

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES: THE SCHOOLS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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We had been living in the Netherlands from 1997 until 2002. My husband had been invited and appointed as professor by the Delft University of Technology. Living in the Netherlands was a new experience and a challenge for all of us, in particular for our children. Nevertheless, our strong intension was to provide the same education for them as they had had in Hungary. With this in mind, we also looked at the Dutch school system with parental eyes. Having been a head of a Section, my husband could see the university system from inside every day. In addition to lecturing for bachelor and master students and doing research, he also supervised and promoted Ph.D. students. At the beginning, I made myself busy with learning Dutch in 5-6 hours every day. Later on, I was working in a primary school as a voluntary assistant.

Actually, the Dutch school system is not really different from the Hungarian one. The kids typically attend a starter school, which is very close to our "kindergartens". There were two possibilities for them: to be there for half a day, or for the whole day. The little ones go there from the age of two and they go to school at the age of five.

Let me start with the International School of the Hague

Our children were attending the International School of the Hague (IHS), which was somewhat special with many differences in comparison with the other local schools. This secondary school means seven years for the children, normally aged from 11 to 18. There were no classes – instead all students belonging to a particular semester worked together. Our two children started IHS when they were 10 and 14, respectively. They had to pass a maths entrance exam. Having many sister institutions in other countries, the pedagogical centre of the International Schools was in Cambridge, England. They coordinated the education in the first 5 years. In addition to harmonising the semester exams for the children, this centre also organized brush-up courses for the teachers. This five-year educational program was closed by IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) exam and gave a first level certificate. This certificate enabled the children to continue their studies in high schools and colleges anywhere in the world, or they could alternatively take various jobs. In the next two years, the children could learn six or seven elective subjects at various levels. The students could take three of these subjects at advanced level, and the rest on intermediate level. This two-year programme was finished with the International Baccalaureate (IB) exam, which was coordinated from Geneva. There were four weeks for the students to prepare themselves for the IB exam, which included exams from each elective subject. These exams were spread over six weeks. Each student had to sit for 24-28 exams. As a matter of fact, the number of exams depended on the

number of the elective subjects taken by particular students, but only six exam marks had been taken into consideration at calculating the totalled mark of the IB exam.

The exams of each subject included a theoretical test, some calculation task and a practical test. In certain subjects they had to design experiments and to describe the conduct and the results of the experiments. As part of the exam of other subjects, they had to write an essay. Routinely, they were supposed to write one or two tests from various subjects every day. The assessment of the tests was double blinded. But it required quite a logistics... The tests that were written in the International Schools on the Northern hemisphere were assessed on the South part of the Globe, and vice versa. The oral exams, such as of languages, were recorded and the tapes were sent to peers. The students could earn 7 points from each subject, and one-one point from philosophy and creativity action service, respectively. They also had to prepare a diploma work, which also yielded one point. Putting everything together, they could earn a total of 45 points. If they had more than 24 points, they could apply for admission to any university of the World. Obviously much more points were needed for entering to prestigious or popular universities, but the tuition fees were also much higher for these institutions.

The interior of the ISH school building was very friendly. The flags of all countries where the students came from were always in the hall, indicating that it was a genuine international school. It was a delightful moment for our children to see when the Hungarian flag was added for the simple reason that they were belonging to this school community. Afterwards other Hungarian students arrived at ISH whose parents were working at the Hungarian Embassy, or at the Hungarian Commercial Council in the Hague. Each student had a well-sized locker on his or her own in ISH, in which he or she could hang up the coat and could store the schoolbag.

There were about 100-120 students belonging to the same semester. They had many public events throughout the school year such as the Halloween Party, the Christmas Party, the School Leaving Ceremony (which was to give the Certificates to the graduate students), the Farewell Party and the International Cultural Evenings. They were all very well organised and were memorable. Eating special cakes and having refreshments and (the indispensable) coffee, parents and teachers could talk about the progress of their children, about the school affairs, and about the future plans.

The students also took part in various cultural and art performances, for which they prepared with poems, dances or instrumental music. They were practicing on their own, or under the coaching of the respective teachers. The way of preparation did bring in quality difference. Telling the truth, the students made a lot of mistakes contrary to their efforts. It happened several times that they could not finish a music piece, or forgot the words of a poem. Anyway, my experiences with the end-of-the-year concerts in the music school were similar too. Almost every second child failed with their presentation, the tone of the musical instrument was far from being clear, and the same was true for the choirs. No matter that they just were reading a piece of text, they could not do it without errors. However, they did never bother about perfection. Opposingly, they were very happy to have the chance to perform, and, in the end, they were satisfied and happy. They celebrated their success with relish, no matter that the results were far from perfect. And this gave a lot of self confidence for them ...

During the five years we spent in the Netherlands, our children never learned something by heart, or played music without notes. To be fair, this was true only for ISH. Since I specifically asked and helped them to do so,

our children learned all the poems which were included in the study program of Hungarian grammar schools. The motivation came from the mentality that being Hungarians they need to know at least the famous and important poems of the Hungarian literature. Coming back to Hungary, the lack of skills and the experiences with learning something by heart did cause a lot of problems for them. Our daughter was more than afraid to show up on the stage and to play the violin without notes because she had never practiced it before. She could not simply use that region of the brain which is responsible for playing instrumental music based on memory. It took quite a long time, almost two years, when it became natural for her to tell a poem, to play the violin, or to do anything without relying on a book or without external help. At the same time, I can recollect very well that the children roared hurray and whistled for her with two fingers after successfully finishing one of her performances in the ISH, and finally celebrated her and each other's success without any sign of jealousy.

