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Citation

Dera, J., Smeets, R., & Wanrooij, T. van. (2023). “The problem with all those teachers Is that they are completely numb”: representations of teachers and education in recent Dutch novels. *Dutch Crossing*, 47(2), 1-21. doi:10.1080/03096564.2023.2230682

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3633941>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Jeroen Dera, Roel Smeets & Tommie van Wanrooij (2023): “The problem with all those teachers is that they are completely numb”: Representations of Teachers and Education in Recent Dutch Novels, Dutch Crossing, DOI: [10.1080/03096564.2023.2230682](https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2023.2230682)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2023.2230682>



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Published online: 04 Jul 2023.



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“The problem with all those teachers is that they are completely numb”: Representations of Teachers and Education in Recent Dutch Novels

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that teachers and education are often represented negatively or stereotypically in popular and literary culture, both in the Dutch language area and in Anglophone contexts. Regarding contemporary Dutch literature, though, research on educational representations has until now focussed on small corpora of novels that explicitly deal with education. In this article, we explore the representations of teachers and education in a much larger and broader corpus: the 170 submissions to the bulk list of the prestigious Dutch *Libris Literatuurprijs* of 2013. We provide a Keyword in Context Analysis of 292 educational representations in this corpus and offer a demographic analysis of the 71 teachers who inhabit the novels under analysis. In doing so, we show that educational representations and teacher characters are relatively common in contemporary Dutch language novels. Our analysis also reveals that literary representations of teachers are predominantly negative in nature, especially regarding their behaviour towards students, their external presentation, and their pedagogical skills. Representations of education in general tend to be even more negative. In that sense, literary representations of education appear to converge with the negative public appeal of the educational sector in the contemporary Low Countries.

KEYWORDS

Teacher representation;
distant reading; education;
Dutch literature

Introduction

‘We have all gone to school, we have all experienced how teachers fixed their eyes upon us. We have all felt humiliated by the power teachers exposed to us.’¹ This is how the Dutch author and critic Kees ’t Hart explains the negative image of teachers in Dutch literature. His claims are exemplary for the relatively low societal status of teachers in the Netherlands and Flanders, where the profession’s image has deteriorated over the last couple of decades, amongst other things resulting in a serious shortage of teachers in the job market.² By representing teachers and educational institutions in a negative manner, literary texts might converge with this development.

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In his doctoral dissertation, Ton Bastings indeed argues that novels centred around education tend to represent teachers stereotypically. He claims that literary representations of teaching lean towards caricatures. In the vast majority of the 10 novels analysed in the dissertation, the teacher-protagonist is a single man and a heavy drinker who quits his educational career early, often after making sexual moves on students.³

Such caricature-like representations are common in the image of teachers circulating in Western societies. As Applegate has pointed out, there seems to be a binary in the popular imagination: Teachers are good or bad; they are driven by love for their students or by a desire for money; they can inspire their students to succeed or they can torment their students into hopelessness and frustration.⁴ This lack of nuance in teacher representations is underlined by stereotypical tropes popping up in popular culture, such as the teacher-saviour metaphor that frequently occurs in movies on education.⁵ It is also highly gendered: as Fisher, Harris, and Jarvis have shown, popular culture often characterizes male teachers as ‘failures’ – ‘people who really wanted to be something else (. . .) or whose main career is over.’⁶

Yet, such research on teacher representations is generally focused on case studies of movies, television anthologies or novels in which both school life and teachers take centre stage. This raises serious methodological issues. Bastings, for instance, limits his analysis to novels in which the protagonist is a teacher. He even prefers to analyse the work of authors who have taught in secondary education themselves. In order to give an adequate image of school life, Bastings argues, writers ‘should be familiar with the ambiance of the staff room’.⁷ In his research he reads his corpus through the lens of educational standards, hence treating literary novels as portfolios that allow us to assess their protagonist’s skills and competencies as a teacher. Although this approach is as original as it is problematic – a novel simply is not an educational portfolio – it ultimately does not inform us about the general image of high school teachers in Dutch novels. By narrowing his scope to 10 case studies, Bastings’ approach does not allow us to make general claims on the literary representation of teachers in Dutch literature.

More convincing, in that respect, is the analysis by Niemi, Smith, and Brown, showing that English children’s fiction ‘characterizes teachers as female, White, straight, and non-disabled’.⁸ In this case, the representational claims are based on 74 children’s novels, which gives this analysis more statistical power. Like Bastings, Niemi, Smith, and Brown confine themselves to novels in which teachers are a main or significant supporting character. Yet, representation of teachers might also be at work in literary texts in which they only have a peripheral role or in which teaching and education are not explicitly thematized. In fact, such texts might tell us even more about the image of teachers in contemporary society, because minor characters are more likely to embody social stereotypes because of the psychological depth they usually lack.⁹

In this article, we thus focus on teacher representations in Dutch-language literature *without* limiting our analysis to specific teacher novels. In doing so, we will answer the following research question: How are education in general and teachers in particular represented in contemporary Dutch-language novels? Unlike Bastings, we will not analyse a limited number of case studies. Instead, we will use a combination of distant reading and qualitative inquiry that allows us to develop a sharper view on the representation of teachers in Dutch-language literature. This is particularly important, because such representations lend themselves well for

teacher-training programs – which increasingly use teacher images from both print and screen culture in their pedagogy, for instance asking preservice teachers to relate their own didactic ideas and professional identity to the images circulating in novels and films.¹⁰

Methodological Framework

Corpus and Dataset

In order to gain insight into the literary representation of education in general and teachers in particular, we draw on a corpus of 170 books of present-day Dutch-language literary fiction. As the social status of teachers in the Netherlands and Flanders has been impacted negatively in the last few decades, focusing on books published in this particular period allows us to trace the extent to which literary representations of education and teachers converged with that societal development. Furthermore, the size and scope of our corpus allow us to make generalizable statements on the literary representation of education and teachers.

The corpus contains all submissions to the bulk list of the *Libris Literatuurprijs* 2013. One of the most prestigious literary prizes in the Dutch language area, the *Libris Literatuurprijs* yearly grants €50,000 to a book in the category of literary fiction (NUR-code 301) published in the past year (in this case: 2012). Modelled after the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, the annually changing jury first selects a longlist of 18 titles from the bulk list (often around 150 to 200 submissions) and subsequently presents a shortlist of six titles. Each of the shortlisted authors receives an amount of €2,500, while the ultimate laureate of the prize is granted a total of €52,000.

