Educational and vocational decision making of Dutch adolescents*

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I. *Introduction*

With the passage of the Educational (Mammoth) Act in 1963 and its recent implementation, Dutch high schools are faced with a series of problems of a counseling nature which now seem to demand immediate attention. One of these is the problem of transition from secondary to higher education. With students now having a wider choice in their selection of secondary programs and more choice of course content within their chosen program, the need arises to counsel them with respect to these choiees and especially with respect to further education. With this problem in mind, the Commissie voor Inpassing van Voortgezette Opleidingen of the University of Utrecht, began an investigation into the whole area of transition from secondary to higher education.

The present paper is an overview of this problem from the point of view of the developmental psychology of the secondary school student. It is based on impressions gathered during my stay in Holland between December, 1969 and May, 1970. These impressions are based on observations and interviews with teachers at the university and secondary schools, with decanen in several secondary schools, and especially with a group of secondary school students from five experimental school sand in addilion, one Gymnasium. Included in the sample are H.A.V.O., Gymnasium, Atheneum and H.B.S. (old form) students, mainly in their fifth year. The schools were a part of the sample chosen by the Commission in a study of the vakkenpakketten in the experimental secondary school, and as such the present report is, in one sense, an extension of that earlier research.

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II. *The transition problem*

The transition from secondary to tertiary education is, from the student's perspective, a developmental task comprised of several aspects:

A. Students must decide on the type of tertiary education as well as the location. In many cases the type of education will be dictated by a further choice, namely that of a vocation. Since, in Holland tertiary education is mainly graduate, professional, and technical education (as contrasted with a liberal arts undergraduate education) vocation becomes the overriding consideration in deciding where a student will go after secondary school. In other words, the student must be prepared before the end of his secondary schooling to decide on his life's work. This is less true of the university bound student, but even in his case, the decision must be made with respect to a 'major,' or 'faculty.'

B. Students must be able to anticipate any difficulties which their change in status will entail. Aside from academic difficulties, these could include such things as financial problems, relocation, leaving home, etc. such consideration is especially pertinent for those students who have had little opportunity to make decisions for

themselves in secondary school and will face a maximum demand to do so during the years of further education, e.g., at the university.

C. 'College stress' is a well documented symptom of first year university students. Even those students who have well developed coping mechanisms to deal with changes in status, often experience adjustment problems associated with entering a culture which gives them greater freedom than they formerly had. (Coelho *et. al.*, Coping strategies in a new learning enveronment. *Arch. gen. Psychiat.*, 1963, *9*, 433-443.)

III. *The question of decision making*

The present paper focusses on the first of the three issues listed above, namely that of deciding on the type and location of higher education. While in the past, the choices of Dutch adolescents were limited in terms of their previous education, the current situation allows for more flexibility both in choosing among possible types of secondary education and also in their choice of higher education.

A. The data herein presented were gathered from interviews with pupils from five experimental V.W.O. schools and an additional gymnasium. All the students were enrolled either in the traditional H.B.S. program or in Gymnasium or in the new Atheneum, or H.A.V.O. program. Therefore, only students of relatively superior ability were interviewed, since students of the M.A.V.O. or of the M.U.L.O. were not included. All of the students volunteered for the interviews and all were willing, in many cases eager, to respond to the questions put to them. Although explicitly told that they could skip any questions they did not care to answer, no student took this option. Nor were the students vague; rather they seemed to make every effort to make themselves clear.

B. Still, the data may appear limited since the sample is not large, though an attempt was made to make it representative of students at this level. Three of the schools were in large cities in the west of Holland, one in a small town in the north, another in a middle sized town in the south and one a surburban western school. Two were Catholic schools, one Christelijk, and the others were Openbare schools.

C. Interview. The schedule of questions asked during the interview is given in Appendix A. These questions were asked of the students in privacy with two interviewers, the author and Drs. Breemer, Director of the Instituut voor Inpassing van Voortgezette Opleidingen, who served as an interpreter when the interviewer's Dutch or the respondent's English were not up to the task.

D. Results of interview.

1. The choice of secondary education. In over fifty percent of the cases, students simply said that their parents or teachers had made the decision about the type of secondary education they were receiving. In most of the others, it was clear that no real decision had been made in the sense that they simply went to the school for which they had the ability or followed family expectations.