This under preparation could be traced back to the fact that the students had less number of classroom hours for all kinds of learning. For instance, our children had music lessons twice a week in Hungary, but there was only one lesson per week in the music school in the Netherlands. In Hungary, they had three hours ballroom dancing training three times a week. In the Netherlands, they had only one lesson per week. My understanding has been that this was one element of why they were not well prepared to play instrument, and could not deepen in the science. But was it enough for them, or had they no money for more? Probably both played a role.

In the Netherlands, the children do everything as a pleasure or as their own hobby. Everything is supposed to be entertaining and an enjoyable event. They do not work too hard and are definitely not obsessed. Without any deeper motivation or strong enthusiasm they do everything for a while. When the time was off, they immediately stopped even with their hobby. They were not motivated to play a piece of music again when the performance did not go through well, or for their pleasure, when the opposite was the case. They left the orchestra immediately, and had a tasty cup of coffee or had a nice chat as the next pleasurable moment of their life. They enjoyed everything but for a short time only. The lack of enthusiasm and low motivation were always reflected on the personal achievements.

There were compulsory and elective subjects in the curriculum. In the first year they studied maths, science, Dutch, French, music, art and obviously English, which was the common language for everyone in the school. The Dutch language was also compulsory as a second language because the Dutch Government supported the International School of the Hague. Our daughter went hand in hand with a lovely coloured girl on the very first day. They had something common: nobody understood them. Neither of them had sufficient English command to speak to the others, but they soon understood each other. She came from China and could speak only Chinese. Nevertheless, they had to take the oral exam of every subject in English at the end of the first year. In the next year, they had to choose a second language to learn, which could be either German or Spanish.

The assessment of the results and the progress of the students were expressed with letters rather than with numbers. There were eight grades such as A, B, C, D, E, F, G and U (unclassified). If the student had this result the staff gave advice to the parents not to go further to the higher year. The parents received report about the progress of their children once every quarter of the year. Every second report was textual and the others with letter marks only. There was another sign next to the mark. It expressed the diligence of the student, and it was either plus (+) if the student worked hard

(well done) or minus (-) if did not (change needed). There were parents-teachers meetings twice a year. The parents were supposed to indicate in advance if they wished to take part and which teacher they wanted to consult by filling in a questionnaire. Then, it was scheduled by the school and the parents received the time schedule by regular postal mail. This way, the meetings were running smoothly, and everybody had the chance to talk to the teachers and to the parents, respectively. Actually, everybody had 7 minutes for a discussion with one teacher. The parents did not have to stand in a long queue or to get bored while waiting for a busy teacher. They could sit at tables, had a coffee or tea, chatted with the others, and were called when the time came. And everybody tried to keep the time under control. I think both the meetings and the people were well-organised. So it was a nice system and a successful practice. Consequently, the parents were positive and gave compliments to the teachers. They, in turn, always found something nice and positive in everybody's result or personality.

The lessons were for 50 minutes and there was no break between two subsequent lessons, just a short time for transferring from one room to the other. But after the second lesson they had a longer break. Different teachers dealt with a group every semester, for example, from English language and maths. At the beginning we were surprised and could not comprehend. However, after a while we realized what the reason was. The students could hear the explanations of different people, and see different approaches. In addition, they were faced different dialects, pronunciations and accents. This is very important in the international arena. The teachers of the ISH came from the United States, Australia, Greece, and Germany, and just a few of them from the United Kingdom. Interestingly, our daughter has now an American accent, while our son has picked up a British accent, because he had learned in England before we left Hungary.

In the ISH, the project oriented teaching was influential and therefore the students had many large projects. In the first year, they had to design and build the model of a well-insulated building from paper, including the insulation layers and all other structural materials. They tested the models to see which one preserved the inside warm longer and which one was warmer. After the laboratory tests, they had to write a report about their findings. From biology they had to at home prepare a poster on a scientist who originated from their native country. We were lucky because Hungary has got so many Nobel laureates. In the framework of this project, they could deeply learn about a specific scientific issue, but also collected knowledge about other scientist from all over the world. Obviously, they were proud of their homeland researchers...

Later the students had lessons from photography and even learned in the practice how to take photos. The students compiled an album from their photos on a chosen topic. They developed the photographs in black and white because it was more artistic and they were supposed to learn how to use a non-automatic machine. They worked in the darkroom to practise the development process. Later they analysed their photographs from an artistic point of view. The best ones were hanged on the walls of the school, or put in the window to let parents to see them. It was a surprise for us to see the works of our children and interesting to compare them with that of the others.

They heard a lot about AIDS, but they done experimental research rather than having explanative classroom on this topic. The experiment they did was an interesting one indeed. Here I just try to summarize its essence. The group taking part in the experiment consisted of 25 students. Everybody had a glass and clean water in it, except for two students who had water with

sugar in it. But it was also transparent, so it could not be recognised at seeing. On the glass of each student there was a short statement written that described one of four personal characteristics: (1) has got a lot of sexual contacts but does not protect against the danger, (2) has got a lot of sexual contacts but protects, (3) has few sexual contacts but does not protect, and (4) has few sexual contacts and protects. The students who had the first and second statements on their glasses were supposed to go up to almost every other classmate and the others only up to two of them. If they were protecting, then they only clinked with their glasses. If they were not protecting, they shared the water in their glasses. They also considered the possibility of ravishment. In the end of the experiment, the teacher poured some drops of a universal indicator into the glass of everyone, which changed the colour of the sugared water. The end result was very revealing and warning. There were only two students who had uncoloured, perfectly clean water in their glasses. All the others had lighter or stronger sugared water. And this meant that all except the two students were infected by AIDS! I think this was a very useful experiment. As far as the pedagogical aspects are concerned, it was much more effective and persuasive than any other oral lecture could have been. Evidently an oral presentation can be interesting too. However, if we compare the influence and the impact of the described hands-on experiment on the students and that of a scientific lecture, it is really difficult for the second to remain competitive. The student will remember for the experiences for ever.

