COVID-19 and repairing learning loss in the Netherlands: feasibility of catch-up programmes

Three experts shared their perspectives on learning loss and the implementation of catch-up programmes in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mark Verhagen: Learning inequality in primary education during the pandemic: “The Oxford study”

Mark Verhagen presented the results of a large-scale cohort study performed on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on primary school children in the Netherlands. The research team obtained data from a national standardised test assessing maths skills, spelling, and reading comprehension in Dutch primary school children. Fortunately, the test was taken shortly before the closure of schools and again after the lockdown. The rich amount of data obtained in previous years made it possible to control for time trends.

Findings revealed that, overall, pupils lost about 3 percentile points of academic achievement in the year of the pandemic, which corresponds to a loss of 8 weeks of learning or the whole period of school closures.

Mark Verhagen noted particular concern about children whose parents have a low level of educational attainment, as they lost around 5 percentile points in the pandemic year. This is a difference of 35 – 40% compared to children whose parents have a high level of educational attainment.

While the education system has been able to close the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children in previous years, the recent school closures seem to have prevented this catch-up from happening. The speaker also emphasised large differences between schools in terms of learning loss, a matter that requires further research.

Mark Verhagen concluded his talk by discussing the potential relevance of these findings to other countries. He pointed out that the Netherlands was relatively privileged by the prevailing conditions, such as a short lockdown, high levels of government funding and a strong support system in comparison to other countries. This may place the Dutch school system on the upper bound of learning loss compared to other countries.

Dr. Anne Fleur Kortekaas: Catch-up programmes in primary education

In her talk, Dr. Anne Fleur Kortekaas elaborated on the implementation of catch-up programmes in Dutch schools during the pandemic. A majority of Dutch students were found to be worried about falling behind at school. To counteract this negative effect, the Dutch government provided funding to primary and secondary schools that could be invested in programmes aimed at minimising learning loss.

Based on data from more than 1,500 schools, Dr. Anne Fleur Kortekaas and colleagues are currently exploring the type of programmes implemented by schools, as well as their theory of change and effectiveness. With their findings, they aim to inform schools about the most effective practices and essential elements to repair leaning loss.
A majority of primary schools indicated that they would use the funding to improve academic abilities, such as reading, writing and mathematics, alongside other dimensions including socio-emotional development and well-being. In secondary schools, funding was also frequently requested to teach students ways to learn efficiently at home.

The speaker closed with some positive and negative facets of the programmes they encountered during their research. On the one hand, schools gave positive feedback on the possibility of using the funding flexibly and being able to tailor catch-up programmes to their own needs. On the other hand, schools seem to over-reach and instead of targeting deprived students with specific programmes as originally intended, they invest in a broad spectrum of interventions that target the whole learning community. In the near future, the research team aims to measure the impact of programmes on the socio-emotional development of school pupils.

Rien Spies: A practitioner’s reflection on the value of catch-up programmes to address inequality

Rien Spies, an experienced primary school teacher and board member of SWV PO Zaanstreek, on organisation that provides education to about 7,000 primary school pupils, elaborated on the inequality of catch-up programmes from a practical perspective. He talked about the severe shortage of teachers even before the lockdown, particularly in socially deprived areas. The lack of professional staff to provide catch-up programmes was one of the reasons why his organisation decided not to apply for funding in the first funding round provided by the government.

Rien Spies’ criticism was that schools were busy organising the regular school programme, whereas the funding was restricted to catch-up programmes outside school hours. This was not realistic to implement in many schools due to the difficulties of finding qualified staff. He further elaborated on a new funding scheme that partly resolves previous issues and allows funding to be used for technical devices and teaching assistance. He advised other school organisations or the municipality to provide pupils with extra programmes to take work out of the hands of teachers, allowing them to focus on important subjects such as reading or mathematics.

He concluded with the thought that high-quality teachers are the most critical part of good education, but that collaboration between teachers and schools in the decentralised school system in the Netherlands is essential to effectively combat learning loss.