As five of the 170 books on the 2013 longlist were written in collaboration, there is a total of 175 authors involved in our corpus. In terms of the demographic composition of the authors, three biases should be mentioned. First, a 70:30 gender ratio shows that male authors are overrepresented. Second, although most authors originate from the Netherlands (76%), a considerably smaller number of authors originate from Flanders (16.6%) and a minor number was born in a non-Western country (4%). Third, with only a few exceptions, all authors are higher educated. As the demographic background of authors has been shown to correlate with the demographic background of their characters,¹¹ we must take into account the likelihood that the literary representation of teachers in our corpus is coloured by the predominantly male, Dutch born and higher educated population of authors that we study.

Something similar holds for genre. Since 2010, only books that are labelled with NUR-code 301 (literary novels for adults) can be submitted to the *Libris Literatuurprijs*. This means that representations of education and teachers in genres such as young adult, children's literature, fantasy, detectives and (literary) thrillers are outside the scope of this study. For the genre of literary fiction, however, our corpus of 170 books is highly representative of the population of books in 2012: it makes up 37% of the total production of originally published books of literary fiction in the Dutch language in this particular year.¹² Finally, it should be noted that these 170 books are not a random sample in the sense that they allegedly represent high quality fiction, which is highlighted by the fact that they are submitted by their publishers for a prestigious literary prize.¹³

In earlier research, extensive demographic metadata – gender, country and place of descent, country and place of residence, age, education, occupation – were collected for a total of 2,137 characters that were semi-automatically identified with a combination of computer-assisted character detection and annotations by a group of researchers.¹⁴ The data was collected in several phases between 2014 and 2018, in which the involved researchers iteratively sharpened the annotation guidelines and complemented earlier missing data. All data is stored in a database that can be freely accessed.¹⁵ For our present purposes, we are particularly interested in the characters that have an occupation as teacher (see [section 3.1](#)).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Our corpus of 170 novels was made available to us as a collection of digitally-searchable text documents (.txt). In the first phase of the research, we analysed the representation of education and teachers on the level of characters. In order to get a first sense of how teacher characters are represented, we focused on the demographic background of all characters in the corpus who have an occupation as teacher. The results of this research phase are reported in [section 3.1](#).

In the second phase, we conducted a Key Word In Context Analysis (KWIC) using AntConc,¹⁶ an analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis: We searched for potentially interesting passages that were generated on the basis of a list of 64 keywords that we compiled. These are all related to education and teaching, e.g. ‘school’, ‘leraar’ [teacher], ‘leerling’ [student], and ‘huiswerk’ [homework] (see [appendix 1](#)). Declensions of these terms, e.g. ‘docent’ [teacher, male] and ‘docente’ [teacher, female], were included in the search as well. On the basis of these keywords, AntConc presented us with a total of 16,518 fragments. Each one was read to judge if it contained any form of educational representation. If it did, we included it in our corpus. When a hit was caused by homonymity, e.g. ‘school’ being the Dutch word for a place of education but also the past tense for ‘schuilen’ [to hide oneself] and the term for a group of fish, the fragment was not included in the corpus.

The majority of keywords brought up fragments that did not contain any form of educational representation, but rather a minor reference or designation of place, as is the case in this fragment from Christiaan Weijts’ novel *Euforie*: ‘There was always such excitement when such a vehicle was driven up, with its tailboards raised, as there is now, on the evening of 12 February 1991, on the field of the school on the Fruinlaan.’ In this fragment, the educational representation does not transcend the fact that the school contains a field of grass, a spatial element that does not allow to make broader representational claims on the literary imagination of education. For that reason, fragments like these were not included in the corpus. In another passage in *Euforie*, though, the character Isa argues:

The problem with all those teachers is that they are completely numb[.] (. . .) that they are so extremely indifferent. Anyone would be if they spent ten years with such shitty teenagers like us, having to tell us exactly the same things every year. And what kind of things? Always only one side of the story.

In this case, Weijts' character makes several negative representational claims about teachers, framing them as indifferent and static. At the same time, she reduces the student population to the negative stereotype of 'shitty teenagers'. Hence, whereas the first excerpt from *Euforie* was left out of the corpus, the second excerpt was ultimately included.

This first research phase eventually resulted in a corpus of 292 fragments containing educational representations. These fragments were taken from 105 unique novels (see [appendix 2](#)) from the corpus of 170 novels, showing that largely 60% of the novels under consideration contained such representations (in other words: the chance that a reader encounters an educational representation while reading a random Libris listed novel is about three out of five). In the second phase of our research, we developed two coding schemes in order to classify the variety of representations in the corpus: one coding scheme to classify the representations of *teachers* and one to classify the representations of *education in general*. The development of these coding schemes took place in two steps:

- (1) The first author of this study performed open coding to all 292 fragments.¹⁷ First, each educational representation in the fragment under analysis was marked. Then, for each segment marked, it was determined whether the representation referred to teachers (A) or education as a whole (B). In the next phase of the process, the representation was captured in a code. The framing of teachers as 'ultra indifferent' in Weijts' earlier-mentioned novel *Euforie*, for instance, was coded as 'indifference', while the phrase 'having to tell us exactly the same things every year' was coded as 'stasis'.
- (2) The open codes generated in step (1) were subjected to axial coding, a process in which similar codes were united under an overarching code, comprising both positive, neutral, and negative representations.¹⁸ For instance, along with codes such as 'enthusiasm', 'drive', 'liveliness', and 'stuffiness', the above-mentioned code 'indifference' was ultimately coded under the umbrella term 'ability to inspire' in the coding scheme for teacher representations. The process of axial coding ultimately led to a scheme of 11 codes concerning teacher representations ([appendix 3](#)), and a scheme of 21 codes concerning education in general ([appendix 4](#)).

In the final phase of the analysis, we individually applied the coding schemes to the dataset of 292 fragments, thus independently using the schemes to code the educational representations marked in the previous phase. Additionally, for each segment under consideration, we coded whether this representation was positive (+), neutral (0), or negative (-). In the case of the teachers that are called indifferent in Weijts' novel, for example, this ultimately led to the code A5-: the representation specifically concerns *teachers* (A), whose *ability to inspire* (5) is evaluated *negatively* (-).

After individually analysing all fragments, the findings were compared in order to assess the reliability of the analysis. In nearly 90% of the cases, we agreed on the codes we allocated. The other cases were resolved through discussion. Together, the codes provide a broad insight in the representation of teachers and education in the novels under consideration as will be shown in [sections 3.2](#) and [3.3](#).

