign school systems (NOV, 1965; WBS, 1965).

One of the people involved in these research committees was Professor Leon Van Gelder. He became the first professor in educational sciences in 1964 (Amsing, 2014; De Jong, 2000). As in other Western countries, scholarly interest in the child appeared as a new field of studies at the beginning of the 20th century (Hofstetter, 2012). The first generations of Dutch scholars who taught child studies at university started their work between 1900 and 1930, first under the auspices of philosophy, but from 1949 onwards as an independent academic field (Exalto et al., 2015; Sturm, 1992; Van Hilvoorde, 2002). In the Netherlands educational sciences, understood as the scholarly study of schooling, teaching and learning, was a specialisation within this field of child studies. Although Van Gelder (1972) thought that the Mammoth Law 'brought some improvement in educational thinking and acting' (Van Gelder, 1972: 21), he also firmly criticised the law by stating that it 'does not succeed in creating suitable education for all children' and also 'lacked possibilities to move up to a higher level of secondary education' (cited in Amsing, 2005: 78). In his view, the law was 'nothing more than a sum of the already existing, highly outdated, school types that originate from the nineteenth century' (cited in Amsing, 2005: 78). He claimed that working-class children rarely reached university or even higher vocational education and most of them ended up in lower vocational education tracks where they were provided with a one-sided and practical education. Van Gelder (1969) argued that if a child does not receive a proper general education, they are 'handicapped for life' (Van Gelder, 1969: 30). As a solution to these problems, Van Gelder and his peers called for a new educational system with comprehensive schools to enhance equal opportunities for all children by postponing school choice for some years. The ideas of Van Gelder and his peers and the proposals of the above-mentioned research committees laid the foundation for the Dutch debate about an educational reform that would soon come to be called the *Middenschool* or Middle School.

Phase 2: The comprehensive school idea is placed on the political agenda, 1968–1973

Comprehensive education comes up for discussion, 1968–1971

At the end of the 1960s the scope of the debate about the comprehensive school idea increased with not only educational scholars engaging in this debate but also other actors in society, such as labour unions and teachers' associations showing their interest in the issue. The ideas about comprehensive education also found their way into government policy. But in contrast to other Western European countries, the Dutch comprehensive school plans were not initially developed by the liberals, as in the Scandinavian countries, or by the Social Democrats, as in England where comprehensive schools were promoted by the Labour government and as in Germany where the *Gesamtschule* was implemented in some social democratic *Länder* (Amsing et al., 2013), but by centre-right politicians from denominational parties. In June 1969 the Catholic Minister of Education, Gerard Veringa, and his State Secretary, Hans Grosheide from the Protestant Party, ARP, who were both members of the centre-right De Jong government, suggested starting with school experiments that would unite the different tracks of secondary education (Veringa and Grosheide, 1969). This was accelerated in November of that same year due to pressure from a group of youngsters who had just entered the workforce.

On 1 November 1969, 10,000 working youngsters demonstrated for their right to education with a protest march in The Hague, the seat of government. Their main demand on this well-prepared 'Day of the Working Youngsters' was to have one day a week of compulsory general education during working hours. Although this right was already encompassed in the Labour Law of 1919, it had never been implemented. Therefore, these youngsters carried around pamphlets with an obituary that said 'With great sadness we announce the passing of our trust in Article 12 of the Labour Law, born on 1 November 1919 ...' (cited in Amsing et al., 2013: 470). Among their other demands was the introduction of a Middle School for all children aged 12 to 16 in order to postpone school choice. On the day of the demonstration, the members of the government were receptive to the demands of these youngsters (Amsing et al., 2013).

This was not that surprising because on the very same day as the working youngsters' protest march, a state commission, established in 1967 and chaired by Professor Bernard Lievegoed, published a report proposing to make secondary school attendance compulsory for one day a week for working youngsters, thus supporting their demands (Lievegoed, 1969). On 7 February 1970 the Minister of Education held a young workers' conference to discuss the Lievegoed Commission's State Report. At the conference State Secretary Grosheide pointed out that the education system needed to be reformed to reduce the influence of social and cultural backgrounds in secondary education. Moreover, he cautiously suggested the option of introducing Middle Schools, stating that 'the establishment of a comprehensive school *could* be helpful, but that it depends on the results of the experiments' (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1970: 9, emphasis added). The conference resulted in the government promising to start experiments with comprehensive schooling (Karstanje, 1988) and, thus incorporating ideas about the Middle School into educational policy (Grosheide and Roolvink, 1970). Grosheide promised the start of experiments and, if those experiments were successful, Middle Schools could be introduced on a national level (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1970–1971a).

In December 1970 the plans for starting experiments were subject to parliamentary discussion. In the Dutch political system, governments always consist of several political parties. In 1970 the government consisted of a coalition of the Catholic Party, KVP; the right-wing Liberal Party, VVD; and two Protestant parties, ARP and CHU; with the Social Democratic Party, PvdA, being in opposition. The KVP and the CHU as well as the Social Democrats responded favourably to the plans, although the CHU expressed some doubts about uniformity in Middle Schools and pleaded

for differentiation. The VVD and the ARP took a much more critical standpoint in the discussion: they feared that comprehensive schools would curb the development of gifted children (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1970–1971a, 1970–1971b).

