Learning from multilevel learning: a research on multilevel learning approaches in relation to curiosity.

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Abstract

As our society is becoming increasingly divided, a look may be directed towards education and its role in enforcing this separation. After an analysis of the Dutch education system and providing an understanding of multilevel approaches to learning, a further investigation into curiosity is presented. Through a focus-group discussion with experts and students with experience in multilevel learning environments, results are presented, with an additional contribution of the attendance of a multilevel learning environment. The results are complex, broad, and argued to raise more questions than they answer. Yet, a framework based on valuable lessons from the collected data is presented in a discussion, arguing that multilevel learning has effects on, as well as needs to be approached from three perspectives: transitional, educational, and social. A plea to consider this direction of change is made, based on results from the research.

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Introduction

As our society is rapidly changing, there is a certain flexibility that is expected from its elements, one of them being education. Based on a spontaneous dinner with students from different educational institutions, the idea of increasingly learning in collaboration with different educational levels arose. The main inspiration behind this came from students that were present, who had been working on how to transform old bread into new products, as part of an assignment of their Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) study program. The thought that so much knowledge is circulating that most people do not know about, and will likely not come in contact with, left a lasting impression. Social separation through education is being felt by many students, as well as people in the workfield. This situation raised thoughts about what it is that we can learn from each other, as well as from working with each other. In a society that is so interconnected, yet so separated from each other, why do we get taught so separately? To work with multiple layers within a certain being is what is called 'multilevel' (Korthagen, 2018), which is an approach that will be explored throughout the research at hand. More specifically, multilevel as an approach towards education and teaching in different shapes. Examples of this can be found within hackathons, collaborative classes, and similar projects. This was explored through a focus-group discussion and observational research on separate occasions. The research stayed within the limits of tertiary education, in order to maintain a narrow working approach. The main research question is stated:

What can be learned from applying multilevel approaches to learning to the Dutch tertiary educational system in relation to curiosity?

An expected outcome is to have a complex answer to the question, with multiple conflicting opinions and no proper solutions. A wish for curiosity to encourage people in searching for a

closer connection with each other, instead of basing opinions on prejudice of the 'other' is also present. As this author believes that many things start with education, it is a natural place to start. A specific focus is put on curiosity, out of curiosity for the topic, and again for narrowing purposes. The work will start by introducing the Dutch education system, multilevel learning as an approach and defining curiosity as a base to build upon. After explaining methodology and presenting the positionality of the author, results will be shown through six guiding questions that have come up during the research. These will be further elaborated upon and related back to the literature in the discussion part, where a framework will be provided, and limitations and considerations will also be shown. A final conclusion will be given at the end.

Literary background

Dutch Education System

The Dutch education system is made up of primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Until the age of 16, it is mandated by law to attend school, this stretches to the age of 18 when a student has not yet finished their secondary education. Three elaborate choices are presented after finishing primary education, they are called VWO (Preparatory Scientific Education), HAVO (Higher General Continued Education), and VMBO (Pre-Vocational Secondary Education). These are perceived, in this order, from a high level of education, to a low level. Certain specializations can be made with elective courses and extracurricular activities. Depending on the chosen level, students are expected to finish this somewhere from 4-6 years, though this may vary depending on the individual. The choices and results of a student made here highly impact, though not determine, what type of tertiary education will be followed, if being done at all.

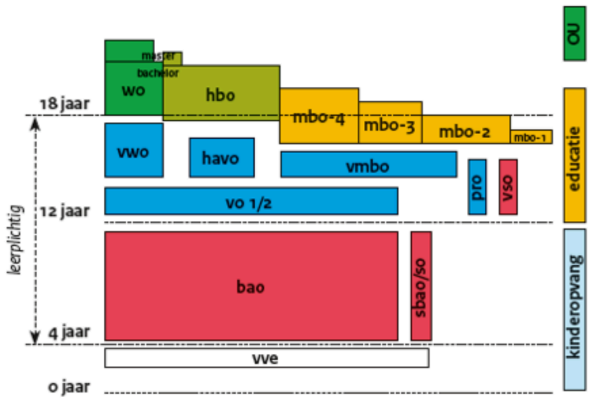

Figure 1. Illustrating the Dutch education system. (OCW in cijfers, n.d.)

Tertiary education exists of WO, which is University, HBO, known as applied sciences, and MBO, best translated as Vocational Education. Here, students will go into the direction of interest and skill, such as hairdresser, biology, or plumber. The options here again are dependent on the level of practicality and educational approach, with certain qualifications based on grades and achievements that have to be in place as part of a selective process.

The indicated ages are mainly guidelines and differ per student, since it may take people more or less time to finish their studies, they might take gap years, and other varying reasons. (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.)

The process of a student gets measured by a variety of factors, but mostly based on their academic achievements which get graded throughout the years. This gets done through general exams and assignments, as well as more central examinations (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, n.d.). Grades are given between 1-10, with 1 being a complete fail, 10 being the highest, and 5.5 being the passing benchmark.

On the question of whether students *should* be separated into different educational branches, both fronts can be argued for. In 2021 the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) published a report on combined and categorical forms of secondary education (Samen of gescheiden naar school, 2021). Actors involved in this field, such as parents, teachers, and policy makers, were interviewed on the Dutch education system. Noteworthy is that no students were asked. Additional quantitative research was also conducted on the division of types of educational institutions.

