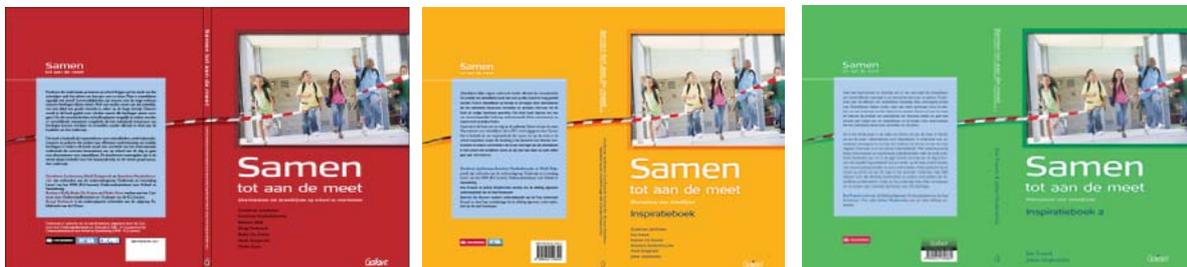


“Samen tot aan de meet”

– Alternatives to grade retention –

Summary of three publications:



General Education Policy

City of Antwerp

Translated to English by Anke Huybrechts





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INTRODUCTION

The number of retained pupils in Flanders is especially high compared to other countries. Recent analyses on PISA 2009 data by the OECD indicated the accuracy of this statement once again. An ample quantity of fifteen-year-olds was asked if they had repeated a grade during their school career. 13.4% of the Flemish fifteen-year-olds stated that they had repeated at least one year in primary school. In the first stage of secondary school, the number of retained pupils was 6.9%, in the second stage 4.8%.¹ Seen from an international perspective, Flanders is at the very ‘top’ of the statistics, while grade retention does not exist in countries like Japan, Korea and Norway, or hardly exists in countries like Slovenia, Iceland, the United Kingdom, Finland, Slovakia and so on. The conclusion seems obvious: in Flanders grade retention is considered to be a self-evident practice. However, from the small amount of retained pupils in other countries, it can be concluded that this does not have to be the case.

In most cases, schools use grade retention as a tool to diminish the educational delay of low-achieving pupils. The fact that Flemish schools use the practice of grade retention so self-evidently demonstrates that Flemish teachers and head teachers are convinced that this practice is very efficient. They build this conviction primarily on their own experiences and impressions.

If their beliefs are in line with reality, Flemish schools would not have to be alarmed by the fact that some other countries prefer to apply the method of grade retention more scarcely or not at all. However, international empirical research is not in line with the convictions of Flemish (head) teachers at all. According to these studies, grade retention does not lead to higher achievement levels nor to an increase in motivation for low-achieving pupils. Even more so, low-achieving pupils who repeated a grade have a higher risk of leaving secondary school without qualifications than low-achieving pupils who moved up to the next year. Flemish research reaches similar conclusions. Mieke Goos (*KU Leuven*), who recently investigated the consequences of grade retention in the first grade, concludes the following: “Making pupils repeat the first grade has hardly any positive effects on their further development. On the contrary, these pupils would have had better numeracy and reading skills, and would have performed equally or even better on a psycho-social level if they had been promoted to the second grade.”

¹ Calculations of Mieke Goos based on PISA 2009 data. Also: Juchtmans, G., Goos, M., Vandenbroucke, A., De Fraine, B. (2012), *Zittenblijven in vraag gesteld. Een verkennende studie naar nieuwe praktijken voor Vlaanderen vanuit internationaal perspectief*. OBPWO-project 10.02 Eindrapport. [“Grade retention questioned. An exploratory study on new practices for Flanders from international perspective”. By order of the Flemish Ministry of Education.]

The teachers and schools usually use the practice of grade retention with the sincere intention to serve the pupil's best interests. They are however unaware of its negative long-term consequences and do not know that grade retention contains a risk especially for pupils with a disadvantaged social background (low socio-economic status and low-educated parents). The discrepancy between good intentions and the actual consequences of grade retention makes questions arise concerning the concrete practices of grade retention in schools.

Therefore the city of Antwerp started with the project 'Samen tot aan de meet' (translated as "Together to the finish", but we prefer to use the Dutch abbreviated slogan 'STAM'). In the first chapter, we present an assortment of research on grade retention. On the ground of this information, we conclude that the educational practice is not as self-evident as it might seem and that grade retention needs to be contested. Therefore, STAM suggests a course of implementation in order to contest grade retention and implement innovations in education to better handle a diverse school and class population (see Chapter 3). Our strategy is to replace grade retention with other alternatives which enrich and accelerate the pupils' individual learning processes (see Chapter 2). In the final chapter of this summarising work, we shall provide two examples of how the process and ideas of STAM are implemented in practice.

CHAPTER 1:

What does research tell us about grade retention?

1.1 Introduction

Why does Flanders have such a high percentage of retained pupils? A study by the OECD (1998) suggests that this mainly relates to the fact that teachers in Flanders have the right to decide whom they retain a grade, while in other OECD-countries this decision usually is grounded on objective external measures. The OECD-study revealed that the Flemish share of retained pupils would be considerably smaller if the teachers would apply external information instead of their own subjective assessment (OECD, 1998). A large number of Flemish teachers considers grade retention to be an effective method. If they are asked why they advise some of their pupils to repeat their grade, most of them answer that the main reasons are: low achievements, a lack of school readiness, psycho-social difficulties, and a low level of intelligence (Bonvin, 2003). Further research reveals that teachers find it hard to explain to which extent each of these circumstances influence their decision. Numerous teachers state that they prefer to use their “gut feeling” as guidance for their advice. Moreover, some teachers admit that even certain aspects of the staff meetings influence their decision whether to have a pupil repeat a grade or not. These aspects include for instance: the time and atmosphere of the meeting or sympathy/antipathy towards the chairman or other participants of the meeting (Lemmens et al., 2008)

Grade retention is nonetheless a disputed educational practice. The opponents argue that grade retention does not provide any new intellectual challenges for the pupil and causes boredom and attitudinal problems (Morrison et al., 1997). The advocates of grade retention, on the other hand, argue that it is a necessary measure to prevent pupils who are behind with their studies from getting even further behind. During the retained year, pupils are able to brush up their skills and knowledge, so their future educational career is facilitated (Smith & Shepard, 1989). Furthermore, the advocates assume that grade retention enhances the self-confidence of low-achieving pupils. As it happens, the retained pupils usually have a huge head start in knowledge on their younger fellow pupils in their new class group, something which might make them feel more confident about their own abilities. Who is right in this case?

To answer this question, we consider in the next part the typical characteristics of retained pupils and the differences between grades, schools and education systems with relation to the percentage of retained pupils (1.2). The following part is dedicated to the impact of grade retention on academic achievement, on psycho-social functioning, on early school leaving and on the pupils’ future professional career (1.3). The final part of this chapter discusses the different views of pupils, parents, teachers as well as head teachers on grade retention which exist in the field of education (1.4).

1.2 Grade retention: Who? Where? When?

Here we shall first examine which pupils are more likely to repeat a grade than others. Furthermore, we shall indicate in which countries grade retention is most common and we shall offer explanations for the variation in the number of retained pupils between different schools. Likewise, we shall consider which grades are repeated most often in Flemish primary schools and why.

Who?