My impression was that the language education was very good and successful in the Netherlands. The students achieved good results though they learned more than one language parallel on different levels, by different methods, and under the guidance of different teachers. For instance, during the Dutch lessons in the first three years, they were learning only words and grammar. In their English lessons they did not even deal with grammar – they were focused on talking and on the vocabulary. Though they were learning English, Dutch, German and French at the same time, they never confused these languages. It often happened that they even forgot which language they were supposed to use at writing their homework. They were also never confused cognitively, although the way of thinking in the second or third language was different from using their mother tongue.

The teaching of the natural science subjects was based on hands-on experiences, rather than on theoretical presentations, as is shown by the above examples. They dealt with everyday things in a commonsensical way, which were less scientific, but based on science and technology, and useful for their whole life. My impression has been that the maths teaching is somewhat weaker in this type of schools such as ISH. This was not able to give a robust foundation for the future studies of the students, considering in particular the necessary underpinning of their university education. For instance, when it was about picking up elective subjects on intermediate or advanced level for our children, the teacher had difficulties to understand our decision on learning maths on advanced level because she assumed that they would not need it at the university. The experiences with ISH suggested to me that they typically learn a subject on advanced level if they really need it at that given moment. Again the same principle ... Never do anything that is not pleasing, that might seem to be useless for the time being, and acquire the extra knowledge only when it is expected from you.

My 11 years old daughter told me once: "The teachers don't want to push me to learn better". At the beginning I actually could not understand what exactly she was missing until I had my own experience in another school in Delft. What she was hearing from her former Hungarian teachers was that

she had to do her homework better, she had to try the gym again, she had to practise the reading because she could do it on higher level, and she had a good talent in these things. They motivated her to do the things harder and to produce better results than she respectively did and had achieved earlier. She somehow missed this support and stimulation in the Netherlands.

In the ISH, the results were not so important, and they didn't measure the achievements that often. They had their exams every half a year. That was all. If a student wanted to learn more on his or her own, then there was no problem. If the student had the motivation and took the challenges then it was a good, but if had not, that had practically no consequences. Maybe I am too critical, but my feeling is that the teachers didn't encourage them and definitely didn't pull them on towards a higher level. Our daughter missed this inspiration very much. On the other hand, they have never heard any negative words; they were never scolded, so they were not nervous or depressive. If there had had a talented group of students in the class, they might have stimulated each other and this could have worked as an extra intellectual power and motivation for better results. But it didn't work like that.

I was employed as an assistant in a school in Delft. They were about 10-11 years old. Regularly, I went around in the classroom and looked into their papers when they were writing their tests. Once they had to report on their learning of multiplying with 6. I observed some misunderstandings and errors in case of a boy. As a last chance, I made a try to explain him the principle of multiplication and that three times six can not be more than four times six. The boy understood the reason of his error, and I could see on his eyes that he knew the correct answer. But he did not make any action to correct the error on the paper. The reason was not his fairness, but the fact that he was not too much concerned about the results. I was waiting for a while, but he went on and tried to solve and complete his other test questions. He didn't want to have a better mark. A good result with this maths test did not mean any special for him. The scores were only statistics. He did not feel cleverer after doing well with this test and it was probably not important for his family or for his teacher either. This was the moment when I understood the problem of my daughter. Our children always needed feedback or reflection from the teacher, in particular because working towards better results was always important in our family.

The children in the ISH were typically calm and well balanced, but they did not push themselves to do something better and to be perfect in doing something. More often than not, they were satisfied with their performance. After five years our daughter managed to pass the IGCSE exam with honour and our son did the same with the IB exam. Soon after returning to Hungary, our son started his University studies; our daughter continued her studies in the International Secondary School of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. They had to learn and practise how to learn again. First of all, they needed to translate everything into English in order to take out the meaning of the text. They have no difficulties to alternately use languages, and they always have ideas and solutions for all kinds of problems. They dare to talk in any situation, to deal with the problems in a practical manner. However, they don't like to go too deep into sciences. On the other hand, they like to be in the middle of a group of people, and they can tolerate many things. They have a large body of comprehensive knowledge and practical, but going deep and specializing themselves in something are not without difficulties. They have a lot of experiences, information, and knowledge of the practical life. They have a good talent in solving unexpected problems. But doing focused research in a particular

scientific topic seems to be somewhat difficult for them. It would be a hard test for them to become a researcher, like their father.

From the point of their learning and personal development, the family background is the same for our two children. We provided the same help for them and posed the same expectations. Their genes are the same as well, but they have got different characters and their attitude to learning and working is also different, I also know that the girls are usually somewhat more diligent and the boys tend to be somewhat light headed in their age. Contrary to their reasonable good capabilities and motivation to learn more and to be more, we have to keep our eyes on their doings. The years in the ISH gave them a lot of exciting experiences and a wealth of knowledge that they would been able to obtain nowhere else, but we also have had our tasks to interpret wider relationships for them, to teach them how to learn, and to raise their awareness to that learning goes together with both pleasure and torture.