Two types of educational separation are presented: institutional separation, which looks at physical, spatial separation; and social separation, which is a separation of personal background. These tend to go hand-in-hand. We see how money becomes significantly more important in a student's learning trajectory, being able to provide for time, support, tutoring, etc. This could help them get into higher levels of education, creating a bigger divide between those who do and those who do not have this money, keeping money where it already is, enforcing a cycle of separation. Through this, students tend to mainly be around like-minded people with similar backgrounds, argues the SCP. A factor that plays into this is the narrowing of schools, especially

in cities. In this process, institutions stop offering all levels of education, and start focusing on the specialization of one specific level. Categorical schools are shown to be desired mostly by parents of children with a high educational prospects, and by teachers, for whom teaching becomes easier in a homogenous classroom. There are certainly benefits in making education more categorical, as the report shows that this way of approaching education helps students in higher levels of education to cognitively develop better and increases self confidence in students in lower levels, by not always having to be the 'weakest link' anymore. In this model it is easier to achieve the identified goals of teaching for qualification and personal development of the student, says the report.

However, those are not the only goals of education. Preparing students for their role as a participant of society is part of education, yet is hard to achieve with categorical separation. The SCP argues that this is almost impossible in categorical schools and that we need broad education to properly develop goals of socialization and citizenship. Teachers indicate they experience a lot of division within their classrooms based on financial, educational and migration backgrounds. The general conversation tends to lean towards antagonist views of 'us' versus 'them' where 'they' are only talked about, instead of with. The report stresses that people feel that the separation taking place in secondary education is not the root cause for our social separation and inequality, but from the way that the system is organized, it does reinforce this division. Additionally, education would be a good way to take some first steps towards decreasing this.

This change would entail changes like wider education in the first year of secondary schools, increased collaborative learning, and letting children make some decisions regarding their education later on. This will likely ask a lot of the system, the people working within it, and

its consumers, of which the parents are the most demanding. It might cause some conflict, yet this could also be perceived as learning opportunities. ‘Samen of gescheiden naar school’ argues for learning with and from each other, instead of about them.

Similarly, Gert Biesta wrote his book ‘Goed onderwijs en de cultuur van het meten’ (2012) on the three fields in which he believes education should suffice, which are qualification, socialization and subjectification. These are, according to Biesta, three aspects that education needs to be able to provide and properly teach. His framework questions the balance between the components and how they might occasionally negatively impact each other. The SCP report argues that qualification has been prioritized too much in recent years and that there are benefits to be gained from reconsidering this imbalance (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021).

Multilevel Learning

Though this research focuses on education, it is important to acknowledge that not all learning happens inside of the classroom. Multilevel is a concept not limited to education, but refers to reflecting upon different layers within oneself (Korthagen, 2018), where, for example, multilevel governance has more to do with working on certain projects from different levels, such as local, regional, or national (Teisman et al., 2018). Within the scope of this research, the main focus lies towards learning with and from people who come from a different educational branch, regardless of whether they are still a student. In addition to multilevel, creating a collaboration between different levels often comes with a transdisciplinary layer, and, in the case of this research, an intergenerational one. The more students specialize towards their field of work and separate from each other, the more these differences come to influence the multilevel process. Multilevel learning as is defined here is similar to the way that the Dutch primary

education system is shaped, but in tertiary education, this could entail letting students from MBO, HBO and WO work and learn together.

Curiosity

Curiosity has the characteristic of being a very argued over, not easily defined concept that is just difficult to properly define. It is something naturally human (Kidd & Hayden, 2015). Oxford Dictionary defines it as "an eager wish to know or learn about something" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). Though the field of curiosity has been researched immensely, many questions remain unanswered. Additionally, most literary works on the topic can be traced back to a handful of pieces written in the 20th century. For this reason, this work shall include sources some might consider outdated or old[1]. Names like Dewey, Berlyne, Deci, and Loewenstein are hard to avoid when researching curiosity. This part will review some of the theories and thoughts on curiosity, while also conceptualizing the understanding of curiosity in the scope of this research.

With his works, Berlyne has distinguished two different types of curiosity: perceptual curiosity and epistemic curiosity (1960). These types differentiate between curiosity that is aroused by things that are novel, strange, or ambiguous (perceptional), and curiosity that is based on a desire for knowledge (epistemic). It might be understood as the difference between tasting unknown food and watching a TedTalk. As this research is on learning and curiosity, it is instinctively easy to assume that its main focus lies within epistemic curiosity. Even though there is quite the case to be made in support of this, learning does not necessarily need to be epistemic, nor only inside the classroom (Prado Camacho Alarcón, 2021). Neither a clear distinction, nor a

[1] This has something to do with not reinventing the wheel

new definition will be made in this work, but a kind request to keep the previous thought in mind throughout the process of reading.

Another distinction can be made between specific and diverse curiosity (Berlyne, 1960; Litman, 2005), which looks at the main motivator behind curiosity and why we act on it. Here, one looks for information in search of a particular piece (specific) or something that lies closer to motivation based on boredom (diverse). Based on this, the following research is more related to specific curiosity, but does not draw our diverse curiosity either. We might wish to get students curious about epistemic knowledge in a way that suits the educational curriculum, but do not have the power, nor the desire, to mold students in such a way. With the working definition, presented below, 'epistemic' will be included, yet not the main point.

In her work 'Educating for Curiosity' (2018), Watson proposes the following definition for a virtuously curious person: *"characteristically motivated to acquire worthwhile epistemic goods that she believes she lacks"*. Taking this definition as a base to develop further upon, there are some things to dissect first. Three main topics jump out: characteristically motivated; worthwhile epistemic goods; believes she lacks. These will be further inspected first to create a more thorough understanding curiosity.