Retained pupils have lower achievement levels than their peers. But, they are usually characterised by several other features which are accompanied by higher risks on learning difficulties: a lower level of intelligence, a disadvantaged socio-economic background, a foreign background, psycho-social difficulties, the male sex and being relatively the youngest of a class group (Bonvin et al., 2008). In the following part, we shall discuss each of these feature with relation to grade retention in more detail.

In addition to the fact that retained pupils usually have a lower level of intelligence (Jimerson et al., 1997), they are frequently characterised by a more disadvantaged socio-economic background (Jimerson et al., 1997). Researchers concluded that pupils whose parents merely have a qualification from secondary education are 67% more likely to repeat a grade than pupils whose parents have experienced some sort of higher education (Tilman et al., 2006). Children from a more disadvantaged social background are more likely to repeat a grade, primarily because they more often display learning difficulties than more privileged children. But, even when they perform equally, less advantaged pupils are more likely to repeat a grade than their more privileged peers (Gadeyne et al., 2008). However, when more privileged pupils are confronted with the choice of repeating a grade or diverting to another track, they more often opt for grade retention than their fellow students from a lower social class. The latter usually prefer to take on a different (lower) track and consequently wind up in the so-called 'cascade'² (Kloosterman & De Graaf, 2009; Spruyt, et al., 2009; Van Damme, 2001). It seems therefore that different social groups have different views on grade retention. Pupils from a lower social class consider it to be something that should be avoided at all costs, while pupils from the higher classes rather tend to regard it as an instrument for obtaining the certificate of the school track they were aiming at.

Further research concluded that children with a foreign background generally more often have to repeat a grade than native children (Bonvin et al., 2008; Hauser et al., 2001). However, research from

² The 'cascade-effect' refers to the tendency among secondary school students to attempt a higher, i.e. more academic, level of education first and, if they fail, to transfer to a lower level.

Tilman and colleagues (2006) stated that this fact mainly can be attributed to their disadvantaged socio-economic background and not to conceivable language or integration difficulties. This research additionally concluded that the new-comers (pupils recently arriving from another country) are more likely to repeat a grade if they arrive into their new homeland at an older age. Culture-related phenomena such as integration and language difficulties emerge more regularly in this case. Moreover, children who arrive at a more advanced age into a new country commonly have obtained a considerable educational delay already, which increases the chance of grade repetition.

Another characteristic of many retained pupils is displaying psycho-social problems more often. A longitudinal study on grade retention (Jimerson et al., 1999) revealed that before the retained year retained pupils displayed more negative behaviour in class than those comparably low-achieving pupils who were promoted to the subsequent grade. The retained pupils were also significantly less socially skilled than their promoted peers.

Moreover, a significant part of a pupil's chance at grade repetition is taken by the pupil's gender. Girls repeat a grade less frequently than boys (Guèvremont et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), even when they receive comparable results (Jimerson et al., 1997). Van Damme (2001) modifies this statement, at least concerning grade retention in secondary school. He states that boys, if they have the option, for instance when they have received a B-grade³, indeed more often choose to retain their grade. Girls, on the other hand, end up in a lower educational track more easily.

Finally, several studies have concluded that there is a connection between a child's month of birth and its chance at grade retention. Children who are born in an 'unfavourable birth month' (in Flanders: November or December) and for that reason are the youngest of the class group, are more likely to repeat a grade than older pupils, even when they have equal potential (Byrd et al., 1994; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1987). The reason behind this phenomenon is that the younger pupils typically have lower achievement levels than their older classmates. This delay is probably caused by neurological and psychological immaturity. However, towards the end of the third grade the delay has disappeared completely (Shepard & Smith, 1987). Some assume, proceeding from this problem, that it is disadvantageous in each case to be the youngest of a class group. Therefore, it is often decided to have a younger pupil repeat a grade as a precaution, with the

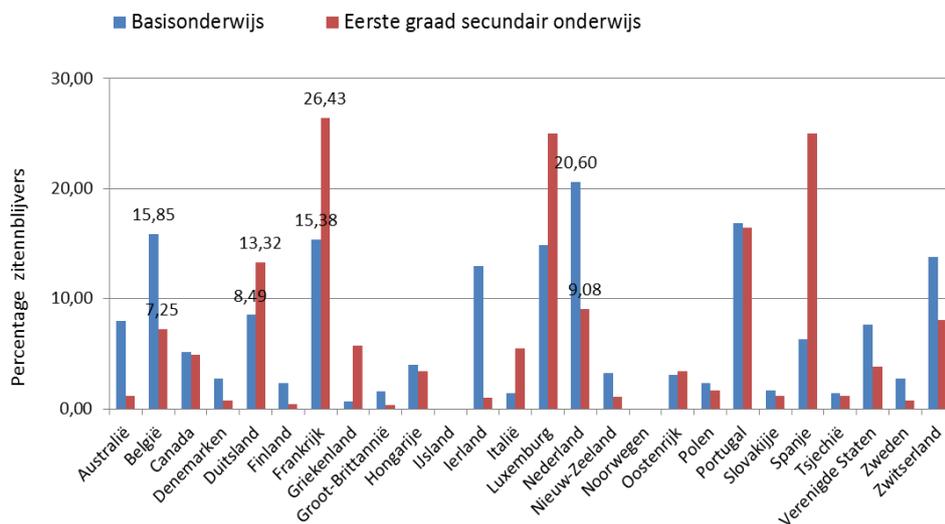
³ In Flanders, in secondary schools, students can receive three kinds of certificates (grades) at the end of the year. An A-grade means that they can pass to the next year without any conditions. A B-grade includes a restriction for some (or several) tracks and options. In this case pupils have the choice of repeating the grade in the same track and option, or promoting to the subsequent grade, but in a different option and/or track. A C-grade means the pupils has to repeat the grade.

purpose of giving the pupil some extra time to ‘mature’. While we discuss the effects of grade retention, we shall determine whether this is sensible or not.

Where?

Grade retention is not as conventional in other education system as it is in the Flemish system. In three OECD-countries, namely Iceland, Japan and Norway, not a single pupil under the age of fifteen has to retain a grade. In addition, grade retention hardly occurs in eight other OECD-countries, among which Finland, Sweden and Korea. However, in the major part of the OECD-countries, including Belgium, more than 15% of the pupils have to repeat a grade at least once in their educational career. France surpasses every other country in this perspective. At the end of their secondary education, 38% of the French pupils have repeated at least one grade (OECD, 2008). In the second chapter, we shall consider different alternative methods, which are used by education systems with very low levels of retained pupils, as to handling the diversity among pupils. In Graph 1, you can clearly see how Belgium relates to the other OECD-countries in terms of grade retention in primary school and the first stage of secondary school.

Graph 1. Percentage of pupils that repeated at least one grade during primary education and percentage of pupils that retained a grade during the first stage of secondary education in several OECD-countries (PISA 2003, Student Questionnaire).



Likewise, research results generally demonstrate that the percentage of retained pupils is higher in large cities than in the remainder of Flanders. This can partly be explained by the higher percentage of pupils with a disadvantaged socio-economic background in these cities.

Lastly, American research concludes that the outcome of the decision whether to have a pupil repeat a grade or not is also related to school characteristics (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). It appears that grade retention is more frequent in schools with only a small number of teachers, in schools with few provisions for pupils with special educational needs and in schools with few exchanges between teachers and parents (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Also in schools with a lower quality of tuition, with an unfavourable learning atmosphere and with inefficient time planning (Van de Grift, 2009). The length of time that the head teacher has been in office is also significant. Under the conduct of fairly recent head teachers there are less retained pupils than under the guidance of longstanding ones (Bali et al., 2005). Finally, there is also a connection between the size of the class group and grade retention. In smaller class groups there is a reduced number of grade retaining pupils in comparison to larger class groups. This might be explained by the probable notion that low-achieving pupils receive less attention in larger class groups and therefore are more likely to repeat the grade (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005).