Results

Characters in the Corpus

Before we describe the specific ways in which education in general and teachers in particular are represented at the sentence or paragraph level, this section first provides an overview of the demographic backgrounds of the 71 teacher characters populating the corpus. This will help us to gain insight into a simple but pertinent question: who are these fictional teachers?

First of all, it should be noted that the educational sector is abundantly present in the Libris 2013 corpus. Table 1 shows that the three most popular occupations of the 2,137 characters are respectively student of primary or secondary education (first place), student of higher education (second place), teacher in all types of education (third place). Although the fact that present-day Dutch-language literary fiction often stages students might also be a result of the overrepresentation of younger characters in the corpus (roughly 25% is below 25 years of age), it nonetheless means that kindergartens, high schools and universities are the environments in which a considerable amount of characters function. And although the high amount of teacher characters, conversely, cannot be explained by the abundance of younger characters (as teachers are usually somewhere between 25 and 65 years of age), a similar argument can be made that their frequency of occurrence anchors the educational sector as one of the central *decora* of characters in Dutch literature.

In order to get a clearer image of how teachers are represented in particular, we zoom in on this subset of 71 teacher characters in the remainder of this section. This enables us to make more generalizable statements on the identity of fictional teachers and gives us an opportunity to compare our findings with claims made in the smaller-scale studies of Bastings and Niemi, Smith, and Brown.

Table 2 shows that a considerable amount of the teacher characters in the Libris 2013 corpus is male, which is in line with Bastings' claim that teachers in Dutch literature tend

Table 1. Fifteen most popular occupations (first place and second place: pupils of secondary and higher education, third place: teachers in all types of education.).

Character's Occupation	Number
Schoolboy/girl	140
Student	118
Teacher	71
Criminal	49
Physician	42
Musician	37
Artists	36
Journalist	33
Writer	31
Farmer	31
Headmaster/principal	29
Housewife	24
Prostitute	20
Nurse	16
Slave	16

Table 2. Distribution of gender for all teacher characters.

Teachers: Gender	Number	Relative number
Male	47	0.66
Female	24	0.34
Unknown	0	0.0

Table 3. Distribution of country of origin for all teacher characters.

Teachers: Country of origin	Number	Relative number
<i>Native (Dutch and Belgian)</i>	44	0.62
<i>Non-native</i>	23	0.32
<i>Unknown</i>	4	0.06

to be male.¹⁹ It does, however, not converge with the finding by Niemi, Smith, and Brown that English children's fiction represent teachers predominantly as female.²⁰ The latter, of course, might also be explained by genre: unlike in literary fiction for adults, teachers in children's fiction are more often female, which seems to be intertwined with stereotypical representations of the female teachers. On a more general level, it is salient that the male-female ratio of 66:34 for the teacher characters ($N=71$) comes close to the gender distribution of all characters in the corpus ($N=2,137$), which is 60:40. Interestingly, similar male-female ratios are found across a wider range of national literatures,²¹ and have been referred to as 'the golden mean of patriarchy'.²² The overrepresentation of male teachers, in other words, might thus be explained by a gender bias in literary representations more broadly.

Not surprisingly, almost all the teacher characters have enjoyed a form of higher education – without it, they probably would not have ended up as teachers. Quite surprising, however, are the distributions for country of origin (Table 3) and age (Table 4). Whereas characters without a migration background (i.e. born outside the Dutch language area) are strongly underrepresented in the corpus as a whole (around 10% of all 2,137 characters have a migration background), 32% of the teachers characters have a migration background. It should, however, be noted that 'different geographical space' is a better term than 'migration background' in case novels are set in a different county than Belgium or the Netherlands and the respective character has not actually migrated. Although race and country of origin are obviously not the same, this finding seems to converge with the finding by Niemi, Smith, and Brown that most teachers in English children's fiction are white if we assume that Dutch and Belgian characters are often white. However, compared to the distributions in the corpus as a whole, it is

Table 4. Distribution of age for all teacher characters.

Teachers: Age	Number	Relative number
<25	2	0.03
26–35	8	0.11
36–45	6	0.08
46–55	11	0.15
56–64	7	0.10
>65	11	0.15
<i>Unknown</i>	26	0.37

remarkable that teacher characters are relatively more often from a non-Belgian or non-Dutch descent.

Finally, while age is unknown for a considerable number of the teacher characters (see Table 4), those whose age is known tend to be relatively old. Something similar holds for age as for country of origin: while in the corpus as a whole younger characters are overrepresented, the subpopulation of teacher characters deviates from that norm in the sense that these are relatively old.

Representation of Teachers

Throughout the whole corpus, we distinguished 137 teacher representations, accounting for 36.63% of all educational representations in the dataset. Table 5 shows how frequently the different categories of teacher representation, as discerned in our coding scheme, occurred in the corpus. Strikingly, four categories together – *attitude towards students*,

Table 5. Frequency and relative frequency of category A: representations of teachers.

Argumentation category	Number of items	Number of items (relative)	Number of items (relative to whole corpus)	Unique number of novels containing the item	Unique number of novels containing the item (relative)
Attitude towards students	42	30.66	11.23	31	28.97
Appearance	28	20.44	7.49	21	19.63
Teaching methodology	14	10.22	3.74	12	11.21
Inspirational	13	9.49	3.48	11	10.28
Professionalism	10	7.30	2.67	7	6.54
Conventionality	8	5.84	2.14	7	6.54
Class management	7	5.11	1.87	6	5.61
Impact	6	4.38	1.60	5	4.67
Other	4	2.92	1.07	2	1.87
Subject knowledge	3	2.19	.80	3	2.80
Collegiality	2	1.46	.53	2	1.87
Total	137			107	

Table 6. Frequency and relative frequency of values attributed to category A: representations of teachers.