During this time many organisations in the field of education joined the discussion. In September 1969 the socialist Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen (NVV) (Dutch Association of Labour Unions) expressed their approval for the introduction of Middle Schools (NVV, 1969). A year later the Algemene Bond van Onderwijzend Personeel (ABOP) (General Teachers Union), which from 1966 also incorporated the Dutch Schoolteachers' Society, NOV, also argued in favour of the introduction of Middle Schools (ABOP, 1970; Karstanje, 1988). Moreover, the national educational consultancy centres undertook pioneering work in the field of education by informing schools about the Middle School ideas. For example, the Algemeen Pedagogisch Studiecentrum (APS) (General Educational Consultancy Centre) organised many conferences to discuss the Middle School plans (Karstanje, 1988). The Christelijk Pedagogisch Studiecentrum (Christian Educational Consultancy Centre) published a report on the educational, cultural and social economic backgrounds of the Middle School and on how Middle School experiments could be organised (Meijer, 1970). Furthermore, the Katholiek Pedagogisch Centrum (KPC) (Catholic Educational Consultancy Centre) joined the debate and published in 1970 a series of three discussion papers (Van Lieshout, 1970a, 1970b, 1970c). In these papers the KPC not only promoted the Middle School as 'an extremely vital link ... in the entire education system and because of the fact that this school type will replace all of the existing secondary school types, it will bring about a complete revolution in education' (Van Lieshout, 1970b: 20), but also gave their thoughts on the curriculum (Van Lieshout, 1970b) and the teacher training of future Middle School teachers (Van Lieshout, 1970c). In the following year the KPC published a fourth paper (Koenen and Simmer, 1971) entitled *Middle School Experiment Now* in which they proposed starting a two-year Middle School experiment to begin gathering information for a definitive Middle School experiment, which should become part of the reform of the education system as a whole. They proposed that this introductory Middle School experiment should be carried out by the national educational consultancy centres, the Christian CPS, the Catholic KPC and the general APS in three experimental schools catering for all tracks of secondary education (Koenen and Simmer, 1971).

Besides organisations presenting themselves as adherents of the Middle School, there were also organisations opposed to this innovation, including the organisation of teachers in higher secondary education called the Nederlands Genootschap van Leraren (NGL) (Dutch Association of Teachers). These teachers fiercely resisted the Middle School plans through publications in their periodical called the *Weekblad voor Leraren* (Teachers' Weekly) (Tromp, 1981). Their main argument focused on concerns for the development of gifted children, an argument which is comparable with the opinions of right-wing Liberals and Protestants in parliament. Another argument was the lack of confidence in the effects of changing the structure of the education system without any scientific evidence (Karstanje, 1988).

The Middle School debate intensifies, 1971–1973

From 1971 onwards, in the Biesheuvel government, the Protestant Minister of Education, Chris Van Veen, together with his Catholic State Secretary, Kees Schelfhout, continued the work of their predecessors. Indeed, until 1973, the subject of Middle Schools was not controversial among politicians, although differing opinions between the political parties now started to take shape. The Parliamentary Proceedings show that at the time only the right-wing Liberals were against the Middle School plans. In their opinion Middle Schools would lead to the levelling of learning results, which was a problem especially for gifted children, thereby continuing the arguments they

had used in the parliamentary debate of December 1970. Furthermore, they thought that the Middle School was not a universal remedy for the deficits of the Mammoth Law. The liberals wanted to improve the existing secondary schools instead of implementing Middle Schools (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1972–1973a, 1972–1973b, 1972–1973c). Finally, they were also hesitant about the costs of a new secondary school system (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1971–1972).

To discuss starting the comprehensive school experiments, Van Veen and Schelfhout (1972) organised a series of ‘resonance meetings’ with experts from the field of education as well as experts from the educational sciences. The first meeting on 22 February 1972 was well-documented and brought together 37 organisations, among them school inspection services, educational expertise centres and teachers’ unions, together with 33 individual experts such as teachers and scholars. Although those present agreed with the plans for the Middle School in general, the report on the meeting suggested that there were both ‘reformers’ and ‘cautionists’ (Van Veen and Matthijssen, 1972: 42). The group of ‘reformers’ mainly pointed out the consequences of the existing segmented school system and claimed that school experiments should be started to enable the introduction of the Middle School, thereby rigorously changing the school system. The ‘cautionists’, on the other hand, warned about the possible negative results for education, such as the levelling of learning results and the lowering of standards in secondary education. They pleaded for the continuity of the existing school system and for trying to unite children within those existing structures, e.g. by bringing different tracks of secondary education together in one single institution (Van Veen and Matthijssen, 1972). In 1972 Van Veen and Schelfhout developed a plan for the start of two types of experiments: full experiments and experiments that were going to study just one aspect of the Middle School, e.g. heterogeneous grouping (Van Veen and Schelfhout, 1972).

The gap between proponents and opponents in the field of education was now becoming more explicit. The NGL kept on resisting the plans (Tromp, 1981) and more proponents entered the scene by publishing their own ideas. One of those proponents was the Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vakcentrales (WOV) (Scientific Research Foundation of Labour Unions). In 1972 the WOV published their report about ‘The young teenager and his school’ in which they pleaded for ‘ongoing action in favour of the establishment of the Middle School in the short term’ (Varkevisser, 1972: 4). The WOV saw the experimental schools as pioneers for the implementation of Middle Schools and that their experiences should be transferred to other schools (Varkevisser, 1972). In August 1973 the WBS published their ideas on the goals for educational policy. Just as in their publication of 1965, the WBS pleaded for the introduction of Middle Schools, but now the plan was more radical in proposing a total reform of the educational system with a Middle School for all children from age 12 to 16 instead of the two-year Middle School they had proposed in 1965 (WBS, 1973).

This phase shows the start of a dichotomy between adherents and opponents of the Middle School plans in both the field of education and in parliament. This dichotomy was already emerging during the first resonance meeting in 1972, with the right-wing Liberals and the NGL resisting and the Social Democrats, labour unions and several teachers’ unions advocating the Middle School plans. But it increased and polarised in the next phase when the first comprehensive school experiments started.

