

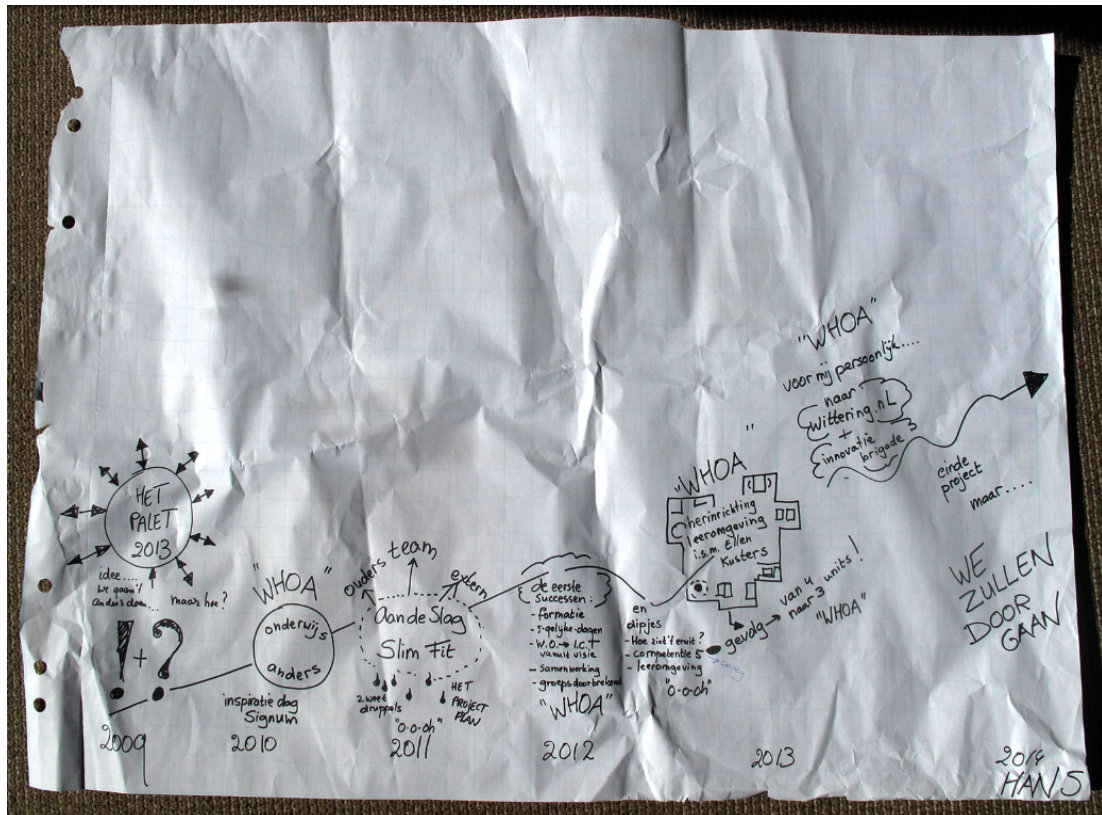
Publication

Pioneering teachers innovate education in Netherlands

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Innovation of the educational field in the Netherlands

The education field in the Netherlands is structured and organised. Our country has around 6500 primary schools and 1300 secondary schools, where more than 200.000 teachers attend the needs of 2.5 million pupils on a daily basis. However the numbers of teachers is waning. This is largely due to an aging working population, but teachers also leave their profession due to a lack of drive and enthusiasm to continue their work. One of the reasons they give is their lack of freedom, space, time and budget to execute their own ideas to improve education. In this article we, social innovators at think-tank Kennisland, explain our concept 'Education Pioneers', in which we designed a learning infrastructure for teachers to create more space for self-organised, co-created innovation in their schools.