Characteristically motivated touches upon the main concept related to curiosity, which is motivation[2]. According to Deci (1982), three different levels of motivation within students can be identified: intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated, and amotivated. For intrinsically motivated students, their motivation comes from within themselves and this is what can be seen as the ideal type of learning. Extrinsically motivated students get their motivation from external factors such as grades, compliments, gifts, etc. Although this state allows students to learn, it creates a level of dependency upon these external factors. Studies have shown that students who

[2] There are few works on curiosity that do not include motivation and I have not come across them yet.

are intrinsically motivated acquire a ‘deeper’ knowledge than those who are extrinsically motivated. When an extrinsically motivated student feels that their freedom is being threatened, they might become rebellious and start disrupting the classroom (Brehm, 1966). They become amotivated. Whereas amotivated students can be perceived as being lazy, this level of motivation is often caused by overwhelmedness, helplessness and a feeling of not having control over their understanding, according to Brehm. The less a student feels like they understand what is going on, the less motivated they become. Classes that are more focused on autonomy are usually more intrinsically motivated and have better self-worth (Deci, 1982). Levels of motivation are not set within a student, they can fluctuate, and are experienced by anyone. According to Deci, there are two ways to foster intrinsic motivation, which are giving someone choice, and providing them positive feedback.

Worthwhile epistemic goods are decided upon subjectively, according to Watson (2018). Something that may be worthwhile for one person, may not be for another. However, a general differentiation between worthwhile and trivial can be made. We might consider how the change in the gendered division of labor during the covid-pandemic may be more epistemically worthwhile than knowing whether Kim Kardashian prefers a Prada bag over an Hermez Birkin one[3]. We might hypothesize that when our intrinsic motivation increases, more things may feel like they are epistemically worthwhile. We tend to feel more curious when we feel that we are close to getting the answer to our question (Pluck & Johnson, 2011). A clear process and enough feedback may help us feel motivated and make the efforts we are putting in more worthwhile when we know that we are making progress. Combining this with curiosity, there is a sweet spot between something being novel enough to peak interest and something being ‘too novel’ and therefore invoking feelings of fear, and with that, losing motivation (Silvia, 2012). It has been

[3] For those curious, her preference goes to the Birkin (Roby, 2023)

suggested that whether an epistemic good is worthwhile is the main underlying reason behind curiosity (Pluck & Johnson, 2011). When looking for this, we arrive at the concept of information gaps.

Believing she lacks lies in acknowledging that there are things that one does not know. As Aristotle said "the more you know, the more you know you don't know". Lacking knowledge is another key component in curiosity[4]. People might be interested in certain topics, but curiosity lies on a different level than being interested. Though active acknowledgement of lacking knowledge is not a requirement for being curious[5], there is an information gap that needs to be present for curiosity to arise (Watson et al., 2018). Based on the works of Berlyne and Gestalt psychology, of which the latter tries to explain the motivation to complete items that lack a part in order to get closure (Berlyne, 1960; Köhler, 1967), Loewenstein created the Information Gap Model of Curiosity (1994). This theory is in compliance with what has been previously mentioned saying that curiosity grows under the factors like the information gap and its size, whether information is relevant enough, and differences in motivation.

We see that curiosity needs the acknowledgement of 'not knowing' to recognize information gaps to be present. But what do we do when 'not knowing' is seen as one of the biggest failures within a classroom? We might also give this act of 'not knowing' the name 'student ignorance', which is something that the work of Brogon and Brogon argue should have more space in the classroom in their work (1995). Sir Ken Robinson argued in his TedTalks on creativity in education that children are not naturally scared of being wrong until the education system takes this away by being built on mistakes being the worst thing that can happen (2006).

[4] I have personally never heard anyone say that they are curious about the things that they already know.
[5] Saying "I do not know, therefore I am curious".

He believed that the way we get educated kills our creativity and this piece would dare argue that the same thing happens with curiosity.

The Socratic method of teaching is located within this earlier mentioned state of ignorance, uncertainty, or confusion, which is called a state of ‘aporia’ (Watson et al., 2018). It is said that because the student knows that they do not know, that they want to find out. The educative dialogues of Socrates would tickle the curiosity of his students, while allowing them to recognize their ignorance, challenge their own thoughts, which would later be rewarded with the satisfaction of the answer.

Methodology

In order to properly answer the research question:

What can be learned from applying multilevel approaches to learning to the Dutch tertiary educational system in relation to curiosity?

two moments of data collection were applied. The first was an organized focus-group discussion, inviting students who have experience in being part of a multilevel learning environment, and experts who involve themselves in the (re)shaping of education. This in and of itself already created a multilevel environment, including different educational backgrounds and perspectives. However, due to a shortage in student participants, it was later decided that an additional moment of data collection would be added by observing an additional, outside multilevel environment. Here, a better insight was gained into what an example of such an environment could potentially look like. This part will explain the details of how these researches were conducted, why certain decisions were made and what approaches were applied.

Part 1 - Focus-group discussion

Starting by organizing a focus-group discussion, ergo, creating a multilevel learning environment. The initial plan was to invite a group of people from different ages, fields of work, and educational backgrounds, and see what happens. Through a gatekeeper, many people were approached, which resulted in a group of 10 participants, of whom six experts of (re)shaping education and four students, of whom one has experience organizing educational spaces for others as well. Most students had gained this experience through participating in a hackathon a few months prior to the data collection.