Phase 3: The Middle School project starts, 1973–1977

Discussing the memorandum ‘Experiments with Middle Schools’, 1973–1974

In July 1972, despite the fall of the government, Minister Van Veen continued his work on the Middle School and, following the election which was won by the Social Democrats, published his

plans on starting Middle School experiments. He presented them to the Centrale Commissie voor Onderwijsoverleg (CCOO) (Central Committee for Consultation on Education), a new body established by him in 1972 to improve deliberation on educational matters between the Minister of Education and those in the field of education. However, the plan was never discussed in that CCOO because of the taking of office of a new government, formed in May 1973 and consisting of the Social Democrat Party, PvdA; the Catholic Party, KVP; the Protestant Party, ARP; the left-wing Christian Democrat Party, PPR; and the left-wing Liberal Party, D66. This left-wing Den Uyl government, generally considered as the most left-wing government in modern Dutch political history, saw education as the lever to reform society to 'distribute knowledge, power and income' (Bosmans and Van Kessel, 2011; Van den Broek, 2002). It entered the political scene in a period of what the Dutch usually refer to as the 'depillarisation' of society. Until then, Dutch society was divided into a number of rather separate subcultures (Catholic, Protestant, socialist, liberal), each with their own political parties, youth organisations, newspapers, and – for the religious 'pillars' – also their own schools and churches. This system regulated the acceptance of ideologically differing opinions. From the late 1960s onwards, however, the impact of this pillarisation decreased, meaning that various kinds of social activities were no longer preferably connected to the pillars. While pillars no longer exist as almost completely separate subcultures, several pillarised institutions do still exist, among them Protestant and Catholic schools, together forming the majority of Dutch schools, with state schools forming a minority (Blom, 2000; Kennedy, 1995; Lijphart, 1990; Stuurman, 1983; Te Velde, 2008). The process of depillarisation coincided with social unrest in Dutch society, with rebel action and riots in the 1960s (Schuyt and Taverne, 2004). Moreover, in the context of the world economy hit by the oil crisis in 1973, the Dutch economy also stagnated, which resulted in a decrease in growth, inflation and increasing unemployment (Schuyt and Taverne, 2004). In this context, the new government chose a strategy of political polarisation or enlarging political differences between themselves as a left-wing government and the opposition right-wing Liberal Party (Bleich, 2008; Bootsma and Breedveld, 1999). Education, the main topic in their ideological agenda for changing the world for the better, became the subject of intense political debate.

The Social Democrat Jos Van Kemenade, the new Minister of Education, although politically a novice, brought along much knowledge about scientific research on education as a former professor of the sociology of education. He was also a member of the educational committee of the NVV labour union, and for many years the chairman of the WBS (Greveling et al., 2014). With this experience and knowledge he was able to immediately start developing his educational policy, including the Middle School plans, which he based upon the work of his non-social democratic predecessors. With the belief that society could be socially engineered being the foundation of his educational policy, his plans clearly differed from his predecessor. He presented his first memorandum *Experiments with Middle Schools* to parliament in September 1973 at his first parliamentary discussion on the National Budget for 1974, just a few months after the start of the Den Uyl government (Van Kemenade and Trip, 1973). In this memorandum the introduction of Middle Schools was central to the realisation of four main objectives: (1) broadening the course content to create a general education for all children of all educational levels by focusing not only on the intellectual qualities of children but also on their social, artistic and technical abilities; (2) providing equal opportunities for all children and eliminating the influence of social and cultural background on school choice; (3) postponing school choice until the age of 15 or 16 by not yet taking a decision on the exact duration of Middle Schools; and (4) enhancing individual development and social awareness. This objective of social awareness gave the plans of Van Kemenade a clearly socialist tone. He had in mind a school with emancipatory goals because children needed to become aware of the injustice in the world and the dangers concerning the environment, and they had to learn to

stand up for themselves (Mars, 1993; Van Kemenade and Trip, 1973). But there were even more differences: while Van Veen only presented a general idea of what Middle Schools should look like, Van Kemenade explained explicitly how equal opportunities could be provided and what courses Middle Schools should provide, in addition to the role of experiments in educational policy differed. While Van Veen wanted to study the objectives of the Middle School and asked the central question of *if* the Middle School should be implemented on a national level, Van Kemenade, a strong believer in the concept of the Middle School, only focused on the question of *how* the Middle School could be organised. For him, the *if* question had already been answered (Mars, 1993).

Van Kemenade's first memorandum caused much controversy in parliament. As was to be expected, his plans met with the approval of his fellow party members (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974a), but the right-wing Liberals resisted the plans, using the argument of the levelling of learning results. The right-wing Liberals now also suggested that Van Kemenade was threatening the constitutional freedom of education and wanted to indoctrinate children (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974a, 1973–1974b, 1973–1974d). This suggestion of the Minister using Middle Schools to indoctrinate school children entered the parliamentary debate following an article in the popular newspaper *De Telegraaf* with the striking heading: 'Socialist syringe threatens school youth' (Brandt and Lunshof, 1973). In the article Neelie Smit-Kroes, then a member of parliament for the right-wing Liberal Party and until autumn 2014 a member of the European Commission, blamed Van Kemenade for wanting to indoctrinate school children with socialist ideas to reform society. After the Minister tried to calm people's feelings on the radio, ensuring that he just wanted to raise critical minds through schooling, the right-wing Liberals calmed down a little (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974a). Although the article in *De Telegraaf* might suggest otherwise, the ideas of the right-wing Liberals and the Social Democrats on the role of education were not actually that different in the early 1970s (Amsing and Bakker, 2014). Some members of parliament noticed that too, which led to a rather amusing discussion instigated by the Social Democrat Cees Laban, who observed that in the discussion about the role of education in society 'blood pressure has risen to unhealthy levels' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2723) among the right-wing Liberals, while there was no problem on that same issue in former governments in which they had participated. His fellow party member Kees Kolthoff observed that the right-wing Liberals 'obviously attempted to exploit mostly worn out differences as old sores' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2725). Wil Wilbers, a member of parliament for the left-wing Liberal Party D66, followed up on that by quoting the chairman of the right-wing Liberal Party, Hans Wiegel, who had written in 1967 that 'education should be the means to break down social barriers' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2730). Kolthoff went along with that, stating that their election manifesto said the same, namely: 'Education is an outstanding means to break down social barriers. This covers completely the ideas of the VVD on the purposes of education' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2730). When Kolthoff began quoting this manifesto statement, Henk Vonhoff, a member of the right-wing Liberal Party, VVD, immediately responded with the jocular remark: 'That's a printing error!' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2730).