When?

In Flanders grade retention for the most part occurs in the first grade of primary education. In the following grades the possibility of grade repetition declines gradually. As for secondary school the levels of grade retention are the highest in the third grade and the fifth grade (Table 2). The motives behind grade retention change as well, as the grades progress. In the early years of primary education, pupils usually have to repeat a grade because they have not acquired the basic knowledge and skills yet. In the final years of primary school though, children have to repeat more often on account of motivational, behavioural or psycho-social difficulties (Safer, 1986). Additionally, the 'early' and 'late' retained pupils differ in terms of severity of their educational difficulties. Further research revealed that pupils who retain one of the first grades of primary school usually have more severe learning difficulties than those who retain one of the final grades. In the area of behaviour and social-emotional functioning, the 'early' repeaters also display more severe problems than 'late' repeaters. For instance, the 'early' retained pupils usually are more easily distracted, less cooperative and less popular among their peers than the older retained pupils (Alexander et al., 2003).

Table 2. Percentage of grade retained pupils in Flanders per grade in regular primary education and regular secondary education in the school year of 2011-2012.

| | Primary education | Secondary education |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| First grade | 6,3% | 4,4% |
| Second grade | 3,5% | 3,6% |
| Third grade | 2,3% | 7,0% |
| Fourth grade | 1,9% | 5,6% |
| Fifth grade | 1,2% | 8,7% |
| Sixth grade | 0,3% | 3,5% |

Source: Flemish Ministry of Education of Education and Training, school year 2011-2012.

Conclusion:

In the previous segment, we discussed a number of aspects associated with grade retention. It became evident that grade retention is not only related to the pupil's achievement level, but also to context- and pupil-related aspects. It is of major importance for school staff to acknowledge these aspects because they facilitate the design of alternative methods which are needed to decrease the number of retained pupils. In the second chapter, we shall consider the alternatives which are proved to be very effective at reducing educational delay.

1.3 The effects of grade retention on pupil outcomes

In this part we shall discuss the impact of grade retention on four different pupil outcomes: pupil's educational achievements, on their psycho-social functioning, on early school leaving rates and on their future professional career. In addition, we shall examine whether the consequences of grade retention differ between various kinds of pupils. We shall also consider the effects of a retained pupil in the class group on the achievement level of the pupils who progress in the regular pace. Does this cause an acceleration of these pupils' learning processes or not? We begin, however, with an outline of the ideal circumstances in which research on grade retention ought to take place. It will enable us to interpret the following research results correctly.

The 'ideal' study on grade retention

Research on grade retention involves the comparison of two groups of pupils: retained pupils and regularly progressed pupils. The ultimate study requires a duplicate of each pupil. One copy will then repeat a grade; the other will move up to the subsequent grade and afterwards a comparison can be made between two corresponding pupils with exactly the same characteristics. Naturally, this is impossible in real life. Retained pupils therefore have to be compared to pupils who proceed at the regular rate. However, it is not advisable to arbitrarily compare a retained pupil to a promoted pupil. As it happens, these pupils differ significantly from each other, for example in terms of age, gender, intelligence, former educational achievements, nationality etc. The actual cause of discrepancy between the achievement levels remains obscure if you compare the achievements of a random retained pupil to the ones of a random promoted pupil. It is therefore tremendously important to compare the retained pupils to those promoted pupils to whom they resemble in a variety of areas. This kind of comparison can be made through the means of complicated statistical procedures. Along these lines, we are able to make a valid comparison.

Furthermore, retained pupils can be compared to their new and younger fellow pupils (*'grade-comparison'*) or to the peers who were promoted to the next grade (*'age-comparison'*). Both of these methods of comparison provide more clarity on the efficiency of grade retention, even though they both provide this through a different approach. 'Age-comparisons' offer information on how the retained pupils probably would have performed if they had moved up to the following grade. Whereas 'grade-comparisons' provide insight into how retained pupils develop with regard to the younger pupils, with whom they eventually will graduate. These methods complement each other and therefore, in this comprehensive work, we use the research results of both means of comparison.

Lastly, pupils ought to be monitored long enough in order to reach a valid conclusion in relation to the 'effects'. A teacher who has a pupil repeat the first grade will probably state that the pupil progressed in regard to the year before. This favourable short term outcome can however easily disappear in the following years. Let us assume that this boy has to retain the fourth grade of secondary school as well, which would make him an eighteen-year-old among sixteen-year-olds. This might lead to school fatigue and as a result he might decide to leave school without a qualification. The short term consequences of grade retention might differ from the long term consequences, and therefore, we shall discuss research on both kinds of consequences.

The effect of grade retention on the pupils' educational achievements

The main justification of grade retention is the expectation that it will improve pupil's achievement level. In the following, we shall examine whether or not this is the case. At the same time, we shall consider whether grade retention affects each pupil equally and whether it has any effects on the achievements of the retained pupil's classmates.

What are the effects of grade retention on the educational achievements of the retained pupil?

Studies, which employ the method of 'grade-comparison' and account for the former differences between pupils, generally conclude that retained pupils perform relatively better during the retained year in comparison to their younger fellow pupils (Alexander et al., 2003; Bonvin et al., 2008; Jimerson et al., 1997; Karweit, 1999; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Peterson et al., 1987; Rust & Wallace, 1993). However, this advantage decreases (Bonvin et al., 2008; Karweit, 1999), disappears (Alexander et al., 2003; Ferguson, 1991; Fergusson & Streib, 1996; Jimerson et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 1990; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Mantzicopoulos, 1997; McCombs et al., 1992; Rust & Wallace, 1993) or even reverses (Alexander et al., 2003; Dennebaum & Kulberg, 1994; Reynolds, 1992; Reynolds & Bezruczko, 1993) as the pupil grows older. It appears that grade retention leads to higher educational achievements during the retained year, but not afterwards.

Studies which use the method of 'age-comparison', and account for the former differences between pupils, reach the conclusion that retained pupils would have better numeracy skills if they had been promoted to the next grade (Alexander et al., 2003; Bonvin et al., 2008; Gadeyne et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005, 2006; Hong & Yu, 2007; Karweit, 1999; Pagani et al., 2001; Wu et al., 2008). The research results vary more in relation to reading achievements. The majority concludes nevertheless that retained pupils would have been more skilled in reading if they had been moved up to the subsequent grade (Alexander et al., 2003; Gadeyne et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005, 2006; Hong & Yu, 2007; Karweit, 1999; Pagani et al., 2001).

Does grade retention affect some pupils' educational achievements more than others?

Grade retention is usually the most harmful to the educational achievements of pupils who are relatively older (in Flanders: children who are born in January or February) (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Ferguson et al., 2001), of pupils who have a more disadvantaged socio-economic background and of pupils whose parents do not value education highly (Ferguson et al., 2001). Moreover, it appears that grade retention is especially harmful to boys (Pagani et al., 2001), pupils without behavioural difficulties (Wu et al., 2008) and children who already have retained a grade once before (Safer, 1986).