Though wishing that more conversations would result in action, this conversation did feel like the right place to start off, especially by having it in a manner that included many different

perspectives of parties involved. However, for reasons of productivity, the perspective of the Ministry of Education was left out. The discussion itself lasted a little less than two hours, in which many in-depth topics were discussed. This was done through the application of the fishbowl-method and in three different rounds. The fishbowl-method can be applied to learning environments, discussions and research to create an open and equal dialogue between participants (Learning for Justice, n.d.). It stimulates understanding between people while increasing their discussion and observational skills. This particular method encourages those in the different circles to speak up, but mostly to listen when needed. It opens the space for different perspectives on a certain topic, while also reflecting on the dialogue being had. The approach has been proven to be very effective in different settings, such as language learning (Effendi, 2017). The method works as follows. Within a room, two circles are created: an inner- and outer circle. Those within the inner circle, usually consisting of 3 to 6 people, discuss an announced topic together. The outer circle observes the discussion that is happening and later discusses what they noticed (Skills Converged, 2019). During the data collection, the room was divided up into two circles (inner- and outer circle), where only the inner circle was allowed to speak. The outer circle was invited to either carefully observe and reflect and, depending on the round, they would be able to take a seat on an empty chair in the inner circle. This, on the condition that someone else in the inner circle would give up their space in order to have an open chair again. This is called the ‘tap-out’ method, but it felt more friendly to take an open space and give yours up than it would have taking someone else’s space by ‘tapping them out’. The fishbowl-method was chosen for keeping a clear conversation structure in order to give everyone the opportunity to share their perspectives. The three rounds were as follows

1) The initial round created space for expert opinions. People who have been working on (re)shaping education and incorporating multilevel ways of working into the current system. Four of them would be in the inner circle conversing, while the other two would be able to step in at any point. The students were asked to keep quiet in this part. It lasted around 30 minutes.
2) The second round, after the break, invited all students to share their opinions on what they just heard, in relation to their experiences with multilevel learning. Here, the experts were asked to keep quiet and this part lasted around 15 minutes.
3) In the final round, the circle continued the conversation of the students, but anyone was free to step into the conversation to have a dialogue. This part took up the rest of the time.

The discussion was held in Dutch, the reason behind all participants being Dutch and the education system at hand is the one of the Netherlands. The general topics that were discussed were the role of education, curiosity in education, topics of motivation, the role of multilevel learning in this process, and how to possibly implement this. The goal was to get a diverse, expert opinion towards the research question. This was raised by asking questions such as "What, for you, is the goal of education? And what in this is a priority?" and "How do you deal with different levels of motivation in a classroom?". The group discussion was led by someone other than the researcher, in order to leave room for observational research. Afterwards, some space was left open for reflections together. An anonymous feedback form was sent later.

Part 2 - Observing multilevel learning

In order to have a better understanding of what it is like to experience a multilevel setting, it was arranged to join a boating project for a day of which the goal was to bring students together in a multilevel way. Here, it was possible to participate in the activities, talk to

facilitators and students and get a general feeling of what it might be like to join something like this. This data collection can be seen as anthropological, observational research, mostly of individual experiences of the day and the atmosphere. This will be a personal perspective, since it does not feel appropriate to speak for others and their experiences.

Instead of individually interviewing participants, a feel of the general atmosphere was taken. The participants of the event were from varying ages between an estimate of 16-50, with a majority being between 16-25 and having signed up as a participant of the sailing project. Facilitators were also considered to be participating in their own way and their contribution is seen as valuable as well. As mentioned before, the research will analyze observations from the point of view of the researcher, therefore becoming somewhat of a participant as well.

The focus-group discussion was recorded both visually and audibly and later transcribed. The visual materials were mainly for rewatching the event and perchance noticing certain bodily behaviors that could be linked to traits of curiosity peaking. The audio recordings were transcribed, coded and analyzed. No outside tools were used, since there were multiple, similar voices that needed to be distinguished, as well as for privacy reasons. Coding was also done by hand. Of this, main takeaways were gathered and worked out into results. All materials are protected by the services provided by the University of Groningen and will be destroyed after a set period of time.

Ethical approval for this project was given by the Ethical Committee of Campus Fryslân, faculty of the University of Groningen.

Positionality

During the process of working on this research, a very interesting pattern emerged. Every time I would explain to someone what my thesis was going to be regarding, they would immediately provide me with their opinion on the topic. I felt like this might have been different, had I been researching something with the title 'Microscopic analyses of female frog bacteria'[6]. Since most people in my circles are privileged enough to have come in touch with many different forms of education, everyone apparently also felt entitled to have an (unasked) opinion about it. Which was quite frustrating, until I realized that apparently I felt the same, since I decided to write my Bachelor's thesis on the topic, without having an educational background in education. This posed me with a question: what gives me the right to write about education? Because, as it seems, I may have had a similar reasoning to theirs. As a response to this question, I can offer a couple of thoughts:

a) I have seen a couple of its sides and am currently still part of the Dutch education system. This may of course be seen as an upside and downside, since this may cause me to be biased, as I am still so deep in the system. However, in the spirit of looking at different perspectives, I invite you to not only listen to me, but students in general. I believe my generation to be one with many ideas, opinions and motivations to take agency in matters that concern them. Do not underestimate the power and knowledge of young people.
b) My hope is that my perspective might be an interesting one, having both thrived and failed in, as well as been failed by the same system. Whereas primary school was not a problem at all, I completely got stuck in high school, both with my learning process and myself. It was during my time at University that I was finally able to figure out what

[6] I do not know if this is an actual research topic, but would be curious to hear about it more

works for me when it comes to my education. That being said, I have been privileged enough to have gotten the support that I needed, of which I am aware is not the case for many other students. For this, I am grateful that I now (hopefully) get to graduate from University.

c) Additionally, I would hope that my previous education has prepared me enough to write a senseful piece on this complex, yet beautiful topic. I have received excellent education throughout my life and would wish to use this for a good purpose.

d) In the end, this work may just be another perspective on the very thoroughly discussed topic that is education. So let this be my contribution.