The right-wing Liberals struck a chord with the denominational parties over their argument of indoctrination. The Christian parties mainly focused on the need for freedom in education, an argument related to that of indoctrination. Both arguments claimed that the role of the state was too strong in the Middle School plans. In the Netherlands freedom in education has been a constitutional right since 1848. Full state funding of denominational schools, also laid down in the constitution, followed in 1920 (Dronkers, 1995). This right also included the freedom for denominational schools to decide on matters for the curriculum. As Van Kemenade, in contrast to his predecessor, had also presented ideas about the curriculum for Middle Schools, the Christian parties feared that

the Minister wanted to limit their constitutional rights on the freedom of education, particularly on matters concerning the curriculum (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b). Some Christian parties displayed fewer objections, for example, the ARP stated that positive elements of the Middle School which emerged from the school experiments should be implemented into existing secondary schools (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974c). Perhaps surprisingly, at the far left of the political spectrum the Communist Party, CPN, expressed their fears through their chairman, Marcus Bakker, about the decline in the level of education and the wasting of the talents of bright blue-collar children.

We fear that what is supposed to create an opening for the children of the blue-collar class, in reality means a poorer quality of secondary schooling and a general decline of the educational standards of secondary education, which automatically decreases the flow towards higher education and higher vocational education. (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2745)

The Christian parties also expressed their concerns about the newly formulated role of the school experiments, which was to answer the question of *how* the Middle School could be organised. In their opinion, the experiments should study *if* Middle Schools were needed. They feared that, under the new Minister, Middle Schools would be nationally implemented into the school system through the expansion of school experiments in the near future (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b). The Minister attempted to soothe tempers by assuring the members of parliament that ‘we only decided upon the start of Middle School experiments’ (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2764), and he also stated that ‘we should consider that the experiments will not give a univocal answer. We will have to weigh the merits and demerits ... to decide whether we implement the Middle Schools nationally or not’ (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1973–1974b: 2765). Even though Van Kemenade had firmly stated his ideas in his first memorandum, *Experiments with Middle Schools* (Van Kemenade and Trip, 1973), he now seemed to refine those ideas in order to combat the resistance among political parties.

The start of the school experiments and the innovation process, 1974–1977

At the end of August 1973 Van Kemenade received the approval to start Middle School experiments. In December 1973 he installed the Innovatie Commissie Middenschool (ICM) (Innovation Committee Middle School) to advise the Minister of Education on the experiments and the innovation process. The ICM, chaired by the former general manager of the general educational consultancy centre, APS, and an adherent of the Middle School plans, Hermen Jacobs Jr., was clear about the kind of Middle School they had in mind, namely an emancipatory one, such as Van Kemenade was also aiming for. The committee used the phrase ‘a new school with new aims’ to make clear that the implementation of Middle Schools did not only mean changing the school system’s structure but also changing the curriculum to provide a general education for all children of all educational levels by focusing on the social, artistic, technical and intellectual qualities of children and changing the didactics, for example, introducing fields of learning instead of separate subjects and letting children work together in various projects (Karstanje, 1988).

The installation of the ICM and the announcement of the start of school experiments marked the beginning of the innovation process (Karstanje, 1988), leading to many enthusiastic reactions from the field of education with many schools wanting to join the school experiments. Thirty-eight schools were selected to discuss the Middle School curriculum (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), 1979a). On 1 August 1976 the first three experimental schools officially started, and in the following school year two more schools joined the project. This resulted in there being five integrated experimental schools by September 1977 (Adviesgroep Projecten Eerste Fase Voortgezet

Onderwijs, 1987). These experimental schools attempted to realise the Middle School in all its aspects (ICM, 1975). Alongside these five integrated experimental schools were ten experimental schools that focused on specific issues concerning didactical reform. Soon these ten school experiments were ended and changed into integrated experiments or so-called 'resonance schools'. The latter were deployed as experimental gardens for the transfer of didactical innovations from the integrated experiments to existing educational practice (ICM, 1976).