2. Parental background and current educational status. A number of investigators have commented on the fact that at all levels of Dutch education, primary, secondary, and tertiary, the type of education received is highly correlated with socio-economic class. Such factors as learning a 'formal language' at home before beginning primary school, the discrepancy between home environment and school demands, and parental expectation, have all been cited as explanations for the fact that children from higher socio-economic families tend to go further educationally than those from the lower classes. While this is rapidly changing with the introduction of the new secondary school systems, the present investigation bore out this observation. When the 16 students from the Gymnasium and Atheneum and the 17 students from the H.A.V.O. are classified into the occupational groups of their fathers, the following results emerge:

	Atheneum and Gymnasium	H.A.V.O.
Lower class occupations	1	9
Middle class occupations	9	8
Higher class occupations	6	0

A similar finding is evident if we compare the educational level of the fathers:

	Atheneum and Gymnasium	H.A.V.O.
Less than M.U.L.O.	2	8
M.U.L.O.	7	6
More than M.U.L.O.	7	2

3. The basis for the choice of vocation. Eight of the questions asked (numbers four through eleven) were adapted from an earlier study done with American adolescents (Gribbons, W. D. and Lohnes, P. R.: Shifts in adolescents' vocational values. *Pers. and Guid. J.*, 1965, *44*, p. 248-252). These questions were used to elicit the values which provided the basis for the vocational choices. Tables 1 and 2 in the appendices give the results of this categorization. Table 1 provides a comparison between the data from 16 Atheneum and Gymnasium fifth year students and 17 H.A.V.O. students all from the same five experimental secondary schools. Table 2 presents the data of 44 Dutch students – the 33 mentioned above plus 11 Gymnasium, Atheneum and H.B.S. students from a non-experimental secondary school. The data from the American study are given for comparative purposes.

The rank ordering of values is highly similar for the Dutch and American students. However, a few differences deserve attention. Interest in the occupation was cited more frequently by both American boys (rank of 1) and girls (rank of 2) than by Dutch boys (rank of 3) or girls (rank of 5.5). Secondly, Dutch students more often mention preparation and ability as an important consideration in vocational choice compared to American students. For the American students this factor ranked 6 for the girls and 6.5 for the boys, while for Dutch boys and girls it ranked as the second most important factor. Finally, the American study did not mention a value which came up fairly frequently with the Dutch students – namely independence. Over 25% of the Dutch students mentioned wanting to be free to do what they liked or not to be forced to do something against their will.

4. Negative vocational choices. In many cases students indicated that their choice of vocation was not what they would most like to do, that is, they were hindered for one reason or another from entering an occupation which they thought they would enjoy. Generally, the reason given was a lack of necessary preparation or ability. These 'second-best' choices were more true of the H.A.V.O. students (41%) than of the Atheneum and Gymnasium students (15%).

5. Aid in making the vocational choice. Virtually all the students in both Gymnasium and Atheneum, as well as those in H.A.V.O. programs had spoken with their parents and friends about their vocational choice. Not all, however, had spoken with their teachers or decanen. Eleven of the 17 H.A.V.O. students had sought advice from their decanen while only 6 of the 16 Atheneum and Gymnasium students had done so. The same pattern exists with respect to talking with the teachers about these decisions. Eleven of the Gymnasium and Atheneum students and seven of the H.A.V.O. students had done so. Information which had come from teachers, decanen or through other school channels was of a wide variety. Included were individual and group counseling, the distributions of pamphlets published by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Education, and various private agencies and business firms, and 'vocation days' when students had a chance to examine material and discuss their choices with members of the relevant occupations. Several students, however, noted that the factual material, while appropriate, dealt mainly with such questions as prerequisites, location and duration of training, etc., while very little of the information addressed itself to the issues of the actual working day

life of the members of the various occupations. One solution to this question was the development in one school of several evenings per year when students had the chance to discuss their future with some of the school's ex-students who were now engaged in various occupations of interest to the present students.

E. Conclusions.

The overall impression which one gets from interviewing these secondary school students is that they consider education a serious business which prepares one for his future role in society. Their choices of courses, to the extent that there are choices, and their choices for further training, are basically functional. That is, they claim to take courses which allow them to take further courses, or permit them to enter into a specific occupation. Education is seen as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Few of the students spoke of an intrinsic interest in the subject matter, itself.

