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Publication date
2013

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Human Figurations

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
van Daalen, R. (2013). Classroom preoccupations: the shadow of the past in Dutch vocational training. *Human Figurations*, *2*(3). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0002.304

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Download date:26 Jul 2022

Classroom preoccupations: The shadow of the past in Dutch vocational training

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Volume 2, Issue 3: *Everyday practices and long term-processes: Overcoming dichotomies with the work of Norbert Elias*, November 2013

Permalink: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0002.304

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the relevance of history for the understanding of everyday life at a lower vocational training school (VMBO) in Amsterdam in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Ideas, symbols and culture of the past remain alive as social memories, and they are employed and reconstructed by students and teachers alike. Echoes of the past loom large in the outsider position of these schools and their students, resonating in their classroom interactions, in their thinking, feeling and acting. By combining Norbert Elias' process sociology with Erving Goffman's symbolic interactionism, I aim to show that these two perspectives complement each other and require each other to fully understand everyday social practices.

KEYWORDS: social memories, interactions, lower vocational training, cognitive achievements

People are equipped with a biological constitution 'which makes it possible for its individual representatives to learn, to store and to act upon experiences made and transmitted to that person by a long line of antecedent generations' (Elias 1991 [1989]: 15). Ancestral experiences are deposited in the concepts of a language, in thoughts, memories and all the other aspects of knowledge complexes. Ways of thinking and explaining are not the result of 'individual's personal experiences, but of experiences of a whole group in the course of many generations' (Elias 1991 [1989]: 9). Thus, the sociogenesis of different parts of knowledge complexes, like languages, thoughts and memories, has the character of a long-term process and should be perceived as individual and social at the same time.

These thoughts of Norbert Elias, coming from the unfinished introduction to his last book, *The Symbol Theory* (1991 [1989]), turned out to be highly relevant to my research on lower vocational training schools (VMBOs) in

the Netherlands. How did ancestral experiences influence the behaviour of students and teachers in the classroom? Should the re-enacting of hierarchical relations from the past in the present be perceived as an example of the phenomenon that is known in many sociological studies as 'the reproduction of social inequality at school'? [1] That expression can have different meanings, pointing to inequality between social strata, to the continuation of inequality at an institutional level, but also to the way remnants from the past are discernible in the acting, thinking and feeling of individuals in situated interactions. In this article the last meaning be emphasised. Individuals bring along their biographies, including transmitted experiences, into their actual interpretations and interactions (Van Daalen 2011).

The case under study is lower vocational training in the Netherlands (*Voorbereidend Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs, or preparatory secondary professional education, abbreviated as VMBO*), at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with a focus on the experiences of students and teachers in the classroom. Dutch secondary education has a sharp and early split between job-oriented and general education. Based on final assessments after primary school, at age twelve, children follow separate educational tracks, often located at schools in different places. Schools of vocational training house more than half of the students between twelve and sixteen, but despite this substantial number of students these schools are seen as the stepchild of secondary education. In newspapers and other media these schools are unashamedly pictured as the 'garbage drain' of the educational system, while their pupils are described as problematic. Parents will do their utmost to prevent their children from being sent to these vocational schools.

Improving the image of lower vocational training was one of the reasons for the formation of this type of school in 1999. The curriculum acquired a more general and theoretical character. It was lengthened and broadened, while at the same time the age of compulsory education was upgraded to eighteen. The aim was to elevate the image of this school type by diminishing the gap between vocational training and general education. However, the image of vocational training has not changed and the problems remain manifold. Its place in the educational system is unclear. Its curriculum is not crystallized, the balance between practical and theoretical lessons is uncertain, and teachers have difficulties combining the practical craftsman education and the more general orientation which originates in recent reforms. Its lack of prestige is reinforced day in day out in the media. Persistent negative, even derogatory stereotypes about students at schools for lower vocational training (*'the VMBO pupil'*) are repeated time and again in public discourse (Van Daalen and De Regt 2006).

In the stereotypes of these students one may discern a structural regularity of the relations between established and outsiders, with the VMBO students in the outsider position. Their image is modelled on the 'bad' characteristics of the 'worst' part of them, the most problematic and the least gifted. This 'bad boy' image: youths who are poor at thinking and theory and who lack the patience to sit still and to engage with books - is projected onto all 'VMBO students', also on the majority of pupils who do not cause any difficulties (Elias and Scotson 1976). All VMBO-students, journalists suggest, struggled through primary school, but they have finally found their place. Give them practical work, let them use their hands, and they will flourish! Such statements reinforce the common perception that these students are only fit for so-called practical tasks, which are defined as simpleminded, as working with your hands (Van Daalen and De Regt 2006). Students of these schools experience this kind of stigmatisation as painful.