A finishing acknowledgement needs to be made towards the harm that can be found within the usage of certain ways of phrasing. Using words like ‘higher’, ‘lower’, and ‘levels’ in relation to types of education attaches different levels of worth to the people following this path, that I personally do not agree with. However, for the sake of clarity and using the language that belongs to the field of work, these words are used in this piece in the same way. A shift in this would be encouraged by the author.

Results

Out of the focus-group discussion arose six questions that have been posed and potentially answered, some more than others. These are presented as questions, since the discussion itself was a wandering one. They are as follows, somewhat in the natural flow of the discussion:

1) What role do we give our education system?
2) What might be lacking in achieving this goal and/or other matters?
3) What are contributing and considerable factors?
4) How might multilevel learning contribute to this transition?
5) What role does curiosity play in the bigger picture?
6) What can we take away from the conversation?

What role do we give our education system?

What is the role of our education system? When asked this question, the main focus immediately went towards personal development and to support learning what it is to be part of this society; 'human-being'[7]. A quick consensus was reached on the significance of getting in touch with society and other people and to prepare students for 'the real world'. It was brought up how many MBO schools actually do offer this education to their students and how it might be assumed that students in HBO or University might not need to be taught this. This assumption was also immediately looked down upon, as there was no rational way of arguing that, within a multi-faceted, ever-changing society as ours, only specific students would need to be taught this. Everybody needs to learn how our society works and what we contribute personally, in order to properly function as one of its members. In this, space for reflection is crucial and needs to be

[7] In Dutch: menszijn

created. There is a new movement of personal development on the rise within the decision-making atmospheres and we might want to look at MBO schools for examples in this, since they have experience in this already. As a counter-thought, it was argued that we must allow students to be young, let them make mistakes, learn what boundaries are in place and cross them sometimes. For this, a learning environment needs to be safe enough to allow this, to protect students from feeling real-life consequences in their every mistake. From the students came a strong desire to actually get in touch with 'the real world'. And so, a first dichotomy came up: how do we teach students about society and their role within it, while also wishing to protect them from it as much as possible?

What might be lacking in achieving this goal and/or other matters?

With that dichotomy in mind arose the first point of improvement. The focus-group felt that the current system provides a fake representation of our society and with that, potentially misleads students in learning what the reality of this might be. The bubble that is the Land of Education has become this made-up paradise in which students need to be protected from the world and from themselves. This is, until they get thrown into society and then have to deal with the harshness of it, while having the wrong expectations. This Land of Education is ruled by set curricula, little room for mistakes, long days in classrooms and a lot of separation and hierarchy between students. We feel the need to make everything 'educable'[8] and push it into a certain mold to ensure it fits into the schedule for the year. However, if this is all students have ever known, how can we expect them to act any differently when having graduated? One of the participants argued that through this, education becomes reality.

[8] In Dutch: 'veronderwijzen'

Another aspect that came up was the fact that the bucket of the Land of Education is overflowing. There are so many things that we might wish to do and even more things have to be done, that there is barely any room for flexibility anymore. Budget is limited, curricula are set and there are learning goals that need to be met by students. It was argued that this leaves little room for valuable (but not easily taught) life lessons and making mistakes. Students are being categorized and being put into boxes, which tend to have a narrowing effect, for both students and teachers. This rigid mindset has become restricting for the system and all its actors, leaving little space for things like outside projects or previously acquired knowledge. Additionally, there is a call from students to be taken seriously. They feel the pressure of receiving certain grades and sense that the world on the outside may be different than what they are being taught inside of their classroom-bubble. According to participants, making things educable might sound like a safe strategy, but does not seem to be very beneficial for many actors involved in the process.

What are contributing and considerable factors?

The general consensus at this point is that there is a goal of supporting students into becoming members of the society, yet, the current system might not be properly facilitating this process. Participants were asked to come up with ideas and solutions. Four themes came up.

Flexibility is definitely needed. It became clear that everyone in this process needs a bit of room to breathe again, which might be difficult to achieve in a system as set in stone as our education system. It was pointed out that we might benefit from looking at the actual effects of our education system instead of only looking at what it *should* do and achieve. We might wish to apply this mindset to our students as well.

Awareness of the way we do things has consequences on our environment was a second theme. An example of this would be the way that certain institutions are structured. One of the

participants brought up a recent change in the fashion-industry in which terms like ‘headquarters’ or ‘main office’ are being changed to ‘service office’ in order to represent their role more accurately; to assist stores in their purpose of selling items to customers, instead of presenting itself as this higher being that knows all. This can counteract some of the hierarchies present within an organization.

Collaboration is of course a recurring theme within this work and was believed by participants to be one of the things necessary to implement for more rich learning. When learning to work together with people outside of your bubble, we might come face-to-face with different perspectives of different topics. This was confirmed by both experts and students. Students said to feel isolated from their peers in different educational branches. In this, it would be interesting to recognize the individual qualities of involved actors and play into those. This could also benefit the personal development into the societal citizen by having a better understanding of who you are and what you might wish to contribute to society. The reflective question “who am I in relation to this process” is central.