Secondly, the students report that the sort of education they are able to receive is based largely on their ability and previous training, and in many cases, especially for the H.A.V.O. students, this did not leave the freedom of decision they would have enjoyed. The desire for independence was coupled with a strong feeling that their societal roles had already been decided. For example, many students found it difficult to imagine what sort of a future they would like. When asked what he thought his life would be like 20 years hence, one young man gave the monosyllabic answer: 'Dull,' 'Why dull?' His answer was equally disconcerting: 'I'll be thirty-seven then. Everybody I know who is that age has a dull life. I think it's just the way things are.'

Several students responded that they did not want to dream about what the future would be like because they did not want to 'crystallize' their lives. As one very articulate Gymnasium student said: 'It would be easier for me to tell you what my life will not be like. I will not be living in that house (pointing across the street), and going to the same job day in and day out at the same time every morning and returning at the same time every evening always to do the same thing in the evening at home. I want to travel to other countries, and perhaps do what I can to make life better for others.'

Finally, one is impressed with the generosity of these students. A common response was their interest in helping other people. Almost a third of them included this as an important consideration in choosing a vocation and many had made quite specific plans for using their education in the service of others. Whatever other values are being transmitted, this one has been acquired. It is coupled with a rather disdainful attitude toward money, prestige, and personal advancement. Prestige and advancement ranked very low in their hierarchy, while salary was important mainly for the purposes of having a family which was well cared for.

IV. *Recommendations*

Rapid strides are currently being made in the democratization of the secondary school system in the Netherlands. This is evidenced by the recent implementation of the Mammoth Law and the even more recent discussion of the introduction of a middle school which would amount to the extension of the brugjaar from its present one year to three years. Such changes allow for a wider variety of educational and vocational choices for secondary school pupils. The need which appears to present itself in the wake of these changes is for an arena in which pupils can make these decisions and for professional help in the process of choosing.

A. The need for counseling. The need for counseling in the secondary schools has been well stated by Abeles (1969) and there is little need to stress this further, except to note that the problem of transition to tertiary education is now an area in which this counseling is becoming especially important. Formerly, when students were assigned to educational tracks at the end of Lagere School, depending on their overall ability, the selection of further education was, in a large sense, predetermined. With the greater flexibility allowed as the result of the Mammoth

Law, students will need more advice and guidance in making educational decisions. Many of the students we interviewed gave voice to this need. Some few did not know personally the schooldecaan, and others had not taken advantage of his help. Still others felt that the help available was not the sort they really needed. They wanted to be able to explore their own needs and values as well as societal needs and educational programs. This observation nicely underscores the distinction made by Abeles between guidance and psychological counseling (Abeles, N., Some suggestions for the development of counseling and guidance in the secondary schools in the reference Netherlands. Mimeographed paper, 1969).

B. Extension of the brugjaar. The brugjaar, of course, is an especially important year for this counseling. The recent consideration of extending the brugjaar into a three year middle school appears to be an ideal opportunity for students to consider their decisions in the context of an emphasis on specific abilities rather than general ability only. The former idea of educational tracks had its foundation in individual differences in overall ability (general intelligence), while a comprehensive middle school could allow for flexibility in exploiting specific abilities. Thus, rather than grouping students in homogeneous schools (by overall intelligence) pupils could be grouped in homogeneous classes (according to specific ability). Thus, a student good in mathematics but poor in languages could advance with better students in the former area and work at a lower level in the latter area.

The second, and equally important, argument for such an extension of the brugjaar is the well documented fact that ability levels are known to change, in some cases dramatically, as the result of changes in self expectation, association with superior students, etc. Such 'late bloomers' are, under these circumstances, still free to make choices for tertiary education which they might not have been able to make having been assigned to a secondary school in accordance with their earlier measured general ability.

C. Social science in the secondary school. One possible arena for the discussion of individual needs, values, and the demands of society in the context of vocational choice, would be a course in psychology given to secondary school students. Such a program serves two quite different functions. First, it provides an introduction to the social sciences which allows students to decide if this is an area they would like to pursue further in their tertiary education. Most other academic disciplines offer this opportunity at the secondary level and there appears to be no reason why psychology cannot also be taught at that level. Having personally taught such a course to juniors in high school (roughly pupils 17 years old), I can attest to the fact that it was well received and that the students are well able by that time to deal with the foundations of experimental psychology. A number of high schools in America have adopted the same policy and text books are now being written with this group in mind. The only prerequisites which are essential, I believe, aside from a strong interest in the topic, are an adequate background in mathematics and biology. That is, students should have completed at least two years of high school mathematics and one year of high school biology.