The seven years of studying in a Hungarian school was long enough for our son to learn speaking and writing Hungarian without grammatical errors and it also gave him a good underpinning for mathematics and for other subjects. However, in the Netherlands I could observed that he gradually spent less and less time on learning, because he became convinced that he could cope with the challenges and achieve good results without very hard work. He could learn languages very easily, and he had much information about the insects and all basic things. He aggregated his knowledge not only from the schoolbooks and from his teachers, but also from watching television. The "National Geography" and the "Animal Planet" channels were always his favourites. They gave him plenty of useful information about various topics of biology. Another TV channels such as the "Discovery" channel helped him in physics and geography. He also collected a plethora of special words from various disciplines of sciences, and he memorised the pronunciation of these sometimes strange words and expressions as well. Anything from the bank to the cartoons was and remained a source of knowledge for him. He made the decision himself to keep his British accent and not to turn into the American accent. That was his choice.

He knows enormous amount of facts and dates, and about events and the different areas of life. Everything was information for him although he never learned about it in the school. He used the television as a second way of education and through his selective approach he became aware and interested in a wide range of things and knowledge. This way of acquiring knowledge proved to be easier for him than learning from books. Surprisingly, he also memorized these pieces of knowledge deeper and longer in his mind. He can use them every day in his daily practice. But this type of learning, mind set, and body of knowledge are not what a scholar or a researcher is supposed to have. Rather they dig deep into the various fields of scientific and technological interests. He prefers developing in this direction. Now he must learn how to go deep in knowledge, how to be systematic, and how to concentrate on a limited number of topics. Again he had to familiarize himself with a new way of learning.

The former school in the United Kingdom

Our son, but also his sister, spent several months in Liverpool and learned in the Knotty Ash School. We have heard many things from him and from our English friends who were teachers. Their opinion was that the taught

subjects and the subject materials were more practice oriented than in Hungary. Surprisingly, they mentioned that the knowledge of the children in the Hungarian schools was higher than in the UK. Visiting my maths lessons in Hungary they said they enjoyed them very much. They visited music lessons as well, which were amazing for them. They have heard already about the Kodály method but they had never seen it in practice before. The children played the flute and sang with do-re-mi. They could read the notes and everybody was able to sing songs and tell poems by heart. As they said, it was unprecedented in the UK. They play instrument from the music books. They were surprised to hear about the expectations from and the results of the children. Over there, pupils sing together and enjoy this singing, but the sound of the choir isn't that clear. For them, difference was what is between amateurism and professionalism.

At the Knotty Ash School in Liverpool there were children from three class years, which were often referred to as the lower, the middle and the upper class. They wore uniform and were very proud of their uniform. The uniform consisted of a white blouse or shirt, a grey skirt or trousers, and a blue sweater. If it was warm, then a short sleeved blue-white checked dress. They were wearing it with love. It was a traditional uniform, which was used by their parents and their grandparents as well. The fashion has changed and the uniform is now made from very handy textile. The children were very polite and they kept the rules during the lessons and in the break. In fact, it was a special school in which deaf and dumb children were also taught. Therefore, everybody in this school was able to use the sign language. And they were tolerant to each other. Before their first lesson they convened in the biggest hall of the school and sang songs together with piano support. It was very often a pray. Their face was happy, definitely not bored, and they were open for the day. It took generally not more than about ten minutes. There was no distinction between religions: the members of the Muslim community could sing the catholic songs likewise the others.

The workday started with this joint singing. Sometimes one of the pupils also played the piano or flute. In the classrooms there were tables with six small chairs around. There were 20-22 children in a classroom. Everybody could practise what he or she needed. They wrote and read a lot, and did grammar practice as well. A lesson lasted as long as the children were able to pay enough attention to their doings. When they were tired they could go further with another subject. Hence the subjects follow after each other somewhat incidentally. It was not an obligation to keep the timetable. However, the teacher knew the children's talent and their power so he/she decided on how to go on.

The children played very much during the lessons. For example there was a tale included in the history lesson. The teacher told a historic story and the children reanimated it as a theatre performance. We still treasure a photograph on one of their play. In the photograph, a larger group of little boys and girls are standing on a table, and there is a boy kneeling under the table. This boy happened to be our son. I remember, when we were there, and saw him in this situation, I asked him immediately why he was under the table when the others were on top of it. He replied that he was a flour bag. He replied to me bravely and proudly. Later on he explained that the story was about the migration and settle down of British people in the United States. They went there on big sail boats and took all kind of things with them, for instance, tools, livestock, food, goods and values. Flour, being very important part of their foodstuff, was preserved deep in the hull of the ship. The settlers managed to get through the Ocean protecting their foods and lives. In the played episode, the table was the sail boat, the children on top of

it the settlers, and our son the flour bag. I am sure he will never forget this time of the history, he will always remember to the difficulties of sailing, and the exact date when they settled down in America. Everybody was very important on the sail boat and the photo taken by us always reminds him of this lovely history lesson. On the next day the children went to school with curious feelings. They were interested to know what would happen in the USA during the next history lesson. Though they took it very seriously, they enjoyed learning very much.