On 18 June 1975, prior to the official start of the experimental schools, Van Kemenade published a blueprint for the future educational system in the so-called *Contourennota* (Van Kemenade et al., 1975). In this blueprint he pleaded for a constructive educational policy, meaning not only a policy of financing and administering education but one of making an active contribution to educational reform. He regarded educational policy as a key instrument for changing society according to social democratic ideals: spreading income, knowledge and power (Leune, 2001). He hung on to his former ideals, seeing the Middle School as an important innovation project to reduce the inequality of educational opportunities, which was, according to Van Kemenade, the biggest problem in the Dutch segmented school system. The Middle School should promote equal opportunities, postpone school choice until the age of 15 or 16, offer a broad curriculum covering not only intellectual development but also the development of children's social, artistic and technical abilities, and contribute to optimal chances for all children to develop their talents and interests. It should raise critical minds and increase children's social awareness and social resilience (Van Kemenade et al., 1975). To justify his plans, Van Kemenade referred to foreign comprehensive systems, e.g. to Sweden and England. In his opinion the Middle School should be implemented within a horizontal structure like the Swedish model. He rejected the idea of implementing Middle Schools alongside the existing school types, because in England such a system did not, according to him, solve the problem of social selection (Van Kemenade et al., 1975). Although his plan did not differ from his first memorandum of 1973, it now received less attention in parliament and parliamentary discussion was less fierce. Yet the right-wing Liberals and the denominational parties expressed the same arguments as before (Karstanje, 1988).

Although the right-wing Liberals had slightly lowered their tone after their hostile reaction to the first memorandum in 1973, they did not stop expressing their concerns. In the parliamentary debate on the *Contourennota*, the right-wing Liberals again emphasised the socialist tone of Van Kemenade's educational policy, now citing it as a 'red print' based on 'a Kemenadian recipe' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1975–1976: 1899). Other oppositional parties took up the argument of indoctrination and linked it to the constitutional freedom of education; for instance, the populist Boerenpartij (Peasant Party, BP), who stated that the Minister wanted to 'stuff the little ones with socialist ideas' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1975–1976: 1922), and the Orthodox Protestant Party, GPV, who argued that the Minister gave 'non-denominational education a red colour' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1975–1976: 1909).

Criticisms about the assumed implementation strategy of Van Kemenade – expanding the experiments until there was a national implementation – were expressed by the right-wing Liberals through Nel Ginjaar-Maas, who claimed that 'the Middle School experiments cannot be used as a means to implement the Middle School' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1975–1976: 1939). Again, the Minister reassured everyone that he did not have such intentions, while also becoming slightly agitated by the repeatedly polarising statements from his opponents in parliament, stating that '... People now really need to quit insinuating that this Minister suddenly is implementing Middle Schools! This is not true and Ms Ginjaar-Maas knows that' (Handelingen Tweede Kamer, 1975–1976: 1939).

The *Contourennota* was meant to start a broad discussion about the education system outside parliament, and this new approach to educational innovation worked (Van Kemenade et al., 1975).

The Ministry of Education received as many as 338 responses from various institutions and individuals, among them school governing bodies, teachers' organisations, parents' committees, local governments, schools' guidance services, educational advice councils and pupils. These responses ensured that the Middle School plans continued the existing discord in the field of education. The NGL teachers in higher secondary education again resisted the plans for a comprehensive school system (Karstanje, 1988; Tromp, 1981). The NGL disapproved of broadening the curriculum, stating that it was not possible to ban selection and claiming that it was not the responsibility of the government to provide the means to raise critical minds and enhance children's social awareness and social resilience (Karstanje, 1988). In addition, other teachers in higher secondary education joined the discussion, for example the teachers who were members of the *Algemene Vereniging van Leerkrachten* (AVL) (General Teachers Society) as well as leaders of schools that provided general secondary education and pre-university education who were united in the *Algemene Vereniging van Schoolleiders bij het VWO en AVO* (AVS, General School Leaders Society). These teachers' societies in higher secondary education heavily criticised the plans. They rejected the Middle School as a solution to the existing problems in the education system and argued that Van Kemenade's analysis of these problems was incorrect (Karstanje, 1988).

Other important actors in the field of education, among them the educational labour unions (ABOP, the Protestant PCO and the Catholic KOV) and the labour union federations (the Protestant CNV and the FNV, a merger of the Catholic and social democratic labour union), however, reacted positively to the plans of the Minister. The labour union federations even argued that the Minister was too modest in his plans, which in their opinion could limit the introduction of Middle Schools. They argued that the Middle School should cover no fewer than four years and therefore postpone school choice until the age of 16, instead of keeping the possibility of postponing school choice only until the age of 15. The FNV stressed the need to lay down the Middle School plans in law (Karstanje, 1988). Also, the federation of national educational consultancy centres, the *Vereniging van Landelijke Pedagogische Centra*, of which the general APS and the Christian CPS were members, again pleaded for the introduction of Middle Schools. They argued, just like the Innovation Committee of Middle Schools, that Middle Schools were 'new schools with new aims'. This similarity was no surprise because the president of the ICM, Jacobs Jr., was the general manager of the APS before becoming president of the ICM. In the opinion of the national educational consultancy centres, scientific research should prove how the new aims might be reached with the introduction of Middle Schools (Bloo et al., 1973).

Van Kemenade adjusted his plans to the reactions that he received from the field of education and from parliament and incorporated them into his second memorandum (Van Kemenade et al., 1977), published just before the fall of the Den Uyl government in March 1977. What is most striking is that Van Kemenade chose to omit the socialist aims of raising critical minds and increasing children's social awareness and social resilience, thus seemingly being sensitive to the arguments of his opponents such as the NGL, the right-wing Liberals and the denominational parties.

The years 1973–1977 were crucial in the history of the Dutch comprehensive school project, because they marked the start of the innovation process by Minister Van Kemenade, who made the comprehensive school a central project in his educational policy and gave it a huge impetus by starting school experiments, installing the ICM and triggering a broad debate on the subject. These innovation plans, now with an obviously socialist appeal, received a lot of resistance from the conservatives, such as the right-wing Liberals and the denominational parties, and from teachers in higher secondary education. Even though it seemed that Van Kemenade was willing to refine his educational policy, he was not able to continue his work because of the fall of the government. In the ensuing elections the Social Democrats became the largest parliamentary party ever. A second Den Uyl government seemed imminent. Eventually, however, the new government

consisted of the Christian Democrats and the right-wing Liberals, resulting in the Social Democrats being in opposition and thus unable to continue their educational policy (Bleich, 2008), which signalled the beginning of the end for the Middle School project.