Argumentation Category	Number of negative items		Number of neutral items		Number of positive items	
	Relative	Relative	Relative	Relative	Relative	Relative
Attitude towards students	29	69.05	3	7.14	10	23.81
External presentation	19	67.86	3	10.71	6	21.43
Professionalism	8	80	0	0	2	20
Pedagogical content knowledge	8	57.14	0	0	6	42.86
Ability to inspire	6	46.15	0	0	7	53.85
Class management	4	57.14	0	0	3	42.86
Impact	3	50	0	0	3	50
Other	3	75	1	25	0	0
Conventionality	2	25	1	12.5	5	62.5
Collegiality	0	0	0	0	2	100
Subject knowledge	0	0	1	33.33	2	66.66
Total of category A	82	59.85	9	6.57	46	33.58

appearance, *pedagogical content knowledge*, and *ability to inspire* – comprise more than 70% of all teacher representations in the novels under analysis. Hence, when coming across a teacher in a contemporary Dutch or Flemish novel, in more than three out of five cases we read about the way they act towards pupils, the way they look like, and their (dis)ability to teach effectively and inspiringly in their school subject. This pattern does not change when filtering out repetitions of specific representations within a single novel, as Table 5 shows (unique number of items per novel). In Alex Boogers' *Alle dingen zijn schitterend* (which translates as 'All Things Are Wonderful'), for instance, the code *attitude towards students* was applied five times. Also when correcting for such recurrences in unique novels, the most prominent categories of representation comprise nearly 70% of the total corpus.

As shown in Table 6, the majority of the teacher representations in the dataset characterizes teachers in a negative way. The distribution between negative and positive representations in the corpus is roughly 2:1, with neutral representations of teachers occurring in only 6.6% of all cases. Positive representations are far more common than negative representations in three categories: *collegiality*, *conventionality*, and *subject knowledge*. However, these categories do not appear frequently in the corpus. In three out of four of the categories that comprise the majority of all representations, on the other hand, negative characterizations prevail. Only in the case of *ability to inspire*, positive representations slightly outweigh negative characterizations. In the preponderance of occasions, however, teacher representations in contemporary Dutch and Flemish literature involve a negative evaluation of teacher behaviour towards students, while teachers' external presentation and their pedagogical content knowledge are also represented negatively.

Representation of Education

Throughout the whole corpus, we distinguished 237 representations of education in general, accounting for 63.37% of all representations in the dataset. Table 7 shows how frequently the different categories of general education representation, as discerned in our coding scheme, occurred in the corpus. Together, the three most frequently coded categories – *safety*, *useful knowledge*, and *inspiration* – account for roughly a third of all general education representations in the corpus. The strong presence of these three elements also occurs when filtering out repetitions of these respective representations in unique novels. Other frequently coded categories, each having a share of at least 5% in the total corpus, include *career formation*, *student engagement*, *school prestige*, and *offering structure*. Hence, when the institution of education is mentioned in contemporary Dutch and Flemish novels, in more than half of the cases representations are centred around the issue of (social) safety; the question whether school-based knowledge is useful; the degree to which schools offer inspiration; the career opportunities that (a certain type of) education offers (or not); the way that teenagers behave in schools in general and classrooms in particular; and the structure that school offers to teenagers (or, negatively framed: imposes on their lives).

Even stronger than in the case of teacher representations, representations of education in general are characterized in a negative way throughout the novels under analysis. As Table 8 shows, in two out of three times, education is characterized negatively when

Table 7. Frequency and relative frequency of category B: representations of education.

Argumentation category	Number of items	Number of items (relative)	Number of items (relative to whole corpus)	Unique number of novels containing the item	Unique number of novels containing the item (relative)
Safety	37	15.61	9.89	25	13.37
Useful knowledge	28	11.81	7.49	20	10.70
Inspiration	20	8.44	5.35	16	8.56
Other	16	6.75	4.28	16	8.56
Offering structure	15	6.33	4.01	12	6.42
Career formation	14	5.91	3.74	11	5.88
Student engagement	14	5.91	3.74	11	5.88
School prestige	13	5.49	3.48	9	4.81
Bureaucracy	9	3.80	2.41	6	3.21
Dynamics	9	3.80	2.41	9	4.81
Autonomy	8	3.38	2.14	8	4.28
Societal prestige	8	3.38	2.14	8	4.28
Quality of education	8	3.38	2.14	6	3.21
Microcosm	6	2.53	1.60	4	2.14
Adolescent troubles	6	2.53	1.60	5	2.67
Care	6	2.53	1.60	3	1.60
Social development	5	2.11	1.34	5	2.67
Challenge	5	2.11	1.34	5	2.67
Growth	4	1.69	1.07	4	2.14
Salary	3	1.27	.80	2	1.07
Workload	3	1.27	.80	2	1.07
Total	237			187	

Table 8. Frequency and relative frequency of values attributed to category B: representations of education.

Argumentation Category	Number of negative		Number of neutral		Number of positive	
	items	Relative	items	Relative	items	Relative
Safety	33	13.92	1	0.42	3	1.27
Knowledge	18	7.59	10	4.22	0	0.00
Inspiration	13	5.49	0	0.00	7	2.95
Structure	12	5.06	0	0.00	3	1.27
Engagement students	11	4.64	1	0.42	2	0.84
Bureaucracy	8	3.38	1	0.42	0	0.00
Career maker	7	2.95	2	0.84	5	2.11
Quality of education	7	2.95	0	0.00	1	0.42
Prestige (class)	7	2.95	5	2.11	1	0.42
Other	7	2.95	8	3.38	1	0.42
Prestige (society)	6	2.53	1	0.42	1	0.42
Autonomy	5	2.11	0	0.00	3	1.27
Adolescent troubles	4	1.69	2	0.84	0	0.00
Challenge	4	1.69	1	0.42	0	0.00
Care	4	1.69	2	0.84	0	0.00
Dynamics	3	1.27	5	2.11	1	0.42
Microcosm	3	1.27	3	1.27	0	0.00
Social development	2	0.84	1	0.42	2	0.84
Pressure	2	0.84	0	0.00	1	0.42
Salary	1	0.42	0	0.00	2	0.84
Growth	1	0.42	1	0.42	2	0.84
Total of category B	158	66.67	44	18.57	35	14.77

mentioned in a novel. Compared to the event of teacher representation, the share of positive evaluations is even smaller in the total corpus of general education representations: only 14.77% of all representations evaluate the institution of education positively. In this case, the number of positive evaluations is even outweighed by neutral evaluations. Out of the 71 categories in the coding scheme, only one category has a bigger share of positive representations than negative representation. Ironically, this concerns the category *workload*, in which the positive characterization corresponds with the stereotype that teachers can often enjoy a holiday leave. In the case of negative representations, most examples are to be found in the categories that occur most frequently in our corpus: *safety*, *useful knowledge*, and *inspiration*. Hence, throughout contemporary Dutch and Flemish literary novels, there seems to be a persistent image of schools as unsafe institutions, that do not offer useful knowledge and that fail to inspire their students.