At noon they had lunch in the dining room. It was the same place where the joint singing took place in the morning. There were some free programs in the afternoon such as playing chess, playing instrument, and comprehension. There was no homework for the children. Instead of doing homework they could play freely out in the garden of the school. Everybody liked playing football in the UK and the people respected the players.

In the Dutch language school

I was learning Dutch for two years in a language school. Then it was obligatory for the immigrants and for free of charge. People working and studying in Holland could also join a group, but they were supposed to pay tuition fee for it. Some people spoke English, others spoke French, and again others spoke only their mother tongue. Because we didn't have any common language in the group, everything was communicated in Dutch. In the first semester we learned grammar. Altogether we had 25 lessons per week. 12 lessons were with the language teacher, and 13 lessons were computer aided drills. The software was amazing, interesting and useful and we could use it without the help of the teacher. The basis of the software was a film with a daily life story, played by well-known actors.

We might watch the film as many times as we wanted with or without under titles. The earphone helped us hear the correct pronunciation. The story was made for adults and was interesting. It was full of everyday problems which may pop up in the bank and in the insurance office, or which are related to finding a washing machine shop based on a telephone book, visiting the GP, and changing the mobile phone to a new one. These topics were very useful for the immigrants because, through these texts, they could meet the real life in a new country and they could learn how to solve their daily problems in the Netherlands. We were motivated to pay attention because we were interested in the story of the family on the film. In addition to watching films and listening to conversations, there were many grammar tests and vocabulary tests, and a final test to measure our new knowledge. It was always possible to see the correct answers, though we typically could not find explanations. After the final test it was decided upon whether we could finish that lesson and go further to the next one, or we had to go back and repeat the given lesson again. Seeing the results, which were shown in percentage at the end of final test, we could make our decision. We could repeat a task as many times as we needed.

In every semester we had listening, reading and writing tests and an oral exam as well. The results of these exams were shown in the Certificate. If somebody could not reach the bottom line, he or she could repeat one semester. The government also wanted to prepare the immigrants for the European culture and for the new lifestyle in Europe. Therefore we had various types of lessons like maths, information science, and drama in the second year. During the maths lesson we recapitulated the basics of maths

like the four arithmetic rules, or unit of measurements. We have learned to read them. In information science lesson we used Microsoft Word, Excel as well as Power Point. An actor taught drama for us. We learned some poems, wrote letters, and sang folklore and pop songs too. We really enjoyed these lessons. We played games in order to raise the capacity of our memory.

In addition to these enjoyable lessons and exercises, we had self-awareness practices. This is important if someone wants to get a job in the home country or anywhere in the world. Later on we had practices that were related to the professional fields where we wanted to work. Our personality was opened very much and soon, and we became braver, more self-confident, and could find our way to become part of the new country. We learned, for instance, how to write curriculum vitae for a job application. They corrected our autobiography. I graduated as mechanical engineer but a few years later I also earned a diploma in engineering teaching. Since I wanted to find a job in a school in the Netherlands, I was fully aware of the importance of speaking Dutch fluently. For a mathematics teacher knowing the technical terms and the precise meaning of them is indispensable.

Learning about schools, pupils, parents, subjects, methods

There was a contact teacher for everyone, who helped me find a place for comprehension practice. She was in contact with a secondary school and arranged for me to be a hospitality member of the staff. This experience was very exciting for me also. In the class the children worked together in certain groups. The boys and the girls were mixed in the groups. Their chairs were arranged around tables, rather in rows. The frontal work was almost unknown in this school as well as in others. The teacher gave a list of tasks to the pupils and they were expected to solve the tasks in two or three week's time. The timeframe depended on the amount of time that was needed to complete the task. If the syllabus is very important or difficult than it takes longer time. Everybody has to solve the assigned task either in the school or at home. The pupils worked separately, but they could ask for help from each other. However, they did not copy the solutions of the maths tasks from the neighbours'. Their pace of progress was different, everybody had his or her own tempo, but they were not nervous if they were in delay. The teacher walked around the room and they could ask him whenever it was necessary. Almost everybody had different problems. In general, the teacher said just a couple of words but it was enough explanation for solving the problem at hand. The pupils dared to ask; they tried their own ideas and did not hesitate to work. They learned how to work alone with minimal help and could go ahead on their own way.

As I mentioned above, the teacher usually walked around in the classroom and advised the pupils how to address their maths problems. He was not urging the pupils and was not annoyed if they were not progressing at the same speed. He left them to work according to their own style. He went up to everyone of them when he was asked, often crouched down, gave a new idea to enable the stacked pupils go further, or put them back to the right track if they were on a wrong one. Sometimes the pupils started talking about friends, fashion, free time, or whatever, but interestingly they almost always knew that sooner or later they had to stop with it otherwise they would not be able to finish their daily tasks. It was interesting to observe that they helped each other. My impression has been that this help of the classmates was at least as valuable for the pupils than that the teacher could provide, probably because they were intellectually closer to each other than

to the teacher. They were on the same level of understanding and they followed the same learning pattern. I appreciated that they nevertheless wanted to solve the assignments on their own, on the basis of the own intellectual capacity and efforts. By the end of the first year they have learned how to can organise their work and how to manage time.

The group work and the individual work were mixed in the comprehension lessons I took part in, and this gave me the opportunity for an analysis and conclusions. Obviously, the group and individual work are more challenging for the teacher than the traditional frontal work. In the first case, the teacher had to deal with and harmonize plenty of different ideas, because the pupils were concentrating only on their own thoughts. Each of them invented solutions individually, but it often took time to see their thoughts from a distance and to come to their own decisions on it. Sometimes, they could come to a conclusion only after clarification or advice of the teacher. This way of working gave the chance to each pupil to complete the assignment with success, and nobody felt bored or being threatened by a failure. The pupils were not humiliated just because they didn't understand the task as soon as the others did. The pupils also faced personal differences, but they sooner or later learned how to tolerate these individual differences.