The Dutch education field

Due to 30 years of centralised, top-down national education policies and management models our teachers are subject to a highly controlled environment: heavy measures, rules, regulations and inspection visits rule their work weeks. Although this system strives and achieves high quality education, for teachers it results in having to stick to the national curriculum, weekly filing dozens of administration forms and heavy testing of pupils to check whether they are on track. At best this system thus results in trained teachers who are very good at executing *other people's ideas and solutions*, and delivers society well-educated pupils who know how to digest educational material. But it leaves little time and mental space for teachers to develop self-organized, self-owned innovations that improve educational practices in schools. Nor may we question whether this way of working adequately addresses the needs of children in the classroom. One of the teachers once expressed to us:

"Many children in my class have never seen the sea, while the sea is 5 kilometres and a tram ride away. To educate them on the formation of sand dunes, I once suggested to my school director to take them out for an afternoon, and transfer my classroom to the beach. But I was not allowed. The school director said I would not meet my weekly registered hours, that it was administratively hard to buy the tram tickets for the children as all budgets were set for the year, let alone having to deal with the security policy in regard of taking responsibility for the group being close to ocean water. So I dropped the idea."

What are according to the teachers hampering factors? Teachers mentioned: no time, no budget, no professional space. But moreover they expressed they experience a lack of trust of authorities in their abilities to self-improve and innovate their education practice. To counteract this dynamic we at Kennisland started Education Pioneers five years ago. The idea was that with a group of teachers, we would be able to demonstrate there are alternatives, that it is possible to change these conditions, that teachers together are able to improve the education field. EP started with its first prototype of the programme and 10 teachers in 2009. Ever since we have been prototyping, running and improving the programme together with teachers, policy makers and semi-public organisations involved in the education field. Ever since we have supported about 80 teachers and their innovations, while EP is now also part of the official education system by now being co-owned by the teacher's union. This year the programme starts again with support to 45 teachers from secondary and primary schools. How is Education Pioneers able to address and support self-organised innovation in schools?

Box 1 : Example of innovation project of teachers Sarah and Aysun in Rotterdam, Netherlands

"We are Sarah and Aysun, two teachers in a primary school in a relatively deprived neighbourhood in Rotterdam. We observed that our pupils, mostly with an immigrant background, had significant problems with mastering the Dutch language, and more specifically with reading. Even though this was generally recognised as a common problem in this part of the city, the local library had to close its doors due to budget cuts. We wanted to act. We had an idea to create a new, interactive, neighbourhood-focused library concept in the school. However, the regular infrastructure of school organisations and the educational field in general usually don't provide any support for such activities since it is not part of the official policy, and, thus, not part of the regular workflow or planning. When selected to participate in Education Pioneers, we prototyped the first concept and put the general slogan of Education Pioneers ('Dare to Share!') to use! We researched the needs of parents, pupils and teacher colleagues. We sought engagement through social media, printing flyers and spreading newsletters. We understood quickly it was absolutely crucial to get our colleagues, the kid's parents and the school director engaged. This happened, for example, through the children, who became super enthusiastic about the prospect of new books and exciting reading activities. The EP Lab days helped us in sharing our enthusiasm and doubts, and to get new ideas to try out. The library and its related activities have now become a very visible part of the school and the neighbourhood. The children have become visibly more enthusiastic about reading, and book loans went up. Our success is spreading: other schools and the municipality has expressed interest in our approach. But most importantly, we as teachers have proven that with just a little extra help and some space to experiment, we were able to act very fast on an urgent, local social challenge. However, the structural problem of having no official time slots available to develop and experiment with new initiatives remains oppressively the same. We hope this will change in the future."



How to support learning and innovation with teachers, for teachers?

Education Pioneers (EP) is a one-year learning programme that holds a specific value set, which is mirrored in our approach to facilitate and support social innovation in schools.

Ownership and self-determination

First of all we believe that teachers are to be trusted in their abilities and ideas. They should be able to execute full *ownership* over their innovation process. In return we ask full responsibility of teachers over their own actions, and active participation in the programme, in terms of sharing their ideas and progress with their peers and the project management team.