In the problems of lower vocational training, in the stereotyped ways of thinking about them, and in classroom behaviour, the shadows of the past loom large. That was one of the observations of my research, and it is the focus of this article. What role does the past play? How are the experiences of a long line of preceding generations somehow re-enacted in contemporary classroom situations? In answering these questions, I want to

propose a combination of the symbolic interactionist perspective of Erving Goffmann (1967) and more recently Randall Collins (2004) with the process sociological approach of Norbert Elias. I will study how long-term changes in interdependencies not only inform the contemporary institutional order of education, but also the social situations at school (compare Diehl and McFarland 2010), the interactions between students and teachers in the classroom, and the ways both parties construct meaning. Processes of learning cover several generations and therefore present-day interactions between students and teachers should be studied as a stage in a long-term development. Such a long-term view enables the understanding of the social roots of their thinking and feeling, perceiving their acting as a sequel of transmitted experiences.

This research, the case of vocational training, and the tension between head and hand

This research had several stages. In order to avoid common stereotypes about the VMBO,[2] I started with a period of orientation. Together with Ali de Regt, I studied the way journalists reported on schools of lower vocational training and their students in daily newspapers in 2005. We analysed the (overwhelmingly negative) attitudes towards these schools and the stigmatisation which is implied (Van Daalen and De Regt 2006). In order to become familiar with everyday school life I visited a lower vocational school in Amsterdam, for one afternoon a week over an eight month period in 2005 and 2006. I hung around, chatted with students in the canteen, was present during 'mentor lessons' in the first grade, and I did some voluntary work: helping students preparing their presentations, reading books with students who had problems with the Dutch language. I talked to teachers and I observed in classrooms. Gradually I became more and more interested in the 'practical lessons', the lessons that distinguish lower vocational training schools from other kinds of secondary education. What did students learn there, and how were they taught? My observations of these lessons took place between 2007 and 2009.[3] In 2009 I investigated the sociogenesis of different branches of lower vocational training, with practical training as its core. I studied its place in secondary education and the changing composition of the population of its students. These materials gave me the means to analyse and interpret my observations in the classroom within a broader historical context. The starting point of my analysis was the second half of the nineteenth century, when the institutionalisation of secondary education took place (Van Daalen 2010).

During this study, lower vocational training in the Netherlands was still in the process of settling down after a substantial reform that took place in 1999. Apart from the improvement of the image of these schools, this reform also aimed to adapt this kind of education to the actual labour market and to present-day occupational possibilities. More aspects of the students' personalities were to be developed, and students were to be equipped with more knowledge and skills, in order to make them more flexible in the labour market. Therefore, students have to spend more time on general courses, like English or biology, while occupational specialisation is postponed. The schools have four grades, and the examination no longer synchronises with the end of compulsory education. So after finishing VMBO-education students have to enrol in two more years of education at least. As far as they have to specialise in a particular subject, they can choose one of four different specialisations, so-called 'sectors' – technique, care and welfare, economy, 'green' -, and each of these specialisations has different tracks, organised along levels of intellectual capacities. So, once determined for lower vocational training, students nowadays have the opportunity to postpone their choice of a specific occupation.

The sharp split in Dutch secondary education is defined as a division between head and hand, which exists in

schools, tracks, lessons, students, and more general is operative in the way people act. It is this rift between *Animal Laborens* and *Homo Faber* that Richard Sennett identified in his 2008 book, *The Craftsman*. Sennett sees the division as artificial, as separating human faculties that cannot be separated: 'Thinking and feeling', he argues, 'are contained within the process of making' (Sennett 2008: 7). He furthermore objects to the presumption of hierarchy with thinkers on top. Good craftsmen cannot be pigeon-holed as *Homo Faber* who inquire 'why?' or as *Animal Laborens* obsessed with 'how?' In the mind of the skilled craftsman, there is no split between technique and expression: problem-finding and problem-solving are intimately related. Good craftsmen use solutions to discover new questions and embody 'the desire to do something well, concretely, for its own sake' (Sennet 2008: 9-11). For Sennett, this desire is a basic human impulse.

By focussing on how craftsmen intimately connect hand and head, Sennett seeks a better understanding of the making and doing of things (in their broadest sense). While his approach is convincing, his understanding is not the dominant way of seeing the issue. Sennett's vision corresponds to the enlightenment ideas of Diderot, who placed manual pursuits on an equal footing with mental labour. However, as Sennett shows, nineteenth-century history took a different track. Ideas about the separation of thinking and doing became fixed in the social relations of industrialising societies. The dichotomy between head and hand (and mind and body) is deeply imbued in people's thinking and feeling, and is seldom questioned. It is also institutionalised in the hierarchy of the educational system, in its rules and procedures, in the diplomas and certificates that give an entry into the labour market, and, last but not least, in the status that is assigned to people who are associated with doing practical or theoretical things.