Although it was not a primary goal for the teacher to control the tempo of the pupils, he tried to keep their progress under control. The latter meant that the teacher took into consideration the variation in the abilities and the inspiration of the pupils. The main issue was how to deal with the more talented pupils and with the less talented pupils at the same time. It is known that by applying the concept and methods of differential lesson, the teacher can give dedicated tasks to the pupils according to their capabilities and progress, but it also gives much more work for the teacher. On the other hand, when the pupils should work together as a group it is very difficult, if not impossible, to apply any kind of differentiation. In addition, the different capabilities of the pupils will have an influence both on the problem solving and on the cooperation. Often not all pupils dared or want to talk about their ideas. Understandably, the dominant pupils came up with many ideas, asked more frequently, and actively directed the process of problem solving. The weaker pupils however felt suppressed and achieved much slower progress even with their own simpler tasks. Working with these differences was a methodological challenge for the teacher...

Impressions and experiences as a volunteer

My intention was to work as a teaching assistant after my hospital job. However, according to the rules, I was supposed to work first on a voluntarily basis. The name of these volunteers is "freiwilliger" in Dutch. This type of work is very useful for the individuals, for the employers, and for the government. The individuals can work if they want, share some responsibility, but they are not receiving salary. Therefore, the employers are not paying overheads, and the problem of unemployment is lessened from the aspect of the government. As volunteers, on the one hand, the individuals are able to try many different jobs and, on the other hand, they can feel that they are useful for the society and the other citizens need them. In the Netherlands, typically the young and the middle aged women are working voluntarily. The young women usually have a job before they give birth to their first child. However, if they want to keep their position, they have to go back to work. They can stay at home with the child just for a short period,

usually for not more than two-three months. If the couple decides that the mother stays at home with the child for a longer time, it goes together with loosing the job. If they want to get back to work, they first have to serve as volunteer. This is part of the system. More often than not, one salary is however not enough for the family.

As volunteer, a woman may move into a hospital for a week, and work there from the afternoon until early morning next day. She may, for instance, take care of handicaps after the end of the regular nursing period until midnight, or even overnight. She helps them wash themselves, gives them breakfast, and even feeds them if it is needed. She also helps them to move, or transfers them, or talks to them. She does practically everything that she can help handicaps with. Other volunteers meet the patient or the visitor at the door of the hospital, and help them to find the information desk or the nurse. She or he can also provide information on how to solve their problem. Again other volunteers serve with driving cars and collect and take the handicaps with wheelchairs to the city, or carry goods with their own car. They also pick up people in need who travel to the city by bus, based on their telephone calls. There are volunteers who help to do shopping, or walk in the city from house to house and collect charity money. There are volunteers in the schools as well, who work without salary or without any other compensation, taking care of children or supporting the administration. These are simple things, but an enormous help for the people and for the government. And, in the end, having been a volunteer is a great advantage at finding a job, in particular if his or her volunteer experience is in line with the target job. This was actually the main reason why I worked in a primary school.

My school was in Den Hoorn, a village very close to Delft, one of the most widely known university city ("kennisstad") in the Netherlands. It was a regular primary school for the children between six and twelve from the urban area. It was built from panels in a month time, for the new housing estate in the neighbourhood. After few years it has been demolished and a new one was build just a kilometre away. It was built from modular elements; therefore they could assemble it very fast, wherever there was a need and possibility for it. The pupils of my school came from the traditional one floor Dutch detached houses. Their parents were neither reach nor poor. They came to school by bicycle, rather that car like in the UK. As a matter of fact, bikes are the best vehicles for the narrow streets in the Dutch villages and cities, which are very dangerous for cars. Biking is very natural and comfortable for the people, healthy. Traditionally they use bikes independently from the weather. They are unable to change the rainy or windy weather therefore they accumulated to that.

The mothers very often give birth at home. The midwife helps them in the heaviest time, and takes the mother to the hospital if it happens to be needed. It means that it is the decision of the midwife whether it is possible to give birth at home or the mother needs a doctor and the services of a hospital. Statistically, the Dutch are ranked highest in the rate of giving birth at home in Europe. If the mother prefers giving birth in hospital, rather than just relying on only one specialist at home, or if there is some problem with the pregnancy, she can go to the hospital, but only in the very end phase. The newborn baby is together with the mother from the very beginning in the regular home environment. The midwife goes every day to take care of the new baby, to wash him/her, and to help the young mother at the feeding. This woman also helps to keep the home tidy, cooks dinner for the whole family, and, if needed, deals with the older brother and sister. She actually does the same job that is of the grandmother in Hungary. As a ritual, the head of the

family puts a stork into the window showing that the baby has arrived. This custom is really lovely. Everybody understands the message seeing a white bird, which holds a blue or pink coloured clothes doll in the bill.