Phase 4: The government removes their support for the Middle School project, 1977–1981

In 1977 the new centre-right government took office, led by the Christian Democrat Dries Van Agt and consisting of the right-wing Liberals and the Christian Democrats, parties that had shown their concerns and agitations towards Van Kemenade's Middle School plans. The new Minister of Education, Arie Pais from the right-wing Liberal Party, immediately made clear that he was going to take a different line to his predecessor and in 1979 presented his Development Plan for improving the first phase of secondary education. Although the subject of equal chances for children from the blue-collar class played a marginal role in his new policy, some of the aims of the Middle Schools, i.e. postponing school choice and broadening the curriculum, can be recognised. But he chose a very different solution to achieving those aims, namely the introduction of a two-year bridging period within the existing segmented school system. At the same time he did not stop the Middle School experiments but made them part of a variety of possible measures that could contribute to the development of the bridging period (Pais and De Jong Ozn, 1979). This change of perspective led to the criticism that the experiments had lost their meaning for educational policy (Karstanje, 1987).

In parliament Pais's Development Plan fell on stony ground. Disapproval was to be expected from the Social Democrats in opposition. They condemned the plan because it offered 'no sound solution' to the problems in education (Vaste Commissie voor Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1980: 1824) and pointed out that the introduction of comprehensive schools in the first phase of secondary education 'is desired for educational and social reasons' (Vaste Commissie voor Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1980: 1864). But the coalition parties also showed their concerns. The Christian Democrats addressed the critical reactions coming from the experimental Middle Schools about their isolated position and the diminished meaning of the experiments for educational policy. To improve the position of the experimental schools, the Christian Democrats wanted to increase the number of experimental Middle Schools (Vaste Commissie voor Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1980). Pais's fellow Liberal Party members did not really disapprove of this, but asked him not to implement his plans yet because, in their opinion, the existing innovation projects in secondary schools – among which the Middle School experiments – should be evaluated first.

The majority of the members of parliament did not support Pais's plans and there was no deliberation with those in the field of education (Karstanje, 1988), who continued to display their support for the Middle School project. The FNV published a memorandum and a booklet for their members in which they expressed the need for Middle Schools to be introduced for all children aged 12 to 16 (FNV, 1979a, 1979b). ABOP also attempted to influence policy. First, an ABOP committee made a fundamental decision to push for the establishment of legislation for the Middle School experiments and an innovation strategy to realise the implementation of Middle Schools nationally in the short term (ABOP, 1980a). Second, the general assembly sided with the ABOP committee's plan (ABOP, 1980b). Besides these plans from general organisations, the Protestant educational union, PCO, also prepared plans that were aimed at bringing in legislation for the experimental schools and an implementation strategy 'to replace the segmented secondary school system with a horizontal system of comprehensive schools' (PCO, 1980). The term *Middenschool* had become politically loaded and was therefore consciously avoided because, according to the central board of the union, 'polarisation ... does not contribute to the national introduction of comprehensive schools in the Netherlands' (PCO, 1980: 2).

Alongside the publication of these plans and papers from proponents in the field of education, advocates also organised themselves into the Middenschool Vereniging (Middle School Society), which was established in September 1980. This new society, which had about 600 adherents of the Middle School as members including teachers, students, parents, pupils, associations and committees, pleaded, just like the FNV, ABOP and PCO had done, for the national introduction of Middle Schools. It gave a clear indication about the time schedule: national implementation should be achieved by 1985, not as another school type alongside the existing school system but replacing the different types of segmented secondary schools and following the ideas of former Minister, Van Kemenade (Middenschool Vereniging, 1980). The innovation committee of the Middle School, ICM, saw the establishment of this new society of adherents as public support for the Middle School project (ICM, 1981).

However, with government support for the Middle School declining, the role of the ICM in advising the Minister about the innovation strategy became less important. Nonetheless, the ICM tried to direct educational policy towards Middle School implementation, as the ICM was still a clear adherent of the Middle School. Immediately after the parliamentary elections the committee published the memorandum entitled *Bouwstenen voor de Middenschool* (Building the Middle School) (ICM, 1981). This memorandum, which was addressed to the Minister of Education of the yet to be formed new government, contained the necessary recommendations on educational policy to realise the implementation of Middle Schools, which consisted of legislation and an implementation plan – mimicking the plans of ABOP and PCO. The ICM also discussed the curriculum and final attainment levels of the Middle School (ICM, 1981).

The NGL continued to criticise the project through their periodical the *Weekblad voor Leraren*, because Pais did not stop the experimental aspects of the project. They tried to alter the positive representations by showing the imperfections of the Middle School that existed in foreign comprehensive school systems, such as the German *Gesamtschule* and the Swedish *grundskola* (Bouwsma, 1977–1978a, 1977–1978b; Rasing, 1979–1980, 1980–1981; Traas, 1977–1978; *Weekblad voor Leraren*, 1977–1978a, 1977–1978b) and by pointing out the problems in the Dutch Middle School experiments (Bouwsma and Hospes, 1977–1978; Van Beusekom, 1977–1978; Van der Brink, 1977–1978).