Several studies have examined the effects of grade repetition with relation to the grade which has to be repeated. The outcomes of these studies point in different directions. However, the majority of studies did not come across any difference in the effects of grade retention on the achievements of pupils in relation to whether they repeated a grade early or late in their school career (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009; Jimerson et al., 1997; Martin, 2009; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Reynolds, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1987; Silbergliitt, et al., 2006). Only a few studies concluded that the effects of grade retention were mostly negative when it occurred during one of the final grades (Ferguson et al., 2001; Graue & Di Perna, 2000; Hagborg et al., 1991; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Pomplun, 1988) or during one of the first grades (Pagani et al., 2001).

What are the effects of grade retention on the retained pupil's fellow pupils?

The advocates of grade retention usually argue that having the low-achieving pupils repeat a grade will be advantageous for their higher performing peers' achievements. Some fear that the low-achieving pupils obstruct the learning process of high-achieving pupils. If the low-achieving pupils have to repeat a grade, the class group becomes more homogeneous, which would allow the general instructional level to rise. Empirical research does not support this statement, however. Hong and Raudenbush (2005) examined whether the absence of low-achieving pupils affected the achievements of the other pupils, but this was not the case.

Conclusion

From the scholarly research we have discussed, it appears that grade retention is inefficient at improving the results of low-achieving pupils. In short term, grade retention seems to have a beneficial effect: retained pupils perform better than their younger fellow pupils in the retained year. Nevertheless, in the long term grade retention has a rather negative effect: retained pupils perform less well, each subsequent year, than those pupils who achieve equally low but were promoted to the next grade. The exact impact of grade retention on the pupils' educational

achievements is established by features which are specific for each pupil, namely the relative age (month of birth), the socio-economic circumstances at home, the pupil's gender and the presence of behavioural difficulties. Finally, we conclude that grade retention does not instigate a higher level of education for regularly progressing pupils.

The effect of grade retention on the psycho-social functioning

Advocates of grade retention frequently assert that it has a positive effect on the pupils' emotional well-being and behaviour. They also claim that the threat of grade retention functions as an external source of motivation which urges the pupils to perform better at school. In this segment, we shall compare the result of several studies on the effects of grade retention on the following aspects: social skills, academic self-image, pupil well-being, psychological well-being, popularity, learning motivation, aggressive behaviour, the ability to concentrate and truancy.

What are the effects of grade retention on social skills of retained pupils?

Grade retention appears to have no significant effect on pupils' social skills. Research generally concludes that retained pupils are neither more nor less socially competent during their retained year and thereafter than comparable, promoted peers (Beebe-Frankenberger et al., 2004; Hong & Yu, 2008; Karweit, 1999; Pagani et al., 2001). Likewise, no differences could be observed between the social skills of retained pupils and those of comparable, younger fellow pupils (Gottfredson et al., 1994).

What are the effects of grade retention on the academic self-concept of retained pupils?

The research results concerning the impact of grade retention on repeated pupils' self-concept vary as both groups of comparison. Studies which compare pupils' perceptions on their own academic capacities with that of their new and younger fellow pupils usually do not perceive any differences, both in long and short term (Gottfredson et al., 1994; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Plummer & Graziano, 1987; Pomplun, 1988; Shepard & Smith, 1987). However, some conclude that in short term retained pupils have a more positive academic self-concept after all (Reynolds, 1992). Other studies however find that retained have a more negative academic self-concept than their younger fellow pupils (Pierson & Conel, 1992).

If you compare the academic self-concept of retained pupils with that of the equally low-achieving peers who were promoted to the next year however, it appears that retained pupils have a more positive image of their own capacities during the repeated year than they would have had if they had

been promoted to the next year (Alexander et al., 2003; Bonvin et al., 2008; Hong & Yu, 2008). Opinions differ on the duration of this more positive self-concept. The positive images on the pupils' own capacities can last approximately two years after grade retention according to Hong and Yu (2008) and even to five years after grade retention as stated by Alexander and colleagues (2003), but then again according to Bonvin and colleagues (2008), this positive academic self-concept gradually disappears already during the repeated year. Furthermore, Alexander and his colleagues eventually conclude that the positive impact on the academic self-concept has disappeared towards the moment of transition from primary to secondary school.

What are the effects of grade retention on the pupil well-being of retained pupils?

Research has not yet settled whether retained pupils enjoy going to school more or less than their fellow pupils. Comparing the well-being of retained pupils with that of their new, younger fellow pupils, some research concludes that retained pupils find *less* enjoyment in going to school (Holmes, 1989; Martin, 2009), while other research observes that they have *more* enjoyment in going to school (Gottfredson et al., 1994).

If you compare pupils' well-being between retained pupils and that of comparable, promoted peers, there are usually no considerable differences observed (Alexander et al., 2003; Bonvin et al., 2008). Hence retained pupils would have enjoyed going to school to the same extent if they had been promoted to the following grade.

What are the effects of grade retention on the psychological well-being of retained pupils?

Research on the effect of grade retention on psychological well-being has been conducted in many different ways. Some scholars examined for instance the effect of grade repetition on the general self-image and self-confidence of pupils, while others explored aspects like anxiety, depression and stress. The research results vary considerably in relation to the observed aspect of psychological well-being.

Research into the impact of grade retention on anxiety revealed that, in short term, grade retention has no immediate effect on pupils' level of anxiety (Mantzicopolous & Morrison, 1992; Pagani et al., 2001). However, one study concludes that the anxiety of retained pupils increases as time progresses, up until they are more anxious than their comparable promoted peers (Pagani et al., 2001). Pagani and colleagues think that this might be because children become more conscious of their 'status' as retained pupil as they grow older.

Several studies have examined the impact of grade retention on the general self-confidence of the retained pupils. If you consider the amount of confidence retained pupils would have had if they had moved on to the next grade a positive effect can be observed on the confidence of low-achieving pupils (Alexander et al., 2003; Gadeyne et al., 2008; Hong & Yu, 2008). In this way retained pupils would have been less confident if they had been promoted. Studies which compare the confidence of retained pupils with that of their younger fellow pupils, however, yield a variety of results (Jimerson et al., 1997; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Plummer & Graziano, 1987; Setencich, 1994).

Lastly, several studies compared retained pupils with their new fellow pupils in the area of socio-emotional difficulties like depression and stress. From this research it appears that retained pupils display more socio-emotional difficulties than their fellow pupils (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985; Jimerson et al., 1997; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Resnick et al., 1997; Robles-Pina et al., 2008).

What are the effects of grade retention on the popularity of retained pupils?

If you compare the popularity of retained pupils to that of comparable, low-achieving peers who were promoted to the next grade, it appears that retained pupils are more popular among their fellow pupils than the promoted pupils (Bonvin et al., 2008; Gleason et al., 2007). Nevertheless, there are indications that this popularity does not last. It even disappears again during the retained year (Bonvin et al., 2008). Retained pupils would therefore have been equally popular if they had been promoted to the following grade.

Studies which compare the popularity of retained pupils to that of their fellow pupils generally conclude that the new classmates prefer to play with their non-repeated peers, rather than with retained pupils (Jimerson et al., 1997; Plummer & Graziano, 1987).

What are the effects of grade retention on the motivation of retained pupils?

Does grade retention make pupils less motivated to do their best at school? Research shows that retained pupils are more motivated to perform well during the retained year than they would have been if had been promoted (Gadeyne et al., 2008; Hong & Yu, 2008; Karweit, 1999). Furthermore, there are indications that this advantage persists until two years after the retained year (Hong & Yu, 2008). In the long run, however, retained pupils would have been equally motivated, if they had been promoted to the subsequent year (Hong & Yu, 2008).