In the countryside of the Netherlands the children are born into the nature. They are plenty of animals around, so the children can not only see them on pictures, but even touch them. Around the cities, and in particular in villages, there were many animal parks, which were called "kinderboerderijen". The boys and girls living in the neighbourhood visit the animals regularly with the parents, or with the girl/boyfriends. There were all kinds of farm and small wild animals in the pinfolds, or sometimes at large in these parks. They were almost always rabbits of different colours, chickens, bots, donkeys, peacocks, deer, and even Asian pigs. Some children could go there day by day and feed them. The food for the animals was prepared by the park owners – the children could voluntarily buy some for nothing. This was just to teach them to be responsible for the animals. Anyway, it was good both for the little ones and for the animals. The children learned how to live together with the Nature, and the animals could live in their natural place. Most children had one or two favourite rabbits, and collected bread every single day for the ducks in the canal. Most probably they will take care of an injured bird when they find one.

There were plenty of cows and sheep everywhere. From early spring to late autumn they were out on the meadows, on their parcels, which were bordered by canals. At the very first time, I was surprised to see that on one side of a main road were the Campus and the Technology Innovation Park of the Delft University of Technology, and on the other side were the fields with hundreds of grazing cows. It is a very normal daily situation in the Netherlands. During the late springs, we could smell the fresh dung, but no one was ever complaining, though roughly 100 thousands people live in Delft. For me this was the implementation of what I would call the perfect coexistence of the high-tech society and the nature.

The outside wall of the primary school was coloured and there were plenty of painted flowers on the windows. Around the building there was a large garden with sand beds for the children and with the indispensable bicycle sheds. It was unbelievable how the children were able to use their bikes. They could eat or get the clothes on while they were riding the bike. They could turn round on one wheel and carry the load of a lorry if this was needed. The school was very colourful inside as well. One could feel in no time that it was built for children. The small pieces of furniture, and the oversized wooden building blocks, the works of the pupils on the walls were there to make them happy and to make the school days enjoyable.

Our classroom was divided into smaller cabinets, which were like nests for the pupils. There were three computers in one of the back corner. Next to them there were two bookshelves full of books, like a home library. In the other corner stood a cupboard with the clay figures and drying paintings the children made. And there was one more shelf to put their textbooks and notebooks on. One of the long walls was with many windows, with sun shelters outside, being in use in summer and winter in the same way. In front of the windows there were little kitchen gardens with beans, corn and other plants. Likewise, plants in little flower pots, standing on the wide windowsills. On the front wall of the classroom there was a big blackboard, with lines and grid. And on every accessible spot on the walls the children's paintings were hanging.

There were about 25 children in a classroom and they sat behind each other. In fact, two age groups were learning together in one classroom, the fourth-year and the fifth-year groups. They got along and behaved well

together. There was a pupil in the class who was prone to behavioural disorder and had to use hearing aid. He received almost an individually tailored education and assessment. The pupils shared the responsibilities for various things. They were responsible for the text books, a different pupil for each subject. These responsible pupils shared out the books at the beginning, and collected them at the end of the lessons.

There were two large coloured disks on the blackboard. The teacher indicated with these disks which activities the pupils were supposed to deal with. The blue one symbolised the fifth-year group and the orange one the fourth-year group. When the blue disk was above the orange, then the older pupils have oral session. Then they had reading comprehension or the teacher explained something to them. When the orange disk was above the blue one, then the younger generation worked aloud, and the other year group worked in silence. In every other case they learned together. They also sang together, listened to tales, or played jointly in the garden. They had hand-craft lessons at the same time. Though the children learned maths and reading separately, the science lessons were combined.

Tolerance towards each other played a very important role in this learning arrangement. One group of the pupils had to wait for the other group patiently. While the first group had silent reading comprehension, the other group had maths lesson. During the drawing lesson they could hear the science discussions of the other group. They also could hear what the other pupils knew about the multiplication table. It was possible because the pupils were able to use more than just one sense organ simultaneously. Their sensors worked very well and they could learn and do more things in the same time.

I called the above approach, which was new to me, cross-learning. With this approach the pupils were learning everything twice. The task was a kind of revision for the higher-year group, but it was brand new for the lower-year group. The members of the fourth-year group listen to the subject of the fifth-year group as external observers. They younger ones did not disturb the older classmates, though they were not seated separately. They were always active in group-work, working in pair or individually.

The lessons lasted only for a half an hour. The subjects followed each other arbitrarily. It was the decision of the teacher, based on his observation on what kind of work the pupils were able to do in that particular time. The lessons that needed strong thinking from the pupils were held in the morning, and the skill development practices after the lunch. The individual exercises were completed according to the individual tempo of the pupils. It could happen that a pupil was still busy with the second book of a series, while someone from the same group might have already finished seven books. They were on the same level, but their habits, tempo and personality were very different. These differences were accepted and they did not mean any problem between the children. The former pupil did not have to feel ashamed, and the latter one could also challenge his capacities. The pupil, who finished reading all books in the series, was allowed to read any other book brought from home. The slower reader did not pull back the other one who was more talented in reading. Although it was not obligatory to read extra books, the opportunity motivated even the weaker reader. They wanted to learn reading faster and correctly, in order to be able to read the book which the other classmates have read. They read history books and tales as well. After finishing their extra reading, they could hold a short presentation about the experiences.

Breakfast was given to the pupils in the school. Typically it was milk or chocolate with some cakes. Obviously they could have their homemade

breakfast as well. During the breaks, the teacher read a tale for them, just to keep them silent and calm. It was interesting to see that they were waiting for the next episodes. They were pleased to follow and understand the whole story. It was also a motivation for them to come to school day by day. They were eating slowly, they poured the milk and drinks always slowly, and chewed their food very carefully in order to create more time for the story.