The years 1977–1981 saw diminishing government support for the Middle School plans. Minister Pais succeeded in reducing the Middle School experiments to a minor feature of educational policy by enabling various kinds of experiments. With this strategy he removed the introduction of Middle Schools from the policy agenda, with the result that the Middle School experiments no longer had any political meaning. Pais's choice to continue the Middle School experiments fitted in with this strategy, because ending them could have led to resistance from those in the field of education who had publicly shown their support. The failure of the Middle School project on the governmental level was imminent, but in the subsequent government, which again placed the right-wing Liberals in opposition, the Social Democrats received one last chance to aim their educational policy at the introduction of comprehensive schools.

Phase 5: The Middle School project meets an inglorious end, 1981–1993

After a troublesome start in 1981, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats again formed a coalition government, with Van Kemenade again as Minister of Education and the Christian Democrats Wim Deetman and Ad Hermes as his State Secretaries. The government policy statement showed that this government was again aiming their educational policy towards breaking through the segmented secondary school system. Contrary to his experimental strategy of the

1970s, Van Kemenade now presented an implementation strategy which was aimed at legislation and the curriculum of comprehensive schools and which closely resembled the proposals of the ICM, the FNV and the PCO from earlier that year. Van Kemenade now suggested the introduction of a three-year comprehensive school in which all children should reach 'basic attainment levels' and 'an educational level as high as possible'. These schools were explicitly not named Middle Schools because of the polarised debate of the 1970s, but schools for *Voortgezet Basisonderwijs* (Extended Primary Education). For the curriculum and the didactical approach, the plan referred to the experimental Middle Schools (Van Kemenade et al., 1982).

But this plan also led to disagreement about the structure of the secondary school system: a horizontal structure or comprehensive schools alongside the existing secondary school types (Karstanje, 1988)? Once again teachers in higher secondary education and leaders of schools providing general secondary education and pre-university education resisted the introduction of Middle Schools as the only school for all children aged 12 to 16. They argued that the problems were not severe enough to justify the introduction of Middle Schools. In their opinion, the ideal of keeping children together for three or four years after primary school is 'an unattainable ideal in the coming 50 years anyway' (Karstanje, 1988: 131).

Adherents of the Middle School published their ideas again. The Middle School Society produced a memorandum in which they again argued in favour of the introduction of a four-year Middle School to postpone selection (Van der Heijden et al., 1983). ABOP also made their opinion heard again in 1985. In a memorandum ABOP underlined their support for 'the national introduction of a four-year Middle School as quickly as possible' (ABOP, 1985: 23), with the compulsory introduction of a two-year heterogeneous bridging period as an intermediate stage towards the implementation of Middle Schools. In October 1985 the Christian educational consultancy centre CPS published an article in their magazine with the heading: 'Surveys repeatedly show: Public support for the Middle School exists' (Van de Molen, 1985: 25), in which they emphasised the existing public support for the introduction of Middle Schools based on surveys in 1978, 1982 and 1985 (Van de Molen, 1985).

Notwithstanding these efforts from the field of education to influence educational policy, the introduction of Middle Schools soon disappeared from the policy agenda because the government, already born under an unlucky star and continuing to have disagreements, fell after a period of only eight months (Bosmans and Van Kessel, 2011). This marked the end of the political discussion about the introduction of comprehensive schools. Aspects of the comprehensive school idea still came up in future discussions about improving the first phase of secondary education, but policy was no longer aimed at breaking through the segmented secondary school system, and the term *Middenschool* was no longer used in future policy documents.

In 1982, in a coalition of Christian Democrats and right-wing Liberals, the Christian Democrat Wim Deetman became Minister of Education together with the Liberal Nel Ginjaar-Maas as his State Secretary. This coalition government wanted to overcome the deadlock in the negotiations about the first phase of secondary education and therefore asked the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid (WRR) (the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy) for advice on the 'desirable content, duration and structure of the *Basisvorming*' (Basic Education) (Ten Bruggencate, 2004: 206). With this plan, the parliamentary debate finally started to flow in the direction of consensus on reforming the first phase of secondary education. Eventually, after a long period of parliamentary debate and many changes, e.g. 15 courses instead of the initial 14, and one level instead of the initial two, and as many as 250 core goals to provide for, *Basisvorming* was introduced into the first phase of secondary education in 1993. This innovative plan did not aim towards an eventual breakthrough of the segmented school system but was a reform of the curriculum, which was supposed to provide all children with a general education, a 'toolbox for life', including courses

such as technical education, economics, computer science and general and personal care. *Basisvorming* not only aimed at a broader curriculum but also suggested didactical innovations such as the increase of cohesion between courses and teaching children various cognitive, social and cultural skills (Bronneman-Helmers, 2008).

This curriculum innovation ended a quarter of a century of political struggle on the reform of the first phase of secondary education (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011; Schüssler, 2006). The introduction of this basic secondary school curriculum also marked the official end of the experimental Middle Schools. However, it did not stop discussion about the first phase of secondary education.

The discussion on the first phase of secondary education continues

From 1993 onwards, *Basisvorming* struggled to survive. It was implemented in 1993, evaluated in 1999, revised in 2001, but eventually abolished in 2003 (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011). The evaluation report of 1999 showed that the implementation into educational practice had failed. Secondary schools had only implemented those mandatory changes that were laid down by law, i.e. a broad curriculum of 15 courses and new textbooks, and therefore the intended goals of postponing school choice and didactical innovations were not achieved (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011; Commissie Dijsselbloem, 2008; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 1999; Onderwijsraad, 2000). The report also pointed out that the common curriculum was too difficult for children in lower vocational education, but too easy for children in pre-university education. Also, a curriculum with 15 courses for all children turned out to be overloaded and fragmented (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 1999; Onderwijsraad, 2001). Based on these findings, the Social Democrat State Secretary of Education, Karin Adelmund, asked the Education Council to advise her on solutions to settle the most urgent bottlenecks (Adelmund, 2000) by allowing secondary schools more latitude to set up their educational needs (Onderwijsraad, 2000, 2001). For the long term, the *Basisvorming* should be reduced to two years and the curriculum should be divided into a mandatory core curriculum for all children and a free part of the curriculum in which the subject of general and personal care was placed together with economics education, additional foreign languages and religious education (Onderwijsraad, 2001).