If you compare the motivation of retained pupils to that of their new fellow pupils, it appears that they are generally less motivated (Jimerson et al., 1997; Martin, 2009).

Does the threat of grade retention stimulate children to try harder at school? Two studies have examined pupils' motivation before and after the introduction of a grade retention-policy in primary schools in Chicago. Before the introduction, the decision of grade retention was mainly in the hands of the teacher. After the policy's introduction, the pupils were obliged to reach certain attainment targets in order to be promoted to the subsequent year (Jacob et al., 2004; Roderick & Engel, 2001). As a result, the rules became considerably more strict than before and the number of retained pupils rose significantly.

The results of these studies are mixed. One study identified that the teachers and head teachers believe that pupils tried considerably harder after the policy's introduction. Pupils stated however that they were more motivated before the policy's introduction (Jacob et al., 2004). On the other hand, another study indicated that pupils stated to try harder after the policy's introduction (Roderick & Engel, 2001). Even the lowest achieving pupils claimed to be more motivated after the introduction of the grade retention policy, but in the group of less motivated pupils, there appeared to be a larger share of low-achieving pupils than high-achieving ones (Roderick & Engel, 2001).

Does grade retention cause more aggressive behaviour among retained pupils?

If children have to retain a grade, they display more aggressive behaviour than if they are promoted to the subsequent grade despite their low achievement level. This conclusion was reached by three studies which compared the behaviour of retained pupils to that of comparable, low-achieving pupils who were promoted to the next grade (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Nagin et al., 2003; Pagani et al., 2001). This increase in aggressive behaviour, however, occurs mainly among pupils who already displayed some level of aggressive behaviour before the retained year. This includes 80% of the pupils in an average class group. With children who either displayed no aggressive behaviour at all, or, on the contrary, responded aggressively quite often, there is usually no increase in aggressive behaviour after grade retention (Nagin et al., 2003).

Does grade retention raises pupils' ability to concentrate?

Or do retained pupils have more difficulties concentrating than comparably low-achieving pupils who were promoted to the subsequent year? The answer to this question remains obscure for the time being. Three studies have examined the effect of grade retention on pupils' ability to concentrate, but unfortunately, they did not reach the same conclusion (Karweit, 1999; Mantzicopoulos & Morrisson, 1992; Pagani et al., 2001). Research by Karweit (1999) and Mantzicopoulos en Morrisson (1992) concludes that previous to grade retention, repeating pupils have considerably more difficulties concentrating than comparably low-achieving pupils who were promoted. In the first few

years after grade retention however they observed no more substantial difference between both groups in their ability to concentrate. Both studies therefore conclude that grade retention has a positive effect on the retained pupils' attention span. Research by Pagano and colleagues, however, reached an entirely opposite conclusion. They observed that grade retention had a negative impact on the pupils' ability to concentrate and even that the difficulties worsened as time progresses. Children who repeated a grade a while ago had more severe attention difficulties than children who had repeated a grade only recently.

Does grade retention cause more truancy among retained pupils?

Safer (1986) compared truancy levels of retained pupils and comparable promoted peers. He came to the conclusion that, although retained pupils in primary school play truant less frequently during the retained year than their comparable, promoted peers, the retained pupils in secondary school were considerably more absent from school during the retained year.

Studies which compare truancy levels between retained pupils and their younger fellow pupils generally reach the conclusion that retained pupils are more likely to play truant than pupils who moved up to the following grade (Frymier, 1997; Hagborg et al., 1991). Naturally, the question remains (here and with some of the other 'effects' of grade retention) whether truancy is a cause or a consequence. Were the retained pupils compelled to repeat their grade because they were absent too often and do they continue this behaviour afterwards, or is the truancy actually a result of grade retention? Future research should be conducted to reveal this.

Does grade retention affect the psycho-social functioning of some pupils more than of others?

Research reveals that the effects of grade retention on psycho-social functioning are the most beneficial for the pupils who repeated one of the higher grades (Alexander et al., 2003) and girls (Pagani et al., 2001). Additional research concludes that the psycho-social effects of grade retention are the same to retained pupils whether they receive extra support during the retained year or not (Cadieux, 2003).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, there has only been carried out a very limited amount of long-term research into the psycho-social effects of grade retention. The short-term consequences which were discussed in this segment are usually either insignificant or positive in nature. The question remains whether these effects persist in the subsequent years. Do they remain the same, or do they reverse in the same way as they did in the case of the retained pupils' educational achievements? Further studies must

be conducted to reveal this. Finally, it is often problematic to compare the results from different studies because each study applies other definitions and measures of psycho-social concepts.

The effect of grade retention on early school leaving among retained pupils

Up until this point, we have mainly looked at the pupils' achievements, feelings, and behaviour in the first few years after grade retention. But does grade retention still affect pupils' emotions and behaviour many years after it has taken place? More specifically, do pupils who retained a grade in primary school experience secondary school differently than the pupils who did not repeat a grade? Research indicates that this actually is the case. As it happens, retained pupils leave secondary school significantly more often without qualifications than non-repeating pupils. An assortment of twelve studies reveals that grade retention increases pupils' chance of early school leaving with 2 to 50% compared to pupils who did not repeat a grade (Alexander et al., 2003; Allensworth, 2005; Eide & Showalter, 2001; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Guévremont et al., 2007; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007; Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson et al., 2002; Roderick 1994). Among pupils who repeated two or more grades the possibility of early school leaving is 90% higher (Jimerson et al., 2002; Roderick, 1994). Pupils who repeat a year after the second grade of primary school are also more likely (54%) to leave school prematurely than 'early' retained pupils (cfr. children from nursery school and the first grade of primary school) (Alexander et al., 2003). Critics have suggested that the higher rate of school dropout among retained pupils is not related to the grade retention itself, but rather to its associated circumstances, like for instance low achievements, disadvantaged socio-economic home conditions, and psycho-social difficulties. However, further research reveals that even when you take these circumstances into account, retained pupils still are more likely to drop out of school than comparable non-retained pupils (Alexander et al., 2003).

Consequently, the following question arises: why is there a higher rate of early school leaving among retained pupils? Which aspect of grade retention causes this high rate? The age difference between retained pupils and their fellow pupils is stated most frequently to be the main cause (Alexander et al., 2003). Research into the predicting signs of early school leaving concludes that alienation from their fellow pupils is one of most important reasons. Being older than fellow pupils often leads to a feeling of 'being different', which might not allow the pupil to ever feel completely at home in the class group. This feeling of 'Unheimlichkeit' causes pupils to search for a place where they can feel at home, and thus they might wind up in an unqualified job, or in some cases even in a criminal environment (Alexander et al., 2003).

This explains as well why there is even a higher rate of early school leavers among pupils who repeated a grade twice or repeated one of the higher grades. Firstly, an age difference of two years might cause the feeling of alienation to increase considerably. Pupils who are two years older than their fellow pupils are quite different in a physical, emotional and social way. Also, older pupils are more aware of the differences between themselves and their fellow pupils, which makes it more difficult for them to get settled in their new environment than it is for younger pupils. Moreover, friendships between pupils in the higher grades are already firmly established which makes it more difficult for newcomers to find their own position in the class group (Alexander et al., 2003). This is even harder for retained pupils than other pupils because pupils with learning difficulties derive the most of their enjoyment in going to school from close friendships (Hymel et al., 1996) and other social aspects of education (McNeal, 1995).