Conclusion and Discussion

How are education in general and teachers in particular represented in contemporary Dutch-language novels? After evaluating a broad corpus of recent novels from both the Netherlands and Flanders, without limiting our analysis to novels that explicitly thematize teaching or school-life, we conclude that educational representations are both highly common in Dutch and Flemish literature and overwhelmingly negative in nature.

The character analysis we conducted showed that the three most common occupations among characters in 170 Dutch-language novels on the 2013 Libris Shortlist are related to education. Moreover, we found that more than 60% of these novels contain representations of either teachers or education in a more general sense. Hence, in contemporary Dutch literature, the representation of the educational system is definitely not limited to the genre of the ‘teacher novel’, which has nevertheless dominated critical discussions on the depiction of education in literature.

Yet, our findings resemble Bastings’ observation that Dutch literature tends to represent teachers through negative stereotypes. Around two-thirds of the teacher representations we analysed contain negative images of the teaching profession. The majority of the teachers who inhabit contemporary Dutch-language novels are depicted as pedagogically weak, either in their attitude towards students, in their pedagogical content knowledge, or in their external presentation. These teachers – predominantly old males – are an exponent of the negative framing of education that is common to most novels in our corpus. Two-thirds of the novels under scrutiny portray educational settings as unsafe or uninspiring. While positive images of teachers still account for roughly a third of the cases, positive images of education in general are scarce.

This overarching negative conception of education in a broad corpus of more than one-hundred novels is striking. It should be underlined that our analysis mainly included novels in which education is not of particular thematic importance. In such novels, educational representations are, in many respects, some sort of narrative sideshow. The fact that so many of these seemingly insignificant depictions of teachers and schools are negative hints at the strength of a discourse disparaging the teaching profession, which probably works through in the social standing of education as a career. It also converges with the image that arises from earlier

research on teachers' imagination, including Shoffner's claim that educational representations in popular culture lack nuance.

An important question that remains is how the trends we discovered through our analysis relate to the deteriorating position of the teaching profession in the last couple of decades. To what extent are representations in literary fiction intertwined with societal developments regarding educational practices? Based on this research, we are not able to answer that particular question. However, our methodology allows for a comparative analysis of multiple reference years. By applying our approach to possible digital corpora from earlier decades (for instance 1913, 1938, 1963, and 1988), we might be able to map constants and changes in the literary imagination of education.

Another perspective for future research are close readings of novels containing relatively large amounts of educational representations. Whereas the study reported in this article was primarily aimed at representational patterns in a larger corpus, close reading allows for a more thorough examination of the nature of such depictions. It might show how stereotypes are at work in educational representation, but also reveal which metaphors and motifs accompany teachers and schools in novelistic settings. Our corpus includes several case studies which lend themselves well for such an undertaking, such as Alex Boogers' *Alle dingen zijn schitterend* (2012, which translates as 'All Things Are Wonderful'), Gerard Koolschijn's *No Mortal Knows* (2012), and Wytse Versteeg's *De wezenlozen* (2012, which translates as 'The Vacant').²³ By conducting such close readings in relation to overarching patterns determined through an examination of larger corpora, the analysis of literary representation will find itself at the delicate balance of single case studies and broader quantitative trends.

Notes

1. Hart, 'De leraar als pispaal'. 'We zijn allemaal naar school gegaan, we hebben allemaal de blik van leraren en leraressen op ons gevestigd geweten. We hebben ons allemaal vernederd gevoeld door de macht die leraren op ons uitoefenden.' The authors of this article are responsible for the translations of original Dutch quotes.
2. Cörvers et al., *Status en imago*; Volders and De Wilde, 'Nieuwe routes'.
3. Bastings, *Meesters van papier*.
4. Applegate, 'Moving beyond the Teacher,' 144.
5. Shoffner, *Exploring Teachers in Fiction*.
6. Fisher, Harris, and Jarvis, *Education in Popular Culture*, 169.
7. Bastings, *Meesters van papier*, 29. 'Hij kent de sfeer van de lerarenkamer van binnenuit.'
8. Niemi, Smith, and Brown, 'The portrayal of teachers,' 70.
9. Cf. Herman and Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, 58–59; Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*.
10. Ellsmore, *Carry On, Teachers*; Shoffner, *Exploring Teachers in Fiction*.
11. Van der Deijl et al., 'Mapping the Demographic Landscape'; Underwood, Bamman, and Lee, 'The Transformation of Gender'.
12. 1,475 books with NUR-code 301 (literary fiction) were published in 2012 according to the database of the KB, the national library of the Netherlands. Subtracting duplicates, reissues, and exclusively online publications from this list results in a total number of 460 works of literary fiction originally published in Dutch. Of these 460 books, 170 books (37%) were submitted to the *Libris Literatuurprijs*.

13. Although it should also be noted that there is no restriction to the amount of books publishers can submit, which might lead to publishers submitting almost all books in of literary fiction they have published that year.
14. Van der Deijl et al., ‘Mapping the Demographic Landscape’; Volker and Smeets, ‘Imagined Social Structures’; Smeets, *Character Constellations*.
15. Visit the open-access GitHub repository: <https://github.com/roelsmeets/character-networks>.
16. Anthony, Laurence. AntConc (Version 3.5.9). Tokyo: Waseda University, 2020. Available from <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software>.
17. cf. Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*.
18. Ibid.
19. Bastings, *Meesters van papier*.
20. Niemi, Smith, and Brown, ‘The Portrayal of Teachers’
21. Underwood, Davis, and Lee, *The Transformation of Gender*; Kraicer and Piper, ‘Social Characters’; Smeets, *Character Constellations*.
22. Kraicer and Piper, ‘Social Characters,’ 3.
23. These novels contain relatively many educational representations. It would also be interesting to perform such close readings on novels that are frequently read in secondary education, such as *Alles wat er wat (Everything There Was, 2013)* by Hanna Bervoets or *Bint* by F. Bordewijk (1934). Compare Dera, *De praktijk van de leeslijst*, 15–16. See also Dera (2021), ‘How Culturally Diverse Are Text Selections in Dutch Literary Education?’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix 1 – Search Words