In 2003 the government replaced the negatively charged term *Basisvorming* with the more neutral term *Onderbouw* (First Phase of Secondary Education) (Bronneman-Helmers, 2008). From August 2006 the changes were implemented again, allowing schools more freedom in structuring the programme for the *Onderbouw* in the way they wanted to, in order to meet the desires of schools to have the responsibility for innovation and to create more variety and therefore more options for parents. The number of core goals was reduced from 250 to 58, and schools could decide for themselves about didactical innovations. This meant that schools could decide if and how they wanted to create more cohesion in the programme, and also if and how they wanted to change the teaching methods. The only obligation was that schools had to provide for the 58 core goals (Bronneman-Helmers, 2008, 2011).

However, the discussion about early selection did not end there. Although the effects of early selection in the Dutch educational system are diminished by the existing possibilities that make it easier for youngsters to work their way up through the academic system and by making it possible for children to switch between tracks, those options are limited because schools try every possible means to avoid student failures because of governmental pressure on school success rates, causing schools to create barriers to upward mobility (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011). Children move not only within secondary education from preparatory vocational education (*vmbo*) to higher general secondary education (*havo*) to pre-university schooling (*vwo*), but also from preparatory vocational education (*vmbo*), via technical and vocational education for 16 to 18-year-olds (*mbo*), to higher

vocational education (*hbo*), to university. Furthermore, switching from preparatory vocational education to higher general secondary education in recent times has become more difficult because of a didactical reform in higher general secondary education towards more independent and active learning and more cohesion between subjects (called *Tweede Fase*). This innovation, introduced in 1999 and refined in 2007, caused a gap between the curricula of these schools (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011; Van der Werf, 2005). On top of this, many schools reversed the integration of different tracks within the same institution and, as a consequence, fewer schools now exist with a comprehensive phase (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011). So the issue of early selection is still a pressing matter in the Dutch educational system. It is no surprise that the issue keeps on entering the political and public arenas, for instance when politicians put out feelers about early selection and postponement of school choice (Plasterk, 2008), when political parties use the Middle School as a policy aim during an election (Magnée, 2010), when the media pay attention to the subject of early selection and the Middle School (Dijkgraaf, 2012; Haan, 2011; Van Meurs, 2011) or when organisations such as the Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2014a, 2014b) and the OECD (Marginson et al., 2008) criticise early selection in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, therefore, the discussion about the issue of early selection in the first phase of secondary schooling continues even now.

Conclusion

This article has studied the rise and fall of the Dutch comprehensive education project. From 1969 onwards the Catholic Minister, Gerard Veringa, and his Protestant State Secretary, Hans Grosheide, as well as their Christian Democratic successors made the introduction of Middle Schools part of their educational policy and were willing to experiment with these kinds of schools as a means of postponing selection in the first phase of secondary schooling. From the outset hesitation towards these plans was voiced by the right-wing Liberals and the Protestants in parliament and by teachers in higher secondary education, because of the perceived danger of levelling learning outcomes, although no fierce opposition could be heard. This changed from 1973 when the Middle School drew a strong socialist appeal which, in a period of political polarisation, led to a lot of resistance from right-wing Liberals and teachers in higher secondary education. They claimed that, in addition to the problem of levelling learning outcomes, Middle Schools that had a distinct curriculum would replace the existing types of schools and threaten the constitutional freedom of education and the minds of schoolchildren through the indoctrination of socialist ideas. With these arguments the right-wing liberals tapped into the old sores of the denominational parties who had struggled for constitutional freedom in education in the 19th century. In 1977 a new government consisting of the denominational parties together with the right-wing Liberals reduced the Middle School experiments to no more than a minor feature of educational policy.

Despite support from the field of education, for example from labour unions and teachers' organisations, which until the late 1980s tried to influence the political debate by publishing policy papers in favour of the introduction of Middle Schools, no political majority was able to drive this innovation. Eventually, political parties did agree on the introduction of a new curriculum for the first phase of all secondary schools. While the segmented school system remained unaltered, now every child would receive a common general education. However, this policy also eventually failed. It was reversed gradually over a period of ten years, leaving secondary schools with substantial degrees of freedom to structure their curricula.

Compared with several other Western European countries such as Sweden, where a horizontal system of comprehensive education was implemented which still survives, or England and Germany, where comprehensive schools were introduced alongside traditional types of schools, the Dutch case was a special one. At crucial moments there was no political majority for comprehensive

schools in a horizontal system, despite a general willingness to introduce such a school in the initial phase and with public support lasting until the 1990s. There had been a long discussion on the issue and there were even some experimental Middle Schools that lasted for almost 20 years. With the introduction of a common curriculum in 1993, the Middle School project stopped, but the problem of early selection was not resolved. Thus, in the Netherlands, the issue of early selection continues to exercise many minds.

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Notes

1. There were also two parents' associations which communicated their standpoints in official deliberation councils (see Karstanje, 1988), but there are no known publications of these associations.
2. The arrangement of the development of comprehensive schools in the Netherlands into consecutive phases is partly based on the dissertation of Karstanje (1988), and extended by the authors for the period after 1981 until 1993.

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