The effect of grade retention on the future professional career of retained pupils

Does grade retention have consequences for the future professional career of pupils? Would they have taken up a different study or practiced a different profession, if they had not repeated a grade? The answer to these questions is simply 'Yes.' It appears that retained pupils are 50% less likely to enrol for post-secondary education than comparable peers who never had to repeat a grade (Fine & Davis, 2003; Jimerson, 1999). Especially grade retention in the final grade of primary school and the first stage of secondary school appears to be connected with a low rate of enrolment in post-secondary education (Fine & Davis, 2003). Retained pupils therefore also earn considerably less on average than comparably low-achieving pupils who never repeated a grade (Eide & Showalter, 2001; Jimerson, 1999), while comparably low-achieving pupils who did not repeat a grade get paid equally at the age of twenty as average-performing pupils who did not repeat a grade.

Conclusion

This segment made clear that grade retention usually does not have the desired effects. For instance, grade retention generally does not lead to higher achievement levels, and in the long run, does not result in more motivation among low-achieving pupils. Moreover, low-achieving pupils who repeated a grade are more likely to leave secondary school unqualified than comparably low-achieving pupils who never had to repeat a grade. There is still no absolute clarity in the matter of the psycho-social effects of grade retention.

The question now is: what is supposed to happen to pupils who become entangled in the education system? Research has shown that the merely moving on of low-achieving pupils to the subsequent year is not the solution at any rate. (Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson, & Kundert, 2006). As with grade retention, merely moving on does not lead to higher educational achievement. In both cases one does not take care of the root of the problem, namely the learning difficulties as such. Children are not going to perform better if their learning difficulties are not dealt with. In the second chapter, we shall discuss several interventions which have been found to be effective at remedying pupils who fall behind in some way. But first, we shall consider what pupils, parents, teachers and head teachers generally think about grade retention.

1.4 What do pupils, parents, teachers and head teachers think about grade retention?

“I think it would be best for your child’s development if he retained this grade.” Annually thousands of parents are confronted with a similar message. But how do most parents react to this news? Do they feel angry, or sad and disappointed? Or, are they convinced of the benefits? And how does this message affect the children themselves? Are they relieved or do they dislike grade repetition, and how much? In this segment, we shall discuss the opinions on grade retention of pupils, their parents, of teachers and head teachers.

The opinion of pupils on grade retention

Shepard and Smith (1989) examined the opinions on grade retention of 71 retained pupils from different grades, by asking them the following question: “Some pupils who need more time to learn may have to retain a grade. Has this happened to you or to someone else in your class group?” Only 73% of the questioned retained pupils named him- or herself. Markedly, only 57% of the retained girls confirmed that they had repeated a grade, while 81% of the retained boys admitted that this had happened to them. These results suggest that girls are generally more conscious of the social stigma associated with grade retention, and that they are more ashamed of it than boys. Furthermore, the pupils who did not name themselves did not hesitate to name other pupils in their class group as retained pupils. The pupils who admitted to have repeated a grade were asked how they felt about it. The majority of children (84%) responded that they felt ‘sad’, ‘bad’, or ‘upset’. Some children (3%) stated that they were ashamed of it. Barely 6% of the retained pupils declared to have a positive feeling towards the fact that they repeated a grade. The other 7% of the responses could not be categorised. Hereafter, the pupils were asked whether they considered it to be a good idea to retain pupils who fall behind in class. 42% of the questioned pupils agreed with this statement. However, when the pupils were asked whether they considered it to be a good idea for themselves, the majority disagreed. To the question what they thought to be the least pleasant about grade retention, the largest share of retained pupils (22%) answered ‘being laughed at and being bullied’. The following responses were also mentioned: ‘being separated from my friends’ (16%), ‘being punished’ (14%), ‘feeling sad’ (10%), ‘getting poor school results’ (8%), ‘being ashamed’ (4%), and ‘doing the same work all over again’ (4%). Answering the question of what they considered to be positive about grade retention was considerably harder for most pupils. Therefore, 21% of the pupils simply stated that there was nothing positive about grade retention and 15% of the pupils said that they did not know. Some pupils mentioned the new friends they made (15%), the friendly teachers (5%), and some stated that they enjoyed learning more during the retained year (5%). The

rest of the responses (39%) could not be categorised and consisted of responses such as: 'The work is easier', 'I have been taught a lesson', and 'I'm doing better now'. Finally, the researchers wanted to know whether teachers used grade retention as a motivational tool to make the pupils try harder at school. The retained pupils were therefore asked if their teachers had ever mentioned grade retention when one of the pupils did not try hard enough. 70% of the retained pupils confirmed this (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

A different study into the opinion of pupils on grade retention examined whether the opinions differs according to pupil's grade (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005). This appears to be the case. In a study in primary school, when pupils were asked about their top-five of serious events that could happen to them, first-graders did not mention grade retention at all, third-graders left it on average at number four, and pupils from the sixth grade placed grade retention at number one of far most worst events that can happen at school. These results confirm that the fear of grade retention increases as the child grows older. The researchers explain these findings by stating that retained pupils become more visible to their fellow pupils as they grow older. This is mainly because older children are more aware of the differences between pupils and name these differences more openly. Impending puberty also makes the differences between younger and older pupils more apparent. Retained pupils reach puberty faster than their younger classmates, which makes them more distinct from their fellow pupils.

The opinion of parents on grade retention

For most people, the method of grade retention seems a logical remedy against learning difficulties and for remediating pupils who fall behind. Common sense often reaches the conclusion that the additional time which is acquired through grade retention must lead to an improvement of the cognitive and social skills. An American survey on the prevailing opinion on grade retention revealed that 72% of the people concerned believed grade retention to be an effective educational method (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Another survey revealed that a large amount of people is not aware of the connection between grade retention and early school leaving (Elam, 1990). 54% thought that low-achieving pupils who were promoted were more inclined to leave school prematurely than retained pupils. Merely 32% deemed retained pupils more susceptible to early school leaving. These responses demonstrate that scientific research, which we have discussed in the previous segment, have not convinced the whole of society yet. In general research concludes that, in the long term, grade retention is not effective at all, although this might not sound entirely logical and sensible for everyone.

But how do parents feel about grade retention when they are actually confronted with it? Research by Shepard and Smith (1989) revealed that parents with a lower social status are more likely to agree with the decision of grade retention than parents from higher social strata. Further, parents find grade retention to be an appropriate remedy especially against learning difficulties, but not against social-emotional or behavioural difficulties. Unfortunately, another large-scale research into parental opinions on grade retention is yet to be conducted. The retained pupils themselves, however, have been questioned on their parent's reaction to the news that they had to repeat a grade. 46% of the pupils described the reaction as 'angry', 28% as 'sad', and 8% of the pupils felt that their parents did not care at all. The remaining 18% of the responses could not be categorised. Even though these descriptions probably do not reflect parents' actual reactions, they do reveal how children interpret and remember their parents' reactions (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

The opinion of teachers on grade retention

In the introduction we have pointed out that Flemish teachers in general consider grade retention to be an adequate method (OECD, 1998). This conclusion by the OECD is supported by the outcomes of the Flemish SiBO-research (Gadeyne, 2004; Gadeyne et al., 2005; Vandenberghe et al., 2006; Vandenberghe & Van Damme, 2009). This research examined how Flemish teachers from the final year of nursery school and the first, second and fourth grade of primary school thought about several important educational issues, among which grade retention. Besides the fact that most teachers believe grade retention to be an efficient device to prevent future school failure, it appeared that most teachers do not agree with the statement that grade retention inflicts damage to pupils' self-image and results in negative labelling.