Perhaps a *different approach* to teaching is the way to go. We cannot know the perfect way to teach, but we can try to do something new, as one participant argued that we cannot continue like this. Leaving the classroom, Design-Based Education, focusing on skills instead of dry knowledge are all types of teaching that are being implemented in more shapes of education. A bigger focus on consequence-based approaches, agency and real questions are desired from both expert and student participants. Education cannot protect from the ‘real world’ forever and complex questions might make for more fruitful learning experiences.

How might multilevel learning contribute to this transition?

Instead of looking at what we want multilevel learning to achieve, we look at what happens when students find themselves in such a situation. A very common first effect, as indicated by a lot of students, is discomfort. The environment is new and different from what they are familiar with and we might not precisely know how to behave or what impact that might have on the people around us. One of the student participants highlighted how it is easier to learn what you are skilled at than learning something completely new. Working in comfortable, known environments may come more easily, but might also be less fruitful in its results and long-term takeaways. As the current system enforces a sense of hierarchy, there are stereotypes that tend to get enforced, especially at the beginning of events. Multilevel environments are great spaces to step off of this hierarchy, but that again comes with conflict and friction. Participants said that it took time to solve these things. This friction can often result in conversation, which is a great next step. This could help give insight into the perspective of the other and improve communication. It is not just learning about a topic anymore, it is achieving different layers of learning through learning to work with each other. Collaboration creates connection, which, in some situations, lasts until after a project is already finished, as indicated by student participants. As our education system is separated, separation still happens within multilevel environments. However, these tend to be built more on strengths and individual qualities than felt differences. When a complex question is posed in a multilevel environment, we can generally see rich solutions evolving. There is this sudden added layer of different perspectives that helps grow a deeper understanding and creates space for reflection and critical thinking. One thing to keep in mind here is that there is no way of controlling what students will take away from this. It was made clear by the students that the learning outcomes very much differed per group and its

dynamics. Multilevel projects are unpredictable and not to be categorized into a curriculum. There are no set learning outcomes, yet a lot of lessons to be learned. In the space of this added layer, we can only hope we become curious for each other once more, as wished for by the expert participants.

The elements that were indicated on the effects of multilevel environments in the focus-group were very much confirmed by the participants of the boating project. It was quickly made clear that it had not been easy, sailing with 30 people who did not know each other. There had already been some arguments and conflict but everything had been resolved. Something fascinating that came up during the observation was a strong sense of "I can", or a can-do-attitude. Whether it was the absence of grading, the possibility to move or availability of choices to make, something in the mindset of the students switched towards them feeling like they were capable of more than they originally thought. This was also confirmed by one of the focus-group participants who works with an organization that encourages students to find their democratic voice. There, students tend to leave their project-days more confident than when they showed up.

What role does curiosity play in the bigger picture?

As mentioned before, curiosity is closely related to motivation. Within this field is where we find more benefits of applying multilevel methods of teaching. During the focus-group discussion, the conversation on motivation touched upon its presence and absence that we might all find within ourselves from time to time. The way that we stimulate curiosity lies close to how we stimulate motivation. Students noticed during their multilevel projects that the motivation of others would also affect their own; motivation motivates. Teachers say they wish to spend more time on individual students and want to give them all sorts of opportunities, but struggle finding

the line between amotivation and not understanding the materials. The experts argued that they wish to facilitate and do many different things, but still have a curriculum that they need to adhere to. As multilevel projects tend to include complex questions and are uncontrollable, they are hard to implement into the classroom. The experts agreed that curiosity needed to be triggered and fed, but said to often get stuck on the point of implementation.

What can we take away from the conversation?

Out of the discussion arose three key points that were deemed crucial for thriving learning environments. They are agency, purpose, and trust. Agency, especially the removal of it, has a massive impact on motivation and can help people do things they actually believe in. Instead of putting students into boxes, we can give them space to move within. In the hackathon in question, a massive difference could be seen between the motivation of those who voluntarily signed up, versus the participants for whom attendance was mandatory. Agency supports people in figuring out what it is that they want to do, their purpose. Other aspects tying into this are interest and benefit; whether there is something to gain or satisfaction to be taken from the effort and discomfort. Purpose is another strong factor, which can be influenced by appointing actual responsibility to the people involved and taking their work seriously. Here, we also come back to the point of real questions. Instead of fitting everything into the Land of Education, there is a call from all parties involved to involve students into real questions, under the condition of set expectations and agreements. Under the theme of purpose, we can also find that a common goal tends to work wonders in stimulating motivation and an open mind. In relation to agency, we can also find a wish for trust. This shows itself in two different ways; transparency and flexibility. A trust with information on how things are going and why students are doing the things that they are doing. Students wish to understand and potentially contribute to their education and the

things that concern them and wish for trust through flexibility. A flexibility to make mistakes, participate in learning things outside the classroom and perhaps do things more their way. Agency, purpose and trust were common themes brought up by student participants, as well as experts who wished to create a fruitful learning environment for their students.

Discussion

What can be learned from applying multilevel approaches to learning to the Dutch tertiary education system in relation to curiosity? In between the many stakeholders, the unpredictability of outcomes and the case-to-case approach that need to be taken into account, we start wondering what actual conclusions can actually be drawn. Many people might have something to say about education and multilevel learning and yet, the next steps are still unclear. The answer to the question in question is, as expected, complex and abstract, but hopefully to be explained through three facets. What can be learned influences education from a transitional, educational, and societal perspective.