Such an introductory course in psychology can serve two distinct purposes. If given during a full year, the first half of the course can be devoted to basic experimental psychology and should include such topics as: experimental methodology, sensation and perception, learning, cognition, and physiological psychology. The second half of the year can then be devoted to those aspects of psychology which are more properly social science rather than biological science: child and adolescent development, social psychology, industrial and vocational psychology, and personality. It is during this second half of the year when workshops can develop, when counselors can be invited guests, and when students can address themselves to more personal concerns, including vocational choices without losing sight of the academic goals of the course. In other words, aside from its intrinsic value as an academic discipline, which can be taught to secondary school pupils, psychology courses

can offer a forum for group discussion of personal goals and values. With expert guidance and moderation, this can be done without diluting the scientific rigor of a course. In fact, it has been my experience that such discussion often puts the content of research findings in a relevant context which enhances learning and enriches development.

D. The need for a moratorium and a possible solution: an equivalent of the community college. At least two social scientists (the psychoanalist, Erik Erikson, and the cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead) have written extensively on the need in democratic societies for a 'psychological moratorium,' during the late adolescent years. In those societies where adult roles are not rigidly prescribed it appears essential that the youth have the opportunity to test a number of possible choices independent of parental pressure, independent of societal needs, and not restricting their final vocational choice. 'This period can be viewed as a *psychosocial moratorium* during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him' (Erikson, E. H., *Identity, Youth* and *Crisis*. N.Y.: Norton, 1968, p. 156). Erikson has argued elsewhere that such experience as the peace corps and other voluntary services provide for such a moratorium. And in a certain sense, so does the undergraduate college experience, wherein students can study those topics which interest them, without a commitment to professional goals in the areas studied. It has been stated that the Dutch educational system has been directed in the past to preparing students for their adult roles. 'The great social importance of schools is a rather recent phenomenon. Traditionally the foremost social function of education has been to transmit the culture of a society to the younger generation in such a way that its members are prepared in time to take their appropriate places in the social structure' (Goudsblom, J. *The Dutch Society*. N.Y.: Random House, 1968, p. 95). Perhaps it is for this reason that the educational system appears to lack the opportunity for the psychosocial moratorium advocated above. Nor would it have been needed in a society in which the adult roles were traditionally prescribed. However, with the democratization of the educational system, it would appear, for some students, at least, a moratorium is more essential than it formerly was.

While it isn't the purpose of this paper to deal with the economics of such proposals, advantages of the regional colleges in the U.S. have been cited by Professor Davis (Davis, R., 'Tertiary Education: U.S.A.' in Bereday, G. Z. F. and Lauwerys, J. A., *The Education Explosion*. The World Yearbook of Education, 1965. London: Evans Brothers, 1965, p. 345):

> In the United States, the two-year community or junior college can only grow and may well spread overseas. This is a versatile institution because it can offer terminal technical and vocational preparation at the post-secondary level.
>
> At the same time, by affiliation either on a formal state-wide basis, as in California, or through informal accreditation arrangements, the regional sub-university can offer the first two years of higher education to students who may later transfer to universities or colleges. It can act as a maturing stage for the late-blooming scholar, and it can also act as a screening and terminal device for students who simply do not have the capacity for going on. It can also meet the enormous social demand for education beyond the secondary that can be satisfied with something less than a fully-fledged first degree. It is particularly promising when located in urban or sub-urban areas, because the bulk of its students can commute and save capital outlays on dormitory construction, or government subsidies for boarding expenses. Also, when located in urban areas, it can – in the technical fields – profit by use of part-time instructors and even plant and equipment loaned by private industry.

Several of the secondary students we interviewed stated the wish to take more 'elective' courses for which there was no time in their

rather tight schedules. Perhaps one way of providing this chance would be the equivalent of the undergraduate college. What is proposed here is a two year 'community college,' not unlike the junior colleges in the United States. Such a two-year institution might simply be an administrative organization which provided two things: counseling for the students and secondly, an entree into those educational institutions for elective courses which were of interest. After two

Table 1 Vocational values cited by Atheneum and Gymnasium pupils and H.A.V.O. pupils.