Pierre Bourdieu has given the most encompassing analysis of these scholastic cultural repertoires, which he connects to existing relations of dominance. He demonstrates that this scholastic order has an ever-repeating fractal nature (Abbott 2004), reaching into the deep structures of schools, into the assessment of curricula, courses, subjects and school results, and into the interactions and the minds of students and teachers. Teachers not only take into account knowledge and know-how, but also intangible nuances of manners and style. In an article that he wrote together with De Saint Martin, Bourdieu considers the latter as the imperceptible but never unperceived manifestations of the individual's relation to knowledge, the 'half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable' expression of a system of values which forms the basis of this power-laden order (Bourdieu and De Saint Martin 1970; Compare: Paulle 2005).

The dichotomy between theory and practice forms a crucial element in the cultural repertoires at school, and it underlies, I will argue, many of the current problems experienced within lower vocation training in the Netherlands. The hierarchy of thinking above doing is a standard with old and new ingredients, which is firmly connected to differences in class, status, and power. This standard is always present at school - consciously or not - contributing to the defining and evaluating of scholastic achievement, of learning styles and students' personality types. Deeply rooted in the system of educational values, cognitive performers represent the highest standard - a burden with a long tradition.

Nowadays, the ambition to do a task well at school is foremost associated with this evaluation scheme, while performing is defined as the responsibility of the individual performer, according to the meritocratic ideal which sees 'achievement' instead of 'ascription' as its program. But this contemporary ideal remains elusive, even contributing to the existing social inequalities: instead of showcasing students' the talents, examination results reproduce their earlier biographies in terms of inherited social and cultural capital, in different ways depending on social context. In this way privilege is transformed into merit, not only at school but also in the labour market (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964). The scholastic appreciation of doing and thinking is closely connected to the occupational world, where diplomas qualify for jobs.

Preoccupations in the classroom

The general negative attitude towards lower vocational training and the students enrolled in it is reflected in the relations and interactions at school. Here I discuss two cases of frictions in the classroom. In both examples the influence of interdependencies from the past is observable in the feelings of students and teachers. The first case has to do with the intellectual definition of merit, in particular with the anxiety and awkwardness invoked by contemporary meritocratic ideals. The second concerns a preoccupation among 'practical' teachers with the diffuse content of their courses. They perceive a shift in the relative weight of theoretical and practical lessons in the curriculum and they have difficulty accepting their new teaching role. They cling to the situation in which they prepared students for the labour market, instead of giving them an orientation in a broad occupational field. They have nostalgic feelings about the time that their lessons formed the core of vocational education.

In this part of my research, I draw heavily on the work of Erving Goffman, who systematically studied face-to-face interactions in natural settings. As an observer of human interaction Goffman is unmatched, with a keen eye for the importance of involvement in interactions, how involvement succeeds or fails and varies in intensity. In his article 'Alienation from Interaction' he describes different kinds of engagement in conversational encounters (Goffman 1967). Ideally, people become mutually entrained in interactions. They 'can become unthinkingly and impulsively immersed in the talk and carried away by it, oblivious to other things' including themselves (Goffman 1967: 113). But such joint spontaneous involvement - Goffman speaks of a *unio mystico*, a socialised trance with a binding and hypnotic effect - is seldom seen, certainly in the classrooms that I visited. It was much more common for involvement of students and teachers in their interactions to be short, meagre and prone to distraction. Goffman's analysis of how misinvolvement arises, how it influences interactions, and how embarrassment accompanies alienated interactions is especially useful in understanding how such failings occur. While Goffman writes about encounters between people in general, one may also apply his interpretative framework concerning involvement to any form of joint action in a concentrated, committed way. In such instances not only the joint involvement of students and teachers is concerned, but also their dedication to their activities in the classroom. Used in this way, engagement is comparable to commitment in Sennett's argument and can be seen as one of the conditions of craftsmanship. While engagement is always precarious, I saw it to be particularly fragile in the beehive of school and classroom activity.

I registered all variants of Goffman's typology of interactions in which the actors did not meet the obligations of involvement. In this article I elaborate on two forms of alienating misinvolvement. The first, the focus on intellectual abilities and performances, concerns individuals who are internally preoccupied: self-conscious, self-centred, and often embarrassed. They focus their attention – more than they ought to – on themselves as actors instead of the interaction. In the second type of misinvolvement, concerning the changing balance in the relation between school and work, participants in interactions become interaction-conscious: they 'may become consciously concerned to an improper degree with the way interaction, qua interaction, is proceeding' (Goffman 1967: 119). I will discuss examples of both kinds of alienation, showing how both undermine the learning and teaching processes at school.

Being smart or being practical: scholastic capacities as individual

gifts

In the classroom, the issue of 'being smart' served, time and again, to distract students from their learning. They saw the fact that they were lower vocational students as a sign of being poor 'theoretical pupils'. This made them self-conscious about their identity as students, influencing their attitude towards school and their courses. In their conversations, students constantly alluded to issues concerning intelligence and schooling, and continuously compared themselves to others. They focussed their attention on themselves as actors rather than on their performance during lessons.