Why do so many teachers believe in 'the power' of grade retention? First of all, teachers' opinions are primarily grounded on their own experiences and therefore only on the short-term consequences of grade retention. Teachers only have knowledge of a pupil's educational achievements a few years after the retained year and, as we established in the previous segment, grade retention often has beneficial short-term effects. What happens in the later subsequent years frequently remains unnoticed by teachers (Bonvin, 2003; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Additionally, many teachers ground their opinion about the effectiveness of grade retention on a comparison between the previous achievements of a pupil and his or her results during the retained grade. These comparisons frequently lead to the wrong conclusion that a pupil's educational achievement improves due to grade retention (Xia & Glennie, 2005). However, as we discussed in the previous segment, the comparably low-achieving pupils who were promoted to the subsequent grade made equal progress or perhaps even more. Secondly, research reveals that teachers have little knowledge of the

conclusions of scientific research which proves that the beneficial short-term effects of grade retention disappear or occasionally even reverse. The fact that most of these studies are written in difficult academic jargon significantly contributes to these circumstances. But, thirdly, even when teachers are aware of the research results, most of them still do not know how to cope with low-achieving pupils. Besides grade retention, there are not many acknowledged alternative methods to assist pupils with educational delay. The teachers do not have enough time, additional aid and support by the head teacher to employ different intervention strategies (Xia & Glennie, 2005).

The opinion of head teachers on grade retention

From the SiBO-research it appears as well that head teachers, same as teachers, feel confident about the method of grade retention (Vandenberghe, Maes, & Vandamme, 2009). Most head teachers indicate that they advise parents to retain the child in the final year of nursery school when the child does not seem ready to move up to the first grade. Likewise, they recommend grade retention in the higher grades as well if they deem it necessary, and try to persuade the parents of the effectiveness of grade retention. Head teachers appear to agree less on the statement that pre-school pupils only should be allowed to move up the first grade when they are absolutely ready. Yet, they rather tend to agree with this statement than to disagree.

Conclusion

The above-discussed research into the opinion of parents, teachers and head teachers on grade retention demonstrates that grade retention is still considered to be an effective method for improving pupils' educational achievements and for coping with pupils who fall behind. However, while discussing the effects of grade retention, we have discovered that this is not the case in the long term. Moreover, as can be derived from the comments of the pupils themselves, retained pupils experience retention to be a punishment and stigma rather than a positive experience which helps them in their learning process. It is therefore urgently necessary to contest grade retention at school. In the following chapter we shall discuss several actions of implementation which are designed to help doing so.

CHAPTER 2:

Building together – The house of STAM

2.1 The Framework of STAM

Figure 1 represents the framework of STAM and its principles. The framework can be represented as a house built on certain foundations and constructed with all sorts of building blocks. The house needs all of these building blocks to remain upright. A successful implementation of STAM can only be achieved if schools succeed to create their own mixture of a variety of building blocks which accelerate and enrich the individual learning process of each pupil.

A school's choice for a certain building block in one of the domains implicates in many cases the partial or complete implementation of other building blocks. This does not mean that a school is obligated to implement each building block, but you should account for the fact that STAM can only function efficiently if a number of different initiatives are combined. It is therefore a continuous process of choosing, implementing, evaluating, adjusting and setting up new actions. As a staff team, you need a large amount of courage, time and strength to eventually reach the ideal combination which is able to anticipate the needs of the specific pupil population at school perfectly. Along these lines, the metaphor of the house makes sense: STAM has to be established on strong foundations, on which the school must place its own mixture of building blocks.

Building a house without cement would be impossible as well. This would result in loose-lying building blocks which would cause the house to waver at the slightest. The metaphorical cement of STAM is its strategy which keeps the house together and thus supports school in reaching their goals. The strategy of STAM intends to keep pupils together until the end of their educational career (or at least until the end of primary school or even until the first stage of secondary school) by enriching and/or accelerating the individual learning process of each pupil. This is our strategy and without it, the building blocks would be too unstable to fulfil their aim. The building blocks are therefore not a purpose in itself, but ways to keep a group of pupils together without anyone falling behind.

GOAL: Samen tot aan de meet

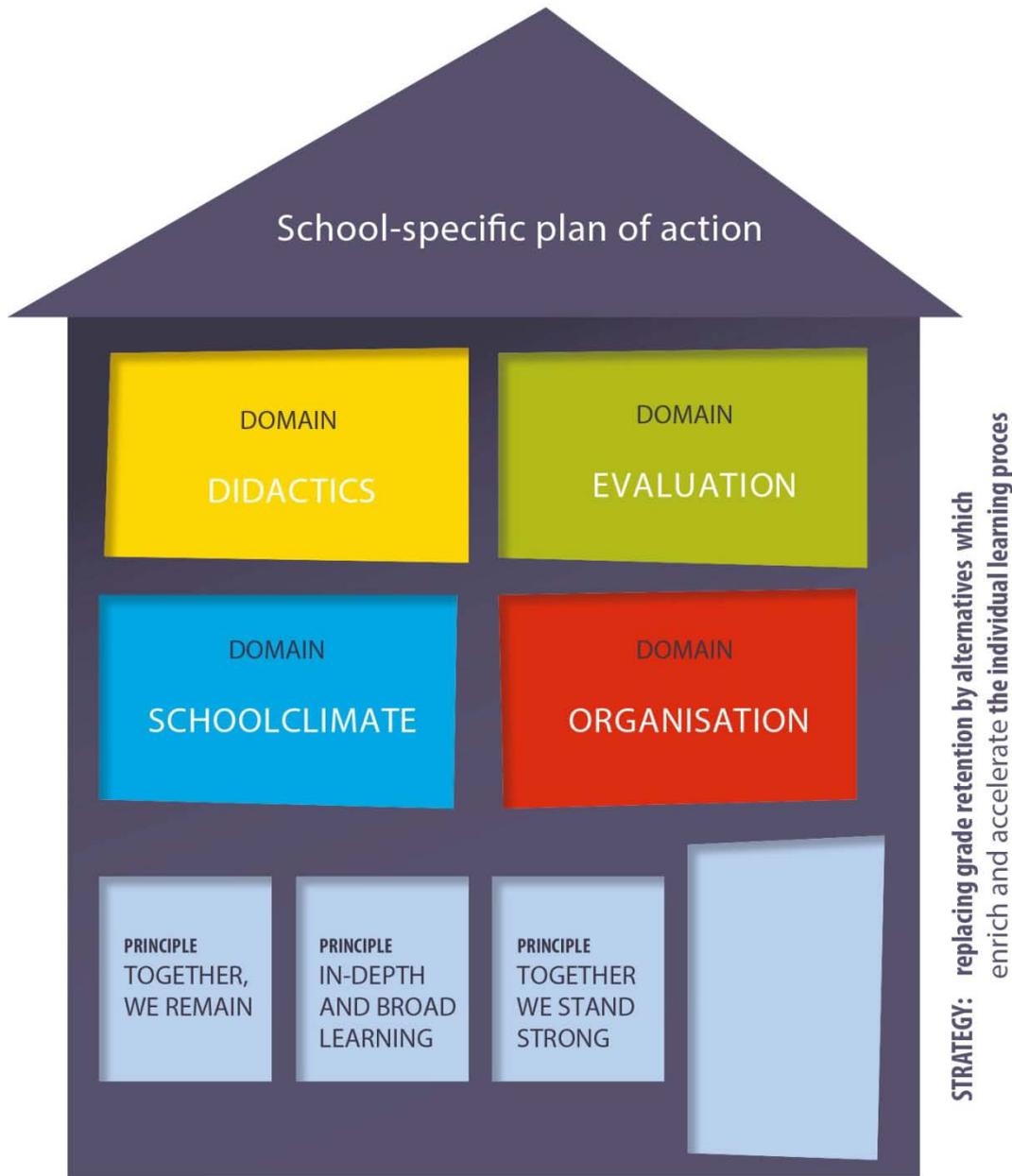


Figure 1

The foundations or principles

The foundations are the essential principles of STAM. They also constitute the touchstones for further action and demand a broad support at school.