In practice this means that through a national campaign and competition, the selected teachers are offered to take part in the EP learning programme, in which we provide additional personal coaching, an on- and offline learning environment and a peer network of 20 to 45 other Education Pioneers (see image 1 for the programme build-up). Teachers own their own innovation budget (of E.3500 - E.5.000,-) which we do not actively monitor. Furthermore they are able to self-determine their idea in terms of content and direction. As a result we as a project team deliberately set loose entry

criteria, such as “your idea should contribute to the improvement of work processes to benefit the school system as a whole”, or “your idea should contribute to the improving the quality of education for pupils”, to invite as many creative proposals and leave space for teachers to think of ideas themselves that innovate their work practice. Furthermore we make the programme accessible to every teacher in Netherlands by setting-up a national campaign and competition to recruit teachers, by offering free brainstorm at schools to think through the ideas and proposals, and by sharing instructional innovation knowledge on the public website.

Not solutions, but feedback processes

Another idea we value highly is that we do not believe in ‘good’ or ‘best’ social innovation practices, or perfect solutions. Instead we regard social innovation as a process of progressive collectives, in which people ‘jump out’ of existing structures and try out new ideas in practice. In doing so they’ll encounter challenges and dilemmas, and their innovations might also have negative or unintended consequences for others. Therefore we do not actively pursue to copy, scale or spread solutions that teachers develop throughout the year. Instead we focus on designing processes that can facilitate for good feedback structures, which we believe is a critical *condition* to enable social innovators to thrive, and to open up possibilities, e.g. time, budget, new social capital. We regard feedback as the best catalyst for change, and systems as vehicles to address the needs of collectives (e.g. the education systems at large, and schools on a local level). Therefore we chose to focus on safeguarding a reflexive, open connection between the two.

In practice this means that the offered learning environment focuses not only on the personal development of the pioneers and their ideas, but it explicitly attempts to include support and feedback from the school (their colleagues, school director, pupils, parents and the neighbourhood) and the co-pioneers from other schools. This learning environment exists of an online space where teachers can connect over their ideas and on-going challenges and dilemmas. Furthermore the programme organizes physical offline learning experiences. These four ‘EP-Labs’ are facilitated workshops, which we organize on pioneering schools around the country. In the Labs the teachers exchange experiences, dilemmas and ideas with participants from the other projects and get acquainted with basic design-thinking principles (e.g. iteration, experimentation, prototyping). Finally we as a project team also design in-between interventions: assignments that teachers can try out in practice and aim to support and enhance their innovations. In this process we value agility, and incorporate feedback into follow-up steps in the EP programme design.

Inclusive and collaborative production of knowledge through storytelling

Our third highly valued principle is that we think everyone involved in innovation processes holds equally valued knowledge. The challenge is not to overrule each other in whose knowledge is better. The challenge is not to monitor and evaluate to see ‘what works best’, or control for wrong directions or failures. Instead it is the challenge to exchange, share instructional knowledge that stem from doing innovation, to make knowledge accessible and inclusive to learn from experiences collectively, and where knowledge production specifically focuses on generating instructional knowledge to support new actions.

In practice this means we have designed our own evaluation methodology: dynamic evaluation (with the generous support of the EU-programme [Emergence by Design](#) and David Lane). This methodology is based on generating, visualizing and sharing pioneer stories and feed those stories back to the innovation communities and the programme design through feedback loops. Dynamic evaluation is actively pursued throughout all stages of the programme, and stimulates everyone involved to become an evaluator and collector of feedback themselves: from the teachers to actors in the schools, as well as the project facilitators of Kennisland and the partners. We focus on generating feedback by the use of stories by designing 'story formats'. Story formats let the teachers decide on the content, as this is of course subjective to context specific needs. By specifically designing 'story formats', we actively stimulated the teachers to construct and develop their stories, and spread their stories in their local environment to receive feedback. In this way (successful and failing) stories are instantly shared, and lets the programme design provide for recognizing leapfroggers and facilitating emergent practices. In our regard stories are strong relational tools that support people in taking new actions.

If we would for example find out that the need is to be able to better explain the message behind the innovation, we would design a video-format to help the teachers spread the message. Or if teachers express a need to be able to better update the school on the current developments, we would design a newsletter-format. These formats result in very visual representations of the innovation projects: videos, newsletters, blogs, cartoons, interviews and so on. This has several advantages. First of all this material is ready to use by the teachers themselves in the schools to support their innovations and move forward. Secondly it enables the project team to track the developments of the teachers and act upon their needs more directly. Thirdly this approach of dynamically evaluating a project, and structuring and embedding the act of storytelling into constant feedback loops is a fruitful way to visualize impact to stakeholders and funders.