Students' class talk revealed that they had internalised the educational ideology regarding the value of theory and practice, fashioned in the new clothes of meritocracy. They tended to equate 'theoretical' and 'practical' primarily with 'smart' and 'stupid', linking these categories to social class. Their preoccupations were manifest in their interactions.

> In a scene in which a student has to demonstrate how to place an injured person in an appropriate position, one of the student bystanders gives her comment. She is proud to know how the position of the fictive victim should be: 'You should open the mouth.' And pointing to the academic standard as the only one, she comments on her own knowledgability: 'I am a genius. Actually I belong to the university'. (Observation in lesson Zorg en Welzijn (Care and wellbeing, 3/11/2008)

From their first steps into primary school, students are socialised into accepting the validity of the cognitive selection standards and to attuning their self-images in the light of these standards. They and their teachers uphold the same values, and see the academic standard as paramount. My job as a university teacher is a regular topic of conversation.

> One of the teachers, a carpenter whose lessons I attended for some time, presents me to one of his colleagues: 'She comes from the university' and he suggests jokingly that knowing me gives his colleague the opportunity to make contact with the university. He adds the words: 'Good for your curriculum vitae'. An older teacher tells me often how tired he is of the lessons. He asks me if I am not fed up with teaching. And when I say that I still like it, he thinks that is because I work with intelligent people. (Observations 07/03/2008; 18/12/2007)

Cognitive values express what counts at school and what does not. Students and teachers use these standards to evaluate school performance as good or bad, to judge courses as more or less important, to determine student personalities as 'intellectual' - which means appropriate for schools - or 'practical', and to portray styles of learning as creative and analytical or as rote reproduction. Echoes of the class-bound past - the 'civilised' and the 'vulgar' - are obvious.

The meritocratic turn has added new elements to this cluster of ideas and feelings: the obligation to make the most of your abilities and to acquire a qualification ('*papiertje*' or 'little paper') corresponding to your talents. Students are considered to be responsible for their own success. Both the old class-bound standards and the new individualised standards are part of their cultural repertoire, and these are even recognised by students who challenge the order at school in other respects. Their own ideas about their cognitive abilities, and the opinion of significant others, clearly matter for them.

Teachers play a key role in that respect. They have the power to sort their pupils, ranking them along and sorting them into specific educational tracks. They see it as their responsibility to support students to make full use of their talents. They wonder whether they are getting the best out of them, and many of them keep worrying: 'How can I get my students to work, how can I inspire them?' 'Did I place them in the right track?' While teachers recognise the interplay of intelligence and effort, they – unlike their students – are more worried about effort than ability. The key issue is for them: 'Do students make the best of their abilities?' They become cross if pupils are lazy, if they lack attention and interest. Their main preoccupation is the fear of being responsible for wasting intellectual talent. They are aware that the will to learn is at least as essential for success at school as intellectual capacities, but their anxiety about a lack of motivation doesn't match their preoccupation with students' marks (Covington 1991 [1989]; Covington and Manheim Teel 1996).

The instructors' preoccupation with intelligence runs parallel to that of students, but teachers are above all interested in intelligence as manifested in school results, while students are preoccupied with the recognition of their innate abilities. Just like teachers, students talk about their marks as the result of their behaviour, something they can influence. But 'smartness' represents a more fundamental issue for them, because they see it as intrinsic to their personality, to their very identity. This makes the presentation of their intellectual selves so important to them. Even students who acted tough at school, appeared to be self-conscious and anxious about their intellectual abilities, preoccupied with their results in situations of assessment. When they receive their marks, or when they are directed towards a specific educational track, they wonder whether evaluations by present and former teachers are right and fair. Distracted by worries about their own intelligence, their anxieties hinder their ability to focus on learning. They do not succeed in – to use Sennett's words – doing things well for their own sake. Instead, they are searching for answers to questions like: 'What do people think about my performance?', 'Does the teacher think I am able to do this?'; and, feeling uncertain about their own abilities, they wonder: 'Can I work it out?'

Preoccupation with intellectual talent and performance causes misinvolvement during interactions, making it difficult for students and teachers to concentrate on learning and teaching. Instead, they focus on their own functioning within specific interactions, contesting the other party's judgment, negotiating assessments and selection procedures, persuading others that their opinions are right, and trying to present favourable images of themselves. The following dialogue illustrates the kind of issues involved in the classroom talk between students and teachers:

> 'Can I do this assignment?' asks a student. 'No', the teacher answers, 'you are at a lower level, so this assignment is too difficult for you'. 'Yes, but earlier I was at a higher level, so I should be able to do this assignment as well', says the student. And the teacher agrees: 'Indeed, you are right, actually you have "higher-level-brains" (*HAVO-hersentjes*) in your head'. (Observation in lesson Economy, 17/04/2008)

In such challenges, teachers and students are fully aware of the situational order and its moral underpinnings. They spend their energy worrying about their relations and interactions, thinking and talking about the way they judge each other.