The first touchstone *'Together, we remain'* (*'samen uit, samen thuis'*) expresses a school's commitment to settle on an uninterrupted educational career. Advising grade retention would be

perpendicular to this commitment. Schools which integrate the aim of STAM in their policy must aspire to replace grade retention in their school with more effective alternatives. They should therefore advise grade retention only in exceptional circumstances and under strict conditions.

The second touchstone *'In-depth and broad learning'* (*'samen diep en breed leren'*) articulates a school's pedagogic choice to strive for maximum learning gains for every individual child. Having faith in the progression and constant development of each child is crucial in this criterion. Every child can achieve educational progress and learning gains, can and consequently be successful. The notion of 'in-depth and broad learning' emphasises that success can also be achieved in other fields than the cognitive. How this individual progress is modelled, will differ depending on the learning domain and on the individual pupil's competences and interests.

The third and last touchstone *'Together, we stand strong'* (*'samen sterk'*) determines that STAM can only succeed when synergy is encouraged between all relevant stakeholders: the school staff, parents, pupils, other schools, the neighbourhood (societies), the municipality etc. STAM assumes therefore not only that the pupils ought to remain together during their educational track, but also that all persons concerned with their education should be involved in the process. They should all work together in a positive and stimulating environment.

The strategy

The strategy is the road which is followed and pursued by means of achieving the central aim of STAM. We choose to replace grade retention by a number of alternatives which enrich and/or accelerate the individual learning process. The replacement of grade retention does not simply imply the reduction of the amount of grade retention. Most of all, it demands a deliberate choice for meaningful and effective alternatives which would make grade retention redundant. STAM puts forward alternatives which, according to research, effectively succeed in dealing with a heterogeneous class group and in meeting with every pupil's needs.

Educational practices which try to accelerate the individual learning process, underline the importance of the development and growth of each individual pupil. Rendering pupils to develop and grow, means searching for new ways and taking initiatives to continuously challenge and stimulate the pupil's learning process. In short, having faith in the progress of each child.

The emphasis on the enrichment of the individual learning process underscores that diversity in the class group, as for educational achievement and home background, can be very valuable for the learning process. One of the main motives of teachers to advice grade retention is, after all, the notion that homogeneous class groups facilitate children's' learning process. By means of attaining

this homogeneity and consequently making it possible to uniformly teach large groups, the 'bottom layer' of the class group is often retained in primary school. In this process of increasing homogeneity, it is either the results of the average pupil in the class group or the entire school, or the expectations of the teacher or school, which determine the standard and whether the pupil belongs to this 'bottom layer' or not. Although the results are not entirely unambiguous, empirical research generally concludes that homogeneous class groups usually are not as effective as they are often considered to be. Low-achieving pupils appear to perform better on a cognitive level in heterogeneous class groups. Also, higher achieving pupils can benefit from the possibilities of using and practicing their knowledge and skills by explaining the subject matters to their fellow lower-achieving classmates. Different didactics can be used for supporting this co-operation, like co-operative learning and peer tutoring. These methods will be explained further on and have proved their usefulness and effectiveness. Pupils not only elevate their knowledge levels, but also develop necessary skills and attitudes.

Positively applying the heterogeneity concerning home backgrounds can also be beneficial as well from a social perspective. Diversity in school career, home background, religion and ethnic-cultural background is, especially in cities or metropolises, a significant matter. Education has the social task to adequately prepare pupils in such matters and to teach the pupils how to cope with them. In the short term this ought to enrich the individual educational track and in the long term result in more social cohesion. We consider the actual presence of diversity in the class group to be the best guarantee for this end.

Domains and building blocks for action

Schools can develop initiatives in several domains to accelerate and/or enrich the individual learning process. We distinguish four of them: school climate, organisation, didactics and evaluation. Limiting oneself to one of these domains is not advisable. Empirical research has revealed that choosing one domain or building block is less effective than a mixture of several initiatives which reinforce each other in order to reach the central goal. Choosing a certain initiative usually implicates other initiatives as well. For instance, choosing for differentiation within the class room directly implicates the use of another kind of evaluation. Differentiation in learning pace, content, level of processing, and through the use of aiding devices, does not work if all pupils are evaluated according to the same criteria.

The building blocks put the strategy into practice and make the realisation of our goals possible. Each building block belongs to a concrete domain. In each domain there are three kinds of building blocks: basic, additional and other building blocks. The *basic building blocks* are initiatives which can be

labelled as effective on the basis of empirical research. Their efficiency has been proven via scientific research which was conducted in a representative number of schools. The conclusions of this research can therefore be generalised to education as a whole. The *additional building blocks* are initiatives of which the efficiency is still to be fully confirmed in literature, because its efficiency mainly depends on the manner of implementation. The same applies for the *other building blocks*. These are initiatives in one of the four domains which are developed by schools, but of which there are few or no data to be found in literature on their efficiency concerning the enrichment and/or acceleration of the learning process. It is feasible that these kinds of building blocks are effective in specific cases, yet schools must be careful with the implementation of both *additional* and *other building blocks*. Before a school decides to work out one of these building blocks, they must check whether and how these alternatives can support the key strategy at their school and whether they do not oppose the essential principles. Thorough evaluation is required, especially for additional and other building blocks.

A school-specific plan of action

The selection of building blocks, the concrete outline, and the manner of implementation is managed by the school. It is therefore the school's task to adopt the building blocks to the school-specific context. On the one hand, this means that the outline of the building blocks needs to be adjusted to the concrete, specific context and needs of the school. On the other hand, the building blocks must also succeed in fulfilling the central aim of STAM. A school-specific plan of action, that puts the key principles of STAM into practice, is therefore necessary. This plan indicates which building blocks are chosen, within each domain, and why. Furthermore, the plan specifies how they intend to implement these building blocks in the specific context of the school, and out of which concrete and measurable goals and initiatives it consists. A timeline for implementation also needs to be elaborated. Finally it also illustrates how the school intends to measure and evaluate the implementation and its effects.

2.2 How to accomplish the building blocks

The actual choosing of building blocks occurs in the third Phase of the implementation process of STAM. Schools have already conducted several actions by then: mapping out grade retention at school and overturning any opposition among the school staff.

Many of these building blocks and the accompanying initiatives will sound familiar to a significant number of schools, because, after all, some schools already carry out a large share of these initiatives. If indeed this is the case, the questions can be rephrased:

1. Which initiatives have we already developed to enrich and/or accelerate the pupil's learning process?
2. To which domain (didactics, evaluation, social climate or organisation) do these initiatives belong?
3. Are the initiatives related to a basic building block (efficiency proven), additional building block (efficiency uncertain), or another building block (efficiency unknown)?
4. How can we apply these initiatives to fulfil the aim of STAM? This entails that a school must pursue an effective implementation of these actions so that they succeed to enrich and/or accelerate the pupil's individual learning process.

In the following a summary of the characteristics of each building block is presented. Figure 2 offers an overview of the various building blocks per domain of action.