Box 2: Valued tips for teachers, by teachers with innovation projects:

- Think large, start small
- Innovation comes from action and reflection
- Dare to share, to ask, to engage and to doubt
- Learn from each other by making your practice and actions visible
- Look through an innovation lens instead of a project lens
- Sustainability happens when others become owners and users of your innovation
- All knowledge is traceable, just start
- Practice an appreciative outlook and strengthen what goes well

Concluding thoughts: teachers in the lead

Qualitative research proves that EP stimulates entrepreneurship, personal development of innovation competencies, growth of valuable networks, capacity building and ultimately the development of new innovative products and services in the education field that are initiated, developed and owned by teachers. The programme stimulates teachers to be innovative, reflective and inquisitive, to enhance their working environment and take responsibility. The programme also gives the teacher a special stage he or she would otherwise not have, with contributes to a stronger position of the teacher in the school and more visibility in networks. The EP- programme finds broad support within teacher communities (both in their own schools and outside). However on the level of the teachers challenges remain: how to get directors on board, how to enthuse colleagues who do not have time or energy to help them, how to create sustainable space, time and budget after EP-year is over? Thus a very important question for Kennisland remains: How can we support self-organized innovation even better?

Furthermore there also remains an enticing challenge in the political domain. On the one hand EP is a vehicle to support innovation practices on the ground. On the other hand it is a vehicle to start a new dialogue in the Netherlands about educational values and working principles. To Kennisland the latter is where the real challenge lies to change the education paradigm. With EP, and the stories of the teachers, we are able to contribute to an ongoing, growing national dialogue of the future direction of education for our children, our future society. The notion that teachers should be able to take the lead in designing and developing educational infrastructures is becoming more widespread. Where the challenge really lies is to challenge the political interests in the status quo: many semi-public organisations and labour unions defend a myriad of interests, and own large budgets to to design and develop programmes to improve labour market conditions in the field of education. And the direct reflex of the Dutch Ministry still remains to direct, defend and control via directive policy guidelines that do not match the lived realities of teachers. How to breach the current national status-quo of top-down learning environments at schools in the Netherlands?

Our ambition would be that every teacher who wishes to innovate at his/her school, would be able to do so in terms of finances, and connecting to a learning community of change makers in their own field. The investment in professionals in the education field (or any other field) should become the core tool to improve the education sector, instead of providing subsidies to parties who need and want to sustain their own agendas and interests. The Education Pioneers programme is one narrative that contributes to moving forward our notions and practices on education, and social innovation at large. We are very curious to the take of Colombian teachers and their ideas and we hope to share our shared lessons and challenges in the near future.

About Kennisland

[Kennisland](#) (Amsterdam, Netherlands) is an independent action-oriented think tank, founded in 1998 with a public mission to support social innovators and make societies thrive. Predominantly focused on the Netherlands and Europe, Kennisland designs and implements innovative interventions to strengthen our knowledge society by connecting different levels and sectors to create new strategies, concepts, ideas and structures that work to provide new approaches for societal challenges. Kennisland currently works in the fields of educational innovation, governance, creative economies, cultural heritage and copyright.

About Marlieke

How can we make knowledge useful to support people's innovative practices? That is Marlieke's encompassing question at Kennisland. In her daily practice she designs new (research) methodologies, for example dynamic evaluation (in the EU-funded programme Emergence by Design), which is a new evaluation methodology to support social innovation practices. [Marlieke](#) also develops new learning infrastructures like [Lab2](#) and the Wicked Series, while she reflects upon her own field (read her latest publication on challenging labbed practices here). Marlieke holds an MSc degree in Anthropology and an MA degree in [Conflict and Governance](#).

About Nora

[Nora van der Linden](#) is an advisor in the field of education and government. She studied sociology and philosophy of science, with a particular focus on knowledge development and the role of knowledge in the relationships between science, government and society. Having spent 18 months teaching at the University of Amsterdam, Nora is now devoting her efforts to smarter and more innovative education.

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