> Take for example another scene, in which the teacher explains that a nice assignment in which students have to observe a school class which is doing gymnastics can only be given to children

> who are streamed in the highest practical track. She considers the assessment too difficult for students in the lower track: 'In that class, I have to explain the assessment a hundred times', says the teacher. And one of the listeners, a girl who has been degraded several times, starting her school career at HAVO (lowest level of general secondary education), then following the highest level at the VMBO, later on the lowest level, reacts with indignity: 'You are offending me, Miss'. 'No', says her teacher, 'I am not offending you, because it doesn't regard you. You started at the HAVO, didn't you? So for you, it is not too difficult'. (Observation in lesson *Zorg en Welzijn* (Care and Wellbeing), 06/11/2008)

Such discussions about the intellectual level of students are omnipresent in contemporary classroom talk, and affect their behaviour. Stereotypes about these students draw heavily on past preconceptions about young labourers. Nineteenth-century notions of vocational school students as 'practical', 'lower class' and 'manual labour' merge with new labels like 'not-smart'. These ideas have wide currency, reaching deep into the classroom, where I heard both students and teachers use these categorisations as if they were self-evident, thereby legitimising the low status of lower vocational training and its students.

Misconceptions about 'practical' and 'theoretical' occupations

In the reformed curriculum of lower vocational training students have the opportunity to get acquainted with different occupational branches and to develop a broad and general expertise. Before the 1999 reform schools of lower vocational training aimed to qualify skilled workers and craftsmen, but nowadays their courses combine an introduction to occupational specialisation with limited theoretical orientation. The number of job-oriented lessons has decreased, while general education gets more room. Only after finishing their VMBO-education have students to specialise in particular subjects and skills.

This postponement of specialisation, of transmitting knowledge and skills for a job, makes the distance between school and work larger, and provides another source of alienation in the interactions in the classroom. I followed some lessons given by an older carpenter, one of the teachers who regretted the limitations of his present-day instructions. Some of his lessons had an introductory character, aiming to give students from the second grade a broad orientation in different occupational fields; other lessons were more specialised and job-oriented, targeting students following the – still quite general – technical track in the fourth grade. None of his lessons aimed to prepare students for the labour market.

In his orientation lessons the carpenter has to teach a very heterogeneous group of students, both boys and girls, only a small part of whom will choose the technical track. This task is new for the carpenter, and for most of his pupils this is the first time that they held a hammer. They have to construct a pen-holder out of three-ply. The teacher starts with some theoretical instructions: 'Listen well. Then it will work out. I will write it down on the blackboard'. 'What is three-ply, master?' 'Plywood made by gluing together three layers with the grain in different directions', answers the teacher and he explains the steps they have to take. The students go into the area with the workbenches and other equipment, with a range of tools and with big devices for sawing and polishing. The teacher tells them where to find the prepared pieces of wood and the equipment for manufacturing the pen-holders. The group is not exactly what you expect when talking of carpenters. The girls are clothed carefully and colourfully, with all kinds of accessories – trinkets, handbags, shawls. Manufacturing wood is a completely new and probably one-off experience for them. The instructions are quite basic, the

students have to find their own way. They inspect each other’s work, they help each other, and the teacher walks around, intervening when someone gets stuck. He demonstrates how to fix the wood to the workbenches. 'It is not easy, it's not an easy assignment, but I am sure you can do it.' Every time he uses technical terms, he has to explain. Students and teachers are in quite a good mood, but they are working from scratch and for most of the students without a follow-up.

The specialised lessons have a completely different character. The students are all boys. They work autonomously, they do not need assignments because they are continuing with work in progress. Some of them are constructing large window-frames, while the teacher gives specified instructions. Other students are making a wooden roof. The teacher says: 'These fourth-grade students do not make simple pieces of work, they don't make itsy-bitsy tiny things (*petieterig*), it's really big what they are doing and they have to take it apart when they are finished.' He walks around, pointing out errors, demonstrating how to revise these, meanwhile talking with the students about technical details. He asks them to explain the specialised terms he uses. Some students tell him that their work doesn't fit together. The teacher asks them: 'Is this a matter of centimetres or of millimetres? In the case of centimetres, you made a mistake in counting'. And indeed, that's what they did.