From a transitional lens, we return to the question of whether we should separate our education system. Based on this research, the short answer to this would be yes. As argued by the SCP report (2021), there are still many benefits to separating students from each other. Examples of this include specialization, personal development, and, as seen in hackathon, individual qualities. From a multilevel approach this is desirable, considering its strong focus and dependency on the significance of different perspectives and contributions. Learning from each other works if there are information gaps present in ourselves and others that we can help fill with different types of knowledge. However, the extent to which students are currently being separated is being felt as isolating, as indicated by the participants. There is a craving towards contact from all actors involved in the educational process and the complex question that is the educational transition would be a right place to start. The participants indicated how a multilevel approach helped with creating rich solutions to complex problems, based on different viewpoints of collaborators. In order to properly implement multilevel approaches to learning, a multilevel approach to creating policy may be considered. This way, all involved parties can voice their

opinions and can be considered in the eventual outcome. As for implementing change in our different educational branches, inspiration may be gathered from the 'other' levels as a starting point. As mentioned above, citizenship could be taught as a course in more studies than just MBO and their knowledge and expertise could be drawn from when shaping these types of courses in different contexts, again learning from those around you. A likely result of trying this approach would be friction, conflict and discomfort, which might come as no surprise. Here, a shift in focus could occur towards letting this happen and evolve into conversation, to later observe what happens as a result of these implementations, instead of mainly looking towards what it *should* be achieving, as mentioned in the focus-group discussion. Furthermore, relating the literature to the results, as students long for transparency and agency, Brehm argued that a clear process and feedback are key in promoting lost motivation (1966). Collaborative processes seem like a wise approach towards education that might be beneficial for many involved actors. Let its complexity not be scary, but challenging, as a complex question best solved within a multilevel environment. Having these conversations can be a difficult thing in and of itself, but their purpose should be to actually do something and bring about change, even if this change is creating understanding and a shift in perspective. Similar to the actual education, we might wish to step away from our desks and actually go into the classroom or onto the workfloor to see this point of view. What is it that we can learn from the real world?

In an educational matter, curiosity and motivation arise as important components. Through the transition, there will hopefully be an increase in learning from each other, in order to create deeper learning. With a shift towards curiosity, a shift in prioritization of educational elements may be hoped for. As Biesta argued that qualification, socialization, and subjectification will never be in perfect balance (2012), it would be interesting to see what would

shift and what effects this would have on students. With small steps, big changes can possibly be made. On the topic of socialization, multilevel projects force students to acknowledge different perspectives to certain topics, which was also indicated by participants to bring up more in-depth, fruitful conversations. Within different educational branches, students get taught different approaches towards tackling posed issues, of which none is better or worse than the other. Not only do people learn from each other, but they learn from the process of working with each other. This, in turn, stimulates learning in the fields of socialization and subjectification, and a reinforcing loop starts to appear. Coming back to curiosity, the research has not yet proven that curiosity is the key stone in the whole process and I do not believe it to be either. Yet, it can be considered a valuable first stepping stone in the process of (re)shaping the way we learn, and considerably significant, the way we teach. Curiosity thrives under stimulating conditions that allow for a safe space to move around in and this piece would argue that the current classroom does not only not offer this, and even crushes this curiosity with dry materials, rules and especially with grades. In order to preserve and stimulate this curiosity, we look towards motivation and the lack of it. As Brehm (1966) argued, amotivation tends to come from feeling incapable or too far from understanding. As multilevel environments help people feel capable again, this might stimulate motivation, and through that, hopefully curiosity. As mentioned in the scoping of this research, this curiosity need not only be epistemic, but would be encouraged to step outside this mindset and look towards what other knowledge can be recognized, for which flexibility is necessary.

On a societal level, there is a wish to step away from attaching different values of worth to levels of education and academic achievement. Perhaps a newfound appreciation for knowledge in a broader sense is needed. Now that money plays a significant role in academic

achievement (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021), social separation will likely only increase if no action is taken. This worry was brought up during the focus-group discussion, saying that the outcomes of multilevel approaches are uncertain, but seemingly headed in a direction that would resolve some of the problems currently being faced in the field of education. As discussed by the SCP report (2021), educational separation does not seem to be the root cause for societal separation, but definitely plays a role in enforcing this divide. Change within the system needs to occur, to hopefully aspire change outside the system as well. On a different note, the educational bubble that we call the Land of Education strives towards a goal of perfection and academic excellence, which is a valid goal, but may disregard other valuable lessons along the way. Society is not perfect, neither are students, pretending that they are or telling them that they should be does not change that. When education becomes reality and separation is a key element of this, how are we supposed to teach people to come together? We might benefit from leaving our desks and the classroom more to go out into the 'real world' only to discover that this is not perfect either. Here, new, unexpected companionships evolve between people from different social groups, who would not likely have come in contact with each other otherwise. Moving onto the following, if multilevel is truly the right path in the process of reconsidering education, none of it will go smoothly and perfectly. As mentioned above, that is the point. It is totally unpredictable and filled with flaws. Therefore, there must be space to reflect and reconsider. It is alright to make mistakes, it is part of who we are as human beings[9]. When education becomes reality and that system is based on qualification and performance, that is an attitude we will only enforce increasingly in the outside world. Laura van Dolron wrote the following paragraphs in her book Liefhebben (2018)[10]:

[9] I can personally promise you that I have made many mistakes during the process of writing this thesis
[10] This piece is translated from Dutch by the author

In the House of Representatives for example.

One person in politics has ever said

"I don't know", one!

That was Hans van Mierlo, who was

that sexy that he thought: "I'll get away

with this."

Once, that is a historical

event, that is crazy right?

How can you have such a difficult job

and never say "I don't know"?

Then you will have to lie, as

politician, and they do,

all of the time.