Term	Translation	Total number of hits
Leren	To teach/to be taught	3036
School	School	3004
Les(sen)	Lesson(s)/class(es)	1064
Meester(s)	Teacher(s) (m)	924
Student(en)	Student	785
Studeren	To study	697
Leerling(en)	Pupil(s)	594
Priester(s)	Priest(s)	558
Directeur	Headmaster/principal (m)	477
Non(nen)	Nun(s)	464
Vak(en)	Course(s)	453
Leraar	Teacher (m)	410
Juffrouw	Teacher (f)	352
Universiteit	University	345
Middelbare	Secondary school	305
Rapport	School report	263
Opleiding	Education	230
College(s)	Seminar(s)	223
Diploma('s)	Diploma(s)	185
Juf(fen)	Teacher(s) (f)	180
Docent	Teacher (m/f)	178
Huiswerk	Homework	174
Leraren	Teachers	157
Onderwijs	Education	141
Rector	Headmaster/principal	118
Docenten	Teachers	114
Lerares	Teacher (f)	111
Scholier(en)	Pupil(s)	97
Academie	Academy	91
Rooster	Schedule*	74
Basisschool	Primary school	71
Mentor	Tutor	60
Conservatorium	Conservatory	59
Seminarie	Seminary	55
Directrice	Headmaster/principal (v)	46
Onderwijzer(es)	Teacher (m)	40
Kleuterschool	Kindergarten	39
Brugklas	???	37
Kunstacademie	Art academy	34
Mavo	Lower general secondary education	29
Vwo	Pre-university education	26
Rectrix	Headmaster/principal (v)	24
Deca(a)n(en)	Student counsellor(s) (m/f)	23
Schoolmeester	Teacher (m)	21
Havo	Higher general secondary education	19
Muziekschool	School of music	17
Onderwijzeres	Teacher (f)	16
Hogeschool	University of applied science	15
Onderwijzers	Teachers (m/f)	12
Scholing	Schooling	11
Onderricht	Education	10
Brugklasser(s)	Lower-grade pupil(s)	10
Docente	Teacher (f)	9
Scholengemeenschap	???	8
Educatie	Education	7
Hbo	Higher professional education	5
Vmbo	Lower secondary professional education	4
Schooljuffrouw	Teacher (f)	3
Beroepsopleiding	Practical education	2

(Continued)

Term	Translation	Total number of hits
Kleuterleidster	Kindergarten teacher (f)	2
Wo	Higher education	0
Brugpieper(s)	Lower-grade pupil(s)	0

Appendix 2 – Novels in the corpus

Özcan Akyol, *Eus* (Prometheus).

Arthur van Amerongen, *Mambo Jambo* (Nijgh & Van Ditmar).

Patrick Bassant, *Joy* (Wereldbibliotheek).

Adri van Beelen, *Celeste* (Marmer).

Huub Beurskens, *De hemelse kamer* (Wereldbibliotheek).

Billiet, *In de naam van TienKamelen* (Wereldbibliotheek).

Marion Bloem, *Een meisje van honderd* (De Arbeiderspers).

David van Bodegom, *Nood breekt wet* (Prometheus).

Alex Boogers, *Alle dingen zijn schitterend* (Podium).

Stephan Ter Borg, *Orang-oetangs drijven niet* (Prometheus).

Willem Bosch, *Op zwart* (Overamstel).

Jon Breemer ter Steege, *Pontus* (Passage).

Herman Brusselmans, *Guggenheimer in de mode* (Prometheus).

Pieter de Buysser, *De keisnijders* (De Geus). M. Dangre, *Maartse kamers* (De Bezige Bij).

H. J. Dautzenberg, *Extra tijd* (Olympus).

Hans Dekkers, *Isis* (Wereldbibliotheek).

Guy Dierckx, *Hondsster* (Houtekiet).

Stefan van Dierendonck, *En het regende brood* (Thomas Rap).

Wim Duijst, *Zwijgend verleden* (Marmer).

Inez van Dullemen, *Twee zusters* (De Bezige Bij).

Esther J (Ending), *Stille mensen* (Prometheus).

Rob van Essen, *Alles komt goed* (Atlas Contact).

Ad Fransen, *Het meisje met de mooiste heupen* (De Bezige Bij).

Johan Fretz, *Fretz 2025* (Lebowski).

Alex van Galen, *Süskind* (De Arbeiderspers).

Niels Gerson Lohman, *Een rijk alleen* (Nijgh & Van Ditmar).

Saskia Goldschmidt, *De hormoonfabriek* (Cossee).

Jos de Gruiter, *Dealy Plazas Gravenhage* (PMA).

Robert Haasnoot, *Het ruime bed* (De Geus).

Kees 't Hart, *Hotel Vertigo* (Querido).

Marjolein van Heemstra, *De laatste Aedema* (De Bezige Bij).

Daan Heerma van Voss, *Zonder tijd te verliezen* (De Bezige Bij).

Kristien Hemmerchts, *Haar bloed* (De Geus).

Hanneke Hendrix, *De verjaardagen* (De Geus).

Joke J. Hermsen, *Blindgangers* (De Arbeiderspers).

Lucas Hüsgen, *De windbel* (Het Balanseer).

Murat Isik, *Verloren grond* (Ambo Anthos).

Arthur Japin, *Maar buiten is het feest* (De Arbeiderspers).

Carla de Jong, *Gebroken Wit* (Ambo Anthos).

Oek de Jong, *Pier en oceaan* (Atlas Contact).

Hella de Jonge, *Spring* (De Bezige Bij).

Daad Kajo, *De verleider van Damascus* (De Geus).

Marco Kamphuis, *Havik* (De Arbeiderspers).

Otto de Kat, *Bericht uit Berlijn* (Rainbow).