Afterwards the teacher and I chat about the lessons, and he has a lot to complain about. He is anxious about the level of his students and is preoccupied with worries such as: ‘What do students at this level nowadays have to know and how should we as instructors teach such knowledge and know-how?’ His ideas about the future jobs of his students are limited and oriented to the past. He is not aware of recent changes in the labour market, of the deindustrialisation and the rise of a service economy, he has not picked up on the increasing differentiation of jobs, among them the rise of a wide range of new jobs for a (lower) middle class. [4]

The carpenter is not the only one who does not make the jump into these new developments. He concentrates on his teaching and he is committed to his work, but he is never happy about his performance – uncertain and anxious, and suffering from what Goffmann calls ‘interaction-consciousness’. He is concerned - to the point that it interferes with his functioning - with how teaching interactions, qua interaction, are proceeding. He compares his lessons with those he gave in the past and regrets the world that has been lost. He feels sad about the decrease of his teaching hours, only eight a week are left, while he sees the practical lessons as more effective than 'chatting behind a table'. He unwillingly succumbs to the new regime, and he is continuously frustrated because he does not have enough time to give his students the kind of training that can make them into craftsmen. Like many of his colleagues he is sceptical about the new curriculum, and he doubts both its practical and theoretical qualities. He wants things to be like they always were. It is difficult for him to accept that the lengthening of compulsory education implies that he is supposed to teach only the basics preceding job specialisation. The fact that his students have been classified for lower vocational training makes them, in his opinion, ‘practical’ students, and he considers the reformed curriculum as interfering with what ‘practical training' ought to be.

The past in people's minds: the petrification of former figurations

These two cases of misinvolvement in the classrooms of schools for lower vocational training show the relevance of past interdependencies for the thinking, feeling and acting of Dutch students and teachers today. They are, to paraphrase Maurice Halbwachs, continuously making and remaking history, and in this process, the active past informs their behaviour as well as their identities (Halbwachs 1992).Their preoccupations are institutionally and culturally structured and at the same time their actions shape schools as institutions. Their behaviour and their

world views, as expressed in the things they say, point to a former class society, although they themselves experience the educational order as something static that exists out there, something that is not manmade but has a life of its own (Elias 1988 [1984]: 95).

In the following sections I discuss several aspects of the sociogenesis of lower vocational training, which make the preoccupations of students and teachers more understandable. I focus on the two kinds of misinvolvements discussed above: concern about 'making the best of your brains' and uncertainty about the balance between theory and practice in the curriculum. Both issues are related to the division between head and hand, in which at a deeper level the tensions between social classes are manifest. From its very inception this social inequality informed the organisation of secondary education in the Netherlands.

It dates from 1863 when the *Wet op het Middelbaar Onderwijs* (Secondary Education Act) was implemented, directly linked to processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. The educational system of that time was not fit to deal with the dynamic occupational prospects of that era. Schools reflected the existing social stratification, with a large and poor working class, a small and rich bourgeoisie, and with class relations that were seen as a fact of life, as God wanted it.

One function was dominant in education: the formation of personality. Working class children had to learn Christian virtues and good manners, while education for children of the bourgeoisie consisted of the cultivation of sensitivity and manners, of formative learning directed at one's inner life. Schools contributed to socialisation for class membership, readying children for the same social position as their parents, but education and future jobs were tenuously related: schools did not prepare pupils for specific occupations or professions.[5]

These patterns changed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the transformation of society went together with the creation of new occupational opportunities, introducing cracks in the relatively stable social structure. The rise of commerce and banking, the building of infrastructures for transport and communications, the growth of bureaucracies and formal arrangements for care and education, these developments brought into existence new jobs for a rising middle class. Adequate education for these jobs was however lacking.

It was in this atmosphere of rapid social change that the Dutch central government filled the gap between primary schools and universities with a system of secondary schooling that instated two kinds of secondary schools: the classical variant that prepared pupils belonging to the elite for university entrance (*gymnasium*)[6] and the modern variant, especially geared towards the children of a new and expanding middle class, the so called *Hogere Burger School* (schools for children from the higher bourgeoisie, HBS), in which modern languages, social sciences, economics and technology were central. This new system of secondary education didn't aim however at the schooling of the working class youth. The majority of youngsters was excluded. They had to be prepared for manual labour, which had to take place on the job - within factories, offices, banks and households. In this highly stratified educational system, civilised learning and high culture figured on top, modern education had a place in the middle, while vocational training got an outsider status.. The learning of 'practical skills' was not seen as 'genuine schooling' and regulation was left to private initiative (Meijers 1983; Wolthuis 1999; Goudswaard 1989).

In this way the existing class relations between bourgeoisie and workers were sanctified and institutionalised in the educational ranking of theory and practice, while the ideologies that legitimized the existing power relations were reproduced and petrified in the educational order. Both quality and quantity of schooling were dependent on the students' material conditions. Most the children had to earn money from a young age – until 1901 even primary education was not compulsory. Getting the opportunity to become skilled workers and craftsmen was a

privilege for the happy few.

Once institutionalised and petrified, this fragmented system of secondary education set the stage for later adjustments to the social setting of the period. However, despite fundamental changes it never lost its class-bound character; even during the radical reforms that took place after the 1950s, when meritocratic ideals became a drive. The existing educational system implied a lack of social mobility that came to be seen as a social problem, as an impediment to economic growth and modernisation. These were days of growing prosperity and an increasing demand for differentiated labour. These were also the days of the expansion of the Dutch welfare state, in which education turned into one of the crucial policy domains. 'Careers for the talented' became the new adage: educational policy was to promote the development of the intellectual capacities of children from all social strata, not determined by their parents' economic, social and cultural capital. In this social climate, leaving talent unexplored came to be seen as a waste of human resources. For children, it became a right and even a moral obligation to develop their talents; for teachers, it became a responsibility to give them the chance to do so.