The pupils who completed their task earlier could go to the computer to play for a while. There were no Internet access, only games in order to relax and to stimulate their thinking and logic. As I observed there was a kind of in house competition between the children concerning who were able to go first to the computer after finishing their tasks. The winner was happy, but there was no loser. For the gym lesson, they went down to an empty classroom downstairs. It was not too big but the children could play ball games and dance. The music lesson was in that room as well, not to disturb the others. They could dance and use instruments. Twice a week they went to the sport hall where they played football and other games. The gym teacher and the music teacher were different people. For the reason that the lessons followed each other in a somewhat arbitrary order, when the children were tired, they could go out to have fresh air. They should not wait until the break.

Part of the pupils went home to have their lunch, if the parents had time to collect them. The others had their lunch in the school. The lunch was not warm food because there were no facilities for cooking. But was not a problem at all - the tradition is that the Dutch people eat warm meal at home starting at 6 o'clock sharp. After the lunch all pupils came together in the classroom.

In every two months period the children had different projects. One of the issues for the project was: What do you know about Africa? In the two months period, this was the recurring theme at every lesson. The map on Africa was on the wall and they could see and memorise the shape of the continent. They could read the names of the countries, the rivers, and the mountains from the map whenever they were loitering around the map. They could talk about the animals in the breaks and change information on what they knew about the life in Africa. They discussed everything what they were interested in, from the faster animal to the number of people living in the African countries? They learned about the African animals in the science lesson. They collected photos, information about their way of living. In particular those pupils who could read well, they collected the information from the daily journals but also from watching programs on TV and listening to the news. They made paintings about the desert, the jungle or the rain forest. They made pictures from the collected photos of the African animals. The boys and the girls learned to play drum and rattling. One part of the class played African music, and the other part danced using that rattling. It was very useful also for their body. They felt the rhythm very well. The teacher read African tales during their breakfast. They enjoyed those extra lessons very much. It seemed to me as if I was in Africa in every moment of that time. They became interested in so many things about the life, the food and the habits of the African people. And their knowledge was wider and wider day by day.

Two teachers worked with the class. One of them was engaged with the children for three days and the other one for two days. They were together with the children from half past seven until four o'clock. The two teachers had to work in a harmony. They had plenty of pre-prepared tasks and tests. In other words, they did not actually use the text books because these pre-prepared teaching aids were in their dossiers, likewise the copies necessary for the children for the lesson. But if for some reasons there was a need

during the lesson they could make extra copies. Also given in the teacher's book, the keys for the tests were included in the dossiers. These keys were, on the one hand, helpful for the teacher, on the other hand, the automated checking and correction somewhat demolished the individual contact and feedback to the pupils.

In the time of correcting the tests of the pupils, the teacher could also receive a feedback on the developing understanding, skills and progress of the pupils. The results revealed for the teacher whether she had to repeat the part of the syllabus having been studied or she could go further with the new parts. The teacher usually did not care too much about the mistakes and about the frequency of committing the same errors. I never saw that she would have analysed the relationship between the incorrect answers and the pupils, or the errors and the groups of pupils in general. Interestingly, during the next lesson she also did not explain the pupils what the correct answers or solutions were.

The feedback was not a strong aspect in the assessment of the pupils' works. It also happened that there was a mistake in the key itself. The teacher did not realise it because she was accustomed with the process of the automatic correction. Let me give an example: there was a house, a tree, a lake and a garden on the picture. The children had to find the answer to the following question: where the painter's place was when he made the picture. The children made their own "bad" decision, but finally the teacher realised that they were right and the key was wrong. She was the most surprised! In another case, the pupil gave an excellent solution to a problem but the key indicated another answer. It was correct, but was far not as elegant as that of the pupil. The teacher nevertheless insisted on the key. The keys reflected a general thinking, but not the intuitivism of the children. When this sort of automatisms becomes the everyday routine, there is always a chance that we do not strive after genuine solutions, but just after routine ones.

The parents had regularly been visiting the school. They had daily contact with the teacher although they have only two parents-teacher meetings in a year. They did not ask questions about the progress of their children, but tried to help the teachers and educate the pupils together. They found a common way to access to the boys and the girls together. Some parents with knowledge went to the music lesson and helped to teach more pupils to play drum. Someone else took part in the art lesson, helped the children to design the colours as a mix of paints and to improve their brush technique. But she also helped to clean the tables and the painting clothes of the children as well. There was a mother who came to feeding the children in lunchtime, and another was their guardian when they went to the Sport Centre for the gym lesson twice a week. She waited for them over there and walked back together with them.

This was a kind of short free time for the teacher to have a little rest, or to prepare for the next lesson. In the afternoon there were always two mothers who could sew and cut with the scissors, and helped to make complete that particular project. They were not instructing, but helped the completion of the tasks. They formed a bridge between the teacher and the children. They had the same experiences and it was very important for the families. The boys and the girls could talk about their work at home, and the parents were able to understand their problems based on their deeper insights, results and thoughts. They could communicate about many important things throughout the projects. However, many parents were not able to do this routine since they had other duties in the school hours ...

Closing up

In my paper I made a summary about my experiences in the Netherlands, I tried to compare them with the Hungarian school system and school life, but also with some earlier experiences from England. Obviously, the interpretation of my experiences is rather subjective; nevertheless I tried to be factual and objective in presentation of my experiences, and in particular in my opinion forming. In this survey the liberalism of the Dutch schools can be compared to the rationality of an English school and with the modernism of an international high school.