Shira Keller, *M* (Podium).
 Marie Kessels, *Het lichtatelier* (De Bezige Bij).
 Gerrit Komrij, *De loopjongen* (De Bezige Bij).
 Gerard Koolschijn, *Geen sterveling weet* (Athenaeum – Polak & Van Genneep).
 Kortsmid & Lotz, *Duisternis* (Mistral).
 Ton Kruisbergen, *Die honden van boven* (Nieuw Amsterdam).
 Joke van Leeuwen, *Feest van het begin* (Querido).
 Simone Lenaerts, *De onvervangbare* (De Geus).
 Lisette Lewin, *Bach onder de palmen* (Nijgh & Van Ditmar).
 Ted van Lieshout, *Mijn meneer* (Querido).
 Gio Lippens, *Halverwege de heuvel* (Atlas Contact).
 Stijn van der Loo, *Slopers* (Querido).
 Maan Leo, *Ik ben Maan* (Wereldbibliotheek).
 Renée van Marissing, *Strak blauw* (Atlas Contact).
 Lidewij Martens, *Dubbel rood* (Cargo).
 Vonne van der Meer en Josef Willems, *Kinderschrik* (Contact).
 Sipko Melissen, *Een kamer in Rome* (Van Oorschot).
 Edzart Mik, *Mont Blanc* (De Bezige Bij).
 Kaweh Modiri, *Meneer Sadek en de anderen* (Thomas Rap).
 Hans Münstermann, *Hou me vast* (Nieuw Amsterdam).
 Bert Natter, *Hoe staat het met de liefde* (Thomas Rap).
 Nelleke Noordervliet, *Vrij man* (Atlas Contact).
 Milan van Opmeer, *De Parijs Conventie* (Boekenbent).
 Joseph Pearce, *Suikertantes* (De Bezige Bij).
 Koen Peeters, *Duizend heuvels* (De Bezige Bij).
 Sylvia Pessireron, *De verzwegen soldaat* (The House of Books).
 Joachim Pohlman, *Altijd iets* (Van Halewyck).
 Marieke van der Pol, *Voetlicht* (De Arbeiderspers).
 Eva Posthuma de Boer, *De Comedy Club* (Nieuw Amsterdam).
 Henk Rijks, *Incognito* (Atlas Contact).
 Thomas Rosenboom, *De rode loper* (Singel Uitgeverijen).
 Suus Ruis, *Zonde* (Mistral).
 Victor Schilferli, *Dromen van Schalkwijk* (De Arbeiderspers).
 Jan Siebelink, *Oscar* (De Bezige Bij).
 Roel Smits, *Ik ben de zoon van John Lennon* (Nieuw Amsterdam).
 Rita Spijker, *Ver van mij* (Marmer Boeken).
 Saul van Staple, *Witte panters* (Lebowski).
 Herman Stevens, *Gloriejaren* (Prometheus).
 Chris de Stoop, *Moedermoord* (De Bezige Bij).

P. F. Thomèsè, Het bamischandaal (Atlas Contact)

Lia Tilon, *Zielhond* (Cossee).
 Toes & Hoeps, *Het hoogste bod* (De Geus).
 Pieter Toussaint, *Gezichtsverlies* (Cossee).
 Marjolein Uitzinger, *Een fatale primeur* (De Geus).
 Arthur Umbgrove, *Hotel Sofia* (Contact).
 Anton Valens, *Het boek Ont* (Atlas Contact).
 Joost Vandecastelle, *Massa* (Lebowski).
 Jan Veenstra, *Here weg* (Passage).
 Lot Vekemans, *Een bruidsjurk uit Warschau* (Cossee).
 Esther Verhoef, *Tegenlicht* (Anthos).
 Wytse Versteeg, *De wezenlozen* (Querido).

Jacob Vis, *Tandem* (Conserve).
 Robert Vuijsje, *Beste vriend* (Nijgh & Van Ditmar).
 Christiaan Weijts, *Euforie* (De Arbeiderspers).
 Rudi Wester, *Vriendinnen van vroeger, vrouwen van nu* (De Arbeiderspers).
 Leon de Winter, *VSV of Daden van onbaatzuchtigheid* (De Bezige Bij).
 James Worthy, *Zwarte Sylvester* (Lebowski).
 Tatjana van Zanten, *Supergelukkig* (Thomas Rap).
 Sophie Zijlstra, *Margot* (Querido).

Appendix 3 – Coding scheme ‘Representations of teachers’

Fragment Category	Content of Category	Example from the Corpus
Appearance	A teacher's appearance is mentioned, e. g. clothes, scent, or movements.	Her name was Mrs. Rosen and she taught French. Tall, slim, blond, and unpredictably strict. (Heerma van Voss)
Attitude towards students	The way a teacher acts against their students is mentioned, e. g. strictly, friendly, pedantically, with interest.	Ata was seated next to me. Every now and again he would take notes and nod when the teacher looked at him sternly. (Akyol)
Class management	The amount of a teacher's control over students' behaviour, their authority in the classroom, and the way they provide structure for the students is mentioned.	Disconcerting when you think about how young he was at the time, maybe twenty seven? Nevertheless, he did have authority, he could look around the classroom with the amused look of someone who had everything under control. (Van Essen)
Collegiality	The way teachers cooperate with each other is mentioned.	They considered him to be an unusual, special, passionate teacher and an inspiring colleague. (Boogers)
Conventionality	A teacher's behaviour and/or appearance is presented as conforming to or explicitly deviating from the dominant prototypical teacher image.	When he was standing in the canteen to order a salad, you could see how different he was from the other teachers. [...] There were no dog ears on his papers or his books, and he had no grease stains on his clothes. He was full of opinions and technical terms about absolutely everything. (Munstermann)
Impact	A teacher's impact on a student is mentioned.	'So you primarily have unpleasant memories of our school,' the teacher concluded compassionately. [...] 'And you are not alone. At the time, the brothers and the teachers excelled at lifting exceptional students to great heights, but they showed no mercy for those who fell behind. Almost inhuman.' (Gruiter)
Inspirational	The capability of a teacher to inspire their students is mentioned.	At school they had been taught by a passionate teacher of classical languages, who had seen it as his mission to let his students experience first-hand that the ancient Greek language could inspire the youth of today. (Goldschmidt)
Subject knowledge	A teacher's knowledge of the subject they teach is mentioned.	I wanted to become a teacher like Stijn, who was able to captivate a group with his outstanding literacy. (Melissen)
Professionalism	A teacher's professional attitude is mentioned, e.g. his/her control over his/her emotions.	'Are you able to control yourself?' [...] 'I am a teacher at an mbo school [secondary vocation education], so what do you think?' (Boogers)

(Continued)

Fragment Category	Content of Category	Example from the Corpus
Pedagogical content knowledge	A teacher's didactical skills (or lack thereof) are mentioned.	I remember how, without looking at any of his students, he would read endlessly from dusty books in a language we barely understood, about issues, the meaning of which escaped us completely. (Dierckx)
Other	All fragments that do not fit the categories above.	The homosexual teacher at school who was being bullied by Muslim students who considered him 'dirty', together with his partner adopted a boy and a girl from a country where Islam was the dominant religion. (Boogers)

Appendix 4 – Coding Scheme 'Representations of Education'