But in the meritocratic ideal and practices, class relations still resonate. Intellectual talent remains associated with the elite and continues to have the highest status, theoretical schooling is still seen as the ultimate aim, with the university as the highest step on the educational ladder. Pierre Bourdieu has elaborated on the importance of this scholastic hierarchy for the daily functioning of schools.

> The aspiration to place oneself as high as possible in the university hierarchy, which is regarded as absolute, is what inspires the most sustained and efficacious endeavours. Adherence to the values implied in the academic hierarchy of performances is so strong that individuals can be seen to be drawn to the school careers or competitions most highly valued by the educational system, independently of their personal aspirations or aptitudes (Bourdieu 1979: 69).

These words of Bourdieu perfectly express the persistent tendency to estimate theoretical, cognitive, intellectual strivings as the highest ambitions in life, as the most important element of school performance. This cherishing of intellect was strengthened, when in the 1960s the cognitive talents of pupils from the lower social classes also came to be recognised, giving some of them the chance to climb the social ladder. General theoretical education became the ideal and the norm for people from all social classes, while vocational training stuck to the lower social strata. Vocational schools are no longer seen as a privilege, and they lost ground as a worthy kind of education. Their negative image is one of the unforeseen and unintended negative effects of 'the ideology of equal chances'. Nowadays children at vocational schools are doubly stigmatised. They are defined as 'practical students', their cognitive abilities are seen as limited, as inadequate for schools that offer general education, the kind of education which is regarded as 'genuine'. And this definition is linked to nineteenth-century notions about manual labour and working class youth.

This development is rationalised by the intensification of test regimes and monitoring systems at school. This 'scientification' of the selection system individualises school performance, success and failure, and suggests a fairness which is not there. The over-representation of children with less educated and immigrant parents in vocational schooling demonstrates that something other than intelligence informs the selection. Indeed, alongside the twists of fate and chance, test scores depend on all forms of transmitted social and cultural capital.

So despite several endeavours to integrate this type of schooling into the system of secondary education, lower vocational training has remained an outsider in the system. Differences with education with a more general

orientation have sharpened. The vocational schools have a hybrid and diffuse identity, with a curriculum that contains elements dating back to its origins as well as elements typical of societies aiming to be ‘knowledge economies’. The more theoretical focus of the contemporary curriculum doesn't get much credit, while the expansion of theoretical lessons in the curriculum is seen as an erosion of its practical education, its distinguishing characteristic. The curriculum appears as the ‘simple brother’ of theoretically oriented secondary schools, while the occupational elements in the curriculum strengthen their status as an outsider in a more and more intellectually-oriented educational system.

So, politicians, policy-makers, students, parents and teachers are all engaged in a race against one standard – the academic one – forcing each other to pursue more and more general education at the level of classes, schools, nations and continents. Making the Netherlands ‘smarter’ and more ‘creative’, reaching for ‘excellence’, ‘reaching for the top’ in education and research. In the last decade, this has become the ambition of educational policies, and that ambition is – again – in particular directed at theoretically-oriented schooling.

The omnipresence of this unidimensional standard, disregarding other talents and other principles, goes hand in hand with the ignoring of the transformation of the labour market, as manifest in the differentiation of occupational options. In this standard, and in the associated patterns of social stratification, echoes from the past keep resonating, working as the symbolic dimension of the interactions between students and teachers in the classroom and hindering their mutual entrainment. Their lack of involvement limits their perspectives and actions to the physical frame of the classroom and to the temporal frame of the moment. They are hard pressed to see beyond these horizons, to think about the future more broadly.

But it is not only students and teachers who have such restricted ideas. In the public domain, it's also common to use a dichotomous worldview, concerning schools, students, talents, occupations and social classes. In this perspective processes of inclusion and exclusion are observable, separating 'we' from 'them'. Within this established-outsiders figuration people are blind to the contemporary differentiated occupational structure and to the layered social stratification. They disregard the fact that the dual class structure of the nineteenth century is no longer here. The differences between the students following vocational training or theoretical instructions are inflated, while little attention is given to the fact that students who graduate in vocational training will acquire positions that are situated in the middle. Just like dropouts, elderly people who only followed primary education, or poorly-educated immigrants, are defined as outsiders, and this process of exclusion is one of the causes of the continued difficulties of lower vocational training[7].