As long as we keep expecting people to be perfect and live up to unrealistic expectations, they will lie and cheat and find any way in which they can seemingly appear to fulfill these expectations without actually doing so, which will lose trust from all parties involved. As shown earlier, trust is crucial in a safe learning environment and for that, there will have to be an acceptance that students, and people, are not perfect. If this goal of reaching for perfection is what is taught, it is what people will believe for the rest of their lives, which does nobody any good. The Land of Education, and its people, need room to breathe again. Students need to know that they are capable through positive feedback and transparency (Brehm, 1966). This

can-do-attitude is a key outcome of a multilevel approach and crucial for motivation and curiosity.

These three elements together create a reinforcing loop in which outcomes and aspects of the elements also reinforce each other. An increase in contact between different social groups may increase curiosity in general, which in its turn hopefully leads to a wish for more contact. In the following, simplified Venn-diagram, the effects and overlapping outcomes are illustrated.

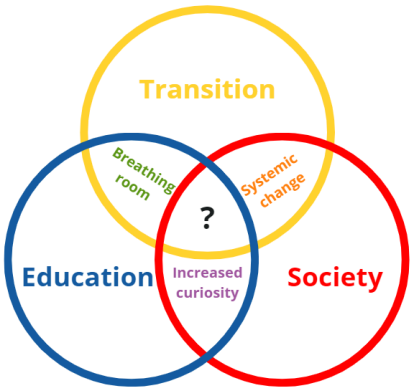

Figure 2. Venn-diagram illustrating the takeaways answering the research question

Noteworthy is the empty middle part. Multilevel learning is no clear step-by-step blueprint to follow, but rather a complex question in and of itself. What will happen with thorough, radical implementation is unknown and likely differing based on manner of application and contextual factors. There is presumably no way to predict what will happen, yet this work is a plea towards being brave enough to take the risk anyways. Coming back to a statement made during the focus-group discussion, we might not know what will happen if we do, but if we do not, we are headed in a destructive direction, so we might as well try. Try by taking small steps, setting up and supporting multilevel projects and open up a learning space for students, as well as people outside of education. Educational institutions, neighbors, peers, colleagues, students might all learn from each other in a space that encourages this collaboration.

Coming back to the complexities of the topic, I believe this research to be a starting point. A stepping stone towards future research on similar, related topics. I, personally, am curious about what else there is to know and discover about different facets of multilevel learning and its implementation into our everyday lives. Similar to what has been said about education itself, I

believe that we need to start moving beyond having conversations on the topic and start trying things out. Go outside, experiment, try, fail, try again and keep developing.

Limitations and considerations

Now a couple of limitations and considerations do need to be acknowledged, in order to have a full, transparent understanding of the process and implications of this piece of work.

First of all, the group of participants ended up being a bit different from initially expected. Not all relevant institutions and involved parties were represented properly and there was a clear lack in students who signed up. The requirements for participants were quite specific, which made it difficult to get to the number of participants we had initially hoped for. The students that ended up participating in the focus-group were also not most representative, since multiple of them were not yet tertiary education students. This was the main reason for my visit to the outside project, to include more student perspectives. However, these people were not interviewed in depth, just observed, which might cause the observations to differ a bit from the actual experience of the participants themselves. There may be a possibility that certain things were read too in-depth or overlooked, seeing winks in twitches (Geertz, 1973). Additionally, it must be noted that the participants of the focus-group discussion could all be defined as motivated and interested in the topic of multilevel education. This can cause a certain level of bias in favor of implementation.

Having completed this research, it might feel a bit incomplete, as it does to me. This work barely scratches the surface of the tiniest piece of this massive topic. As curiosity is to the broader topic of multilevel learning, so is this project like a small stepping stone, a starting point towards something bigger. Topics such as creating frameworks for implementations, motivation,

the educational bubble, are all potential for future research, relevant in the (re)shaping of education.

During the process of writing this, the political situation in the Netherlands underwent some shifts, now being governed under the name of Hope, Courage, and Pride. In this future programme we see how education budgets are being cut left and right, with extra pressure on performance and less room for international students and different perspectives (2024). It is worrying to write a piece like this, asking for more space, knowing that any space available will likely be cut due to budgeting. Therefore, I wish to say the following. It is our right and responsibility to educate and be educated. The more we drift away from each other, the more polarized we will become, making way for the extreme right to enforce this divide through harmful structures. As long as we believe that it is ‘us’ versus ‘them’, instead of acknowledging the complexities of our multifaceted society, we will only end up causing more harm than good. Learning can happen outside of the classroom, so let us keep educating ourselves and each other, and let this hopefully be a learning experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Dutch education system is a very complex and rigid one, with many great aspects and people working within it. Many people have some ideas and opinions on it, therefore this research went to explore the perspectives of experts and students with experience on implementing multilevel learning into daily education. Results in this were excessive, yet quite inconclusive, as many questions remain unanswered. It was made clear by a multitude of participants that they have an interest in the implementation of multilevel approaches to learning, yet there is no set way of doing so. It was also agreed upon that there are currently structures in place that are harmful for the people currently part of it, yet no clear way of going against these. One of the findings of this research is how there are many benefits to implementing multilevel approaches to education, such as a general can-do-attitude, rich solutions and more in-depth learning. The main takeaway is that this is only a starting point with a lot of questions that still need answering. The complex questions will need complex, flexible answers, preferably answered in a diverse, multilevel manner. Additionally, the current education system may be too protective and preventative, which is being felt by its students who wish for more autonomy. Multilevel approaches to learning might benefit the educational transition, the education system, as well as on a societal scope. Agency, purpose, and trust are key elements towards stimulating participation and motivation within students. Future conversations need to be had *with* people, not *about* them.

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