	H.A.V.O. (17)		ATH + GYM (16)	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
Satisfaction	16	(1)	15	(1)
Interest	7	(5)	8	(3.5)
Marriage + Family	4	(8)	8	(3.5)
Personal Contact	11	(3)	5	(7.5)
Social Service	6	(6)	5	(7.5)
Preparation, Ability	12	(2)	11	(2)
Advancement	0	(13)	0	(13)
Salary	8	(4)	7	(5)
Personal Goals	3	(9.5)	2	(11.5)
Demand	1	(12)	3	(9.5)
Location, Travel	2	(11)	2	(11.5)
Prestige	3	(9.5)	3	(9.5)
Independence	5	(7)	7	(5)

Table 2 Vocational values of Dutch and American secondary school pupils[1].

	Dutch (28) Boys	Amer. (54) Boys	Dutch (16) Girls	Amer. (57) Girls
	Rank	*Rank*	*Rank*	*Rank*
Satisfaction	(1)	2	(1)	1
Interest	(3)	1	(5.5)	2
Marriage and the family	(6)	4	(7.5)	3
Personal contact	(4)	6.5	(3.5)	4
Social service	(7)	8	(5.5)	5
Preparation and ability	(2)	6.5	(2)	6
Advancement	(11.5)	9	(11)	7
Salary	(5)	3	(3.5)	8
Personal Goals	(8.5)	10	(12)	9
Demand	(10)	11	(9)	10
Location and travel	(8.5)	12	(10)	11
Prestige	(11.5)	5	(7.5)	12
Independence	not included in American sample.			

1. American data taken, for comparative purposes from:
Gribbons, W. D. and Lohnes, P. R.: *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 1965, *44*, p. 248—252.

years, a student would be in a better position to choose his major course of study, nor would he have lost time, if the universities were willing to grant credit for courses thus taken in their own institutions. Such a college would serve to facilitate the transition from secondary to tertiary education and could provide the avenues for remedial work for students who chose a program of tertiary education for which they were not yet prepared in terms of their secondary program.

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Table 3 Definitions of the Value Categories[1].

Satisfaction:	happy at work; fulfill myself; doing something worthwhile.
Interest:	like to work with my hands; really enjoy it.
Marriage and Family:	get married eventually; be happy with husband and children; want a nice home and kids.
Personal Contact:	chance to meet new friends; like to meet people; working with others; get to know people better.
Social Service:	help others; to further society; giving something to humanity; making people happy; like to help children.
Preparation, Ability:	where abilities lie; what Iam good at; suited to it.
Advancement:	opportunity to get ahead; good future in it; can become a manager; can work from bottom up.
Salary:	earn enough to support family; good income; bank account.
Personal Goals:	improve self; get to know myself better.
Demand:	good job for later on; it's in demand; teachers are needed.
Location, Travel:	like to fly; able to travel; learning from travel; raises transportation problems.
Prestige:	people look up to you; earn recognition, respectability.
Independence:	to work for myself; not always to be told what I must do.

1. Taken from Gribbons, W. D. and Lohnes, P. R., *Loc. cit.*
The category 'independence' has been added to the original list of Gribbons and Lohnes.

Appendix A

Name: Program: *Courses:*
Age: Year:

1. *When* did you choose to go to Atheneum, Gymnasium, H.A.V.O.?
Why?
2. Where will you go after this?
When will you decide?
Why go there?
3. What occupational choice have you made?
4. What is the most important factor to consider in making an occupational choice?
5. Why do you consider this factor important?
6. When you were a young boy what did you want to be?
Will you tell me what has strengthened this decision (or caused you to change your mind)?
7. Do you feel that the occupation you will enter is a matter of chance or choice? Can you tell me why?
8. What would you like to get out of life? What do you think would make you happy and satisfied?
9. What would you like to get out of work?
10. Can you tell me something of how you feel about going to work?
11. When you think about work, is there anything you feel to be especially disagreeable about it?

12. Have you spoken with your parents about next year? Do they agree?
13. Have you spoken with friend?
    teacher?
    counselor?
14. How successful do you think you would be in your chosen field?
15. Father's education? Occupation?
    Mother's education? Occupation?
16. What will life be like 20 years from now?
17. Do you anticipate any areas of difficulty at University (T.H.S.)?