Fragment Category	Content of Category	Example from the Corpus
Adolescent troubles	School is concerned with adolescents and their problems.	They [the students] all had personal problems, they were weighed down by something, they were chained in a way that made it impossible for them to be themselves, to become themselves, or to discover themselves [. . .] and he considered it his mission in life to help them shake off parental interference and lead them towards that destination. (Mik)
Autonomy	School offers the opportunity for students to make their own choices or limits their choices (perhaps even indoctrinates).	[W]hilst only an idiot would be able to lose their way in the forest, for a child it was dense and dark enough to serve as the landscape of a wonderous planet, far away from the civilization of school and the home, and all those other places where adults kept children in check. (Pearce)
Bureaucracy	School involves administration, management culture, and administrative rules or lack thereof.	There are complaints [about increasing bureaucracy] that you hear everywhere, especially in professions with strong public investment – teachers, general practitioners, police officers. The core activities are under pressure due to an increase of bullshit. (Weijts)
Care	Schools have students that need extra support/counselling. School is in charge of student's upbringing.	It is very logical for her to withdraw herself, I think. Does a school not have the task of protecting vulnerable children? Especially a girl that is a little insecure, and does not take the lead everywhere. (Van Zanten)
Career formation	Choices in school will decide a student's future; school is a possibility for social mobility.	How old are you, Jasmien?' 'Nineteen. And à propos, before I forget: I have no intention to be good for anything. I didn't finish my school, and I work at a café. Not at this café. At another café. The Black Light. Do you know it?' (Brusselmans)
Challenge	School presses students to work hard and to succeed or school is easy and no challenge at all.	The two women opposite are again engaged in busy conversation. In fluent French. [. . .] I eavesdrop on them. At least all that hard work at high school has been good for something. (Lippens)

(Continued)

Fragment Category	Content of Category	Example from the Corpus
Dynamics	School is a static, conservative institution or a progressive institution subject to change.	During the first few years, I tried to mix things up a little. Keep it fun for yourself, turn it into a performance. Come up with an anecdote. Vary in tone. That is actually not allowed. It is written very clearly in the official guidelines for Education and Training for the First Year of High School, volume 1 until 7. Do not divert from the education programme. This is the story. This is what you have to tell. Nothing else. After standing in front of the classroom for seventeen years, I just tell it. (Bosch)
Student engagement	Students as a group are either committed or indifferent to their education.	The class is only half listening. Pupils mostly look around to see who they want to sit next to this school year. (Bosch)
Growth	School is a place that makes students grow as a person, where they can develop their identity, or it is a place that makes personal growth difficult if not impossible.	It was just like when I went from primary school to high school, I could fashion a whole new style for myself. Happy, careless, moderately indifferent. Pleasant. (Van Marissing)
Inspiration	School is inspiring, fun, and stimulating; or school is boring, useless or unchallenging.	Already at high school, I could not have been more indifferent: literature, chemistry, physics, and what have you. Still, I cannot bring myself to care about it for a second. Actually, I detest it, still. (Breemer ter Steege)
Useful knowledge	The usefulness of the knowledge acquired in school is evaluated.	What we learned there was what he referred to as book knowledge, not to be confused with life knowledge. [. . .] This meant that at school, Xander had only learnt what he considered necessary, not so much he lost his open mind, but enough to pass every year without breaking a sweat. (Heerma van Voss)
Microcosmos	School is a safe cocoon with its own rules, or school is presented as a realm that has nothing to do with the 'real society'.	And oh, they don't tell you this at school, when you enter the real world, where everything is creaking and groaning, where nothing makes sense and nothing ever goes just the slightest bit normal, god damn it, they do not tell you about that [. . .]. They do not tell you that, because it is impossible to tell, or perhaps only in the words of Arthur Rimbaud: Par la nature, heureux comme avec une femme. (Weijts)
Workload	There is high work pressure in education. with a ratio of high working hours and little time off for teachers.	Was there no one at your school? I mean a tutor or a – 'Oh man, you have no idea in what kind of dump we grew up. We definitely were not the only ones who came from that kind of family and the school was heavily understaffed. They could barely handle the pressure.' (Ending)

(Continued)

Fragment Category	Content of Category	Example from the Corpus
School prestige	School is or is not a place where social classes take shape, also through the level of education.	The teacher has explained it: You have the Its, which is a lower technical school, which is mainly attended by the boys who later go and work in construction. Then there is the mavo – general secondary education – a pre-education for the mbo – secondary vocational education, and this will enable you to, for example, work in a shop or start one yourself. Above that there is havo and the highest of all are atheneum and gymnasium, but according to the teacher this is only attended by the real brainboxes who want to go to university later, and he does not have any of those in his class, he said. (Verhoef)
Societal prestige	Working in education earns one great respect or little respect.	Aunt Cecile was already a grown woman. She had a lover. That is, someone who pursued her. However, he was too little for her, he was a socialist, and worse still, a teacher. (Pearce)
Quality of education	Schools have (or no longer have) an outstanding curriculum and are (or are not) held in high esteem.	'It is almost holiday, we do not do anything important anymore. The teacher says that these are the happy hours.' 'Does she say that, happy hours? Is that how it goes these days? I did not have any happy hours in my time.' [...] 'Happy hours,' I said, with a slight note of astonishment in my voice. (Boogers)
Safety	School is a place where students can be safe and feel at home, or a uncomfortable or even dangerous place of intimidation, bullying, intolerance, drugs, and weapons.	I was only a small insignificant guy, something for which later, at primary school, I would be laughed at and even bullied. (Dangre)
Salary	The salary is good/bad in the educational sector.	'The salary is lousy, but when you teach about twenty hours a week, it does add up quite a bit,' he said without much conviction. (Van Amerongen)
Social development	School is (not) a pre-eminently social place and does (not) offer students a social safety net.	At school she was a little withdrawn, overwhelmed as she was by the complex network of social relations and codes that she had never learned how to deal with. (Dierckx)
Offering structure	Education offers order and discipline, gives someone something to hold on to, or is in the worst case a maze of regulations.	The only reason to stand here and exchange little facts about the city of Berlin whilst hiding their grief, is to take their children away from here as quickly as possible and to get them home again. Routine, discipline, the safe harbour of a home, a school, one's own family and friends. (Buysser)
Other	All fragments that do not fit in the categories above.	One of the novelties was that we no longer had a permanent classroom, but that after every lecture, packed and loaded, we would go on an expedition through a wondrous labyrinth of buildings in order to visit our teachers in their own territories. (Kamphuis)