Why lower vocational training fails

It's no wonder that the unfortunate hodge-podge of old and new elements in lower vocational training has not improved its image or solved its problems. Despite several educational reforms, the deep structure of its nineteenth-century organisation has not fundamentally changed. It is still present in the minds of both students and teachers. The meritocratic ambition cannot conceal the class-bound character of lower vocational training, the efforts to make the curriculum suitable for the twenty-first century cannot hide its outsiders' status. Compared with the interest in the theoretical and academic branches of education, efforts to change vocational schools show a lack of involvement. The lingering of associations with lower class and unidimensional manual jobs, with a disregard for new occupational possibilities, invigorates the established-outsiders figuration and hampers fundamental educational innovations. The hierarchical distinctions between doing and thinking, between 'practical' and 'theoretical' students, between hand and head, between low and high in education, are

taken for granted, without much reflection. The issue how to design new educational programmes and how to prepare young people for comparatively new jobs and for a constantly changing labour market has not been fundamentally tackled. And this is not to be expected, as long as such dichotomous, often obsolete notions have a life of their own and are strengthened by existing power relations. In this context, knowledge about the past appears to be indispensable in understanding the acting, thinking and feeling of students and teachers in the classroom. The hierarchies of the industrialising class society are up to now perceivable in their everyday interactions.

At a theoretical level this research demonstrates why historicising the sociology of micro-interactions is a fruitful and important, analysing interdependencies and using them as a frame for historicising situations (Diehl and McFarland 2010), interactions and interpretations (Van Daalen 2010). A figurational approach can provide situations in the here and now with a social context, but process sociology has more to offer. In the ways people experience and interpret specific situations, the echo of former interdependencies is still resonating. People store ideas that are not the result of their 'personal experience, but of the collective experiences of a whole group in the course of many generations' (Elias 1991 [1989]: 9). The ideas, symbols and culture of the past remain alive as social memories, and these are employed and reconstructed in daily practices. Such transmitted experiences can have the function of orientation, but – as this research illustrates – these can be disorienting as well, obscuring insight into what is desirable for the future. In the case of vocational training dreams and nightmares with a long history form a hindrance in adjusting to actual social relations. Dichotomous categorisations – of human faculties, talents, students and curricula, occupations and social strata – are institutionalised in the educational system and its underlying values. Such ideas however belong to the museum of obsolete knowledge (Elias 1988 [1984]: 71). Categorising jobs as working with your hands or with your head has always been problematic, but the diversification of work in the twentieth century made it especially clear that this distinction has become even more dubious than during early industrialisation. Dichotomous perspectives on social strata, jobs and categories of education are relics transmitted from earlier societies that are not suitable to conceptualise people's capacities and behaviour, and do not allow for the existing diversity. But the fact that these are relics cannot prevent such perspectives from having a life of their own. That makes it worthwhile to study the past, to bring history and micro-sociology into conversation: not only to shed light on the changes in social relations of people, but also to make their ideas and feelings more understandable.

Biography:

Rineke van Daalen is a sociologist who studied at the University of Amsterdam. In addition to her PhD, a historical-sociological study about citizen complaints to the municipality of Amsterdam, 1865-1920, she published in the area of families, children, professionals and the welfare state. She wrote *Overgebleven werk* (2005), about children and their supervisors during lunch time at school, and *The vmbo as stigma* (2010), about school life at a school of lower vocational training. A book about the work of these students, once they finished their school, is in progress.

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Notes

1. Social inequality and education is one of the central topics of educational sociology, a domain of sociology which always was connected to social policy. Such sociological research deals with the relation between school performance of children and characteristics of their parents or other family members - social economic, language codes, parental style, ethnicity, but also divorce or no divorce, working mother, one-parent family, number of children, etc..The empirical research in this domain is comprehensive, has an international orientation, although following different tracks per country. In theorising about these issues Pierre Bourdieu has been highly influential. Bourdieu conceptualised 'the reproduction of social inequality in education' and he introduced the concepts of cultural, social and economic capital. He focusses on the process character of social inequality and he sees inequality at school as a consequence of power relations in societies. But the approach of Bourdieu is not symbolic interactionist and although his perspective is dynamic, it doesn't use a long-term historical frame. It is this combination of a dynamic and social historical perspective with a symbolic interactionist approach which is typical for this article.
2. These schools for lower vocational training, (*Voorbereidend Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs, VMBO*), offer students the preparation for vocational training at the middle level.
3. All references to interactions at school originate in these observations, some of them are specified according to place and time.
4. E.g. as hairdressers, cooks, plumbers, electricians, computer technicians, in computer programming, assisting at school and in offices, paralegal work and communication work, as receptionists, social workers, security guards, in intermediating functions between clients and professionals, between producers and professionals, in institutionalised caring for the young, old and sick. See for institutionalised care work also: Rineke van Daalen, 'Paid mothering in the public domain: Dutch Dinner Ladies and Their Difficulties', *Journal of Social History*, 40, 3 (2007) 619-634.
5. This was also the opinion of social democrats, who saw education above all as enlightenment (De Rooy, 2005).
6. In the original law of 1863 *gymnasia* were put on the same line as universities, as part of higher education.
7. These are conclusions based on my research in *Gewoon werk*, which still has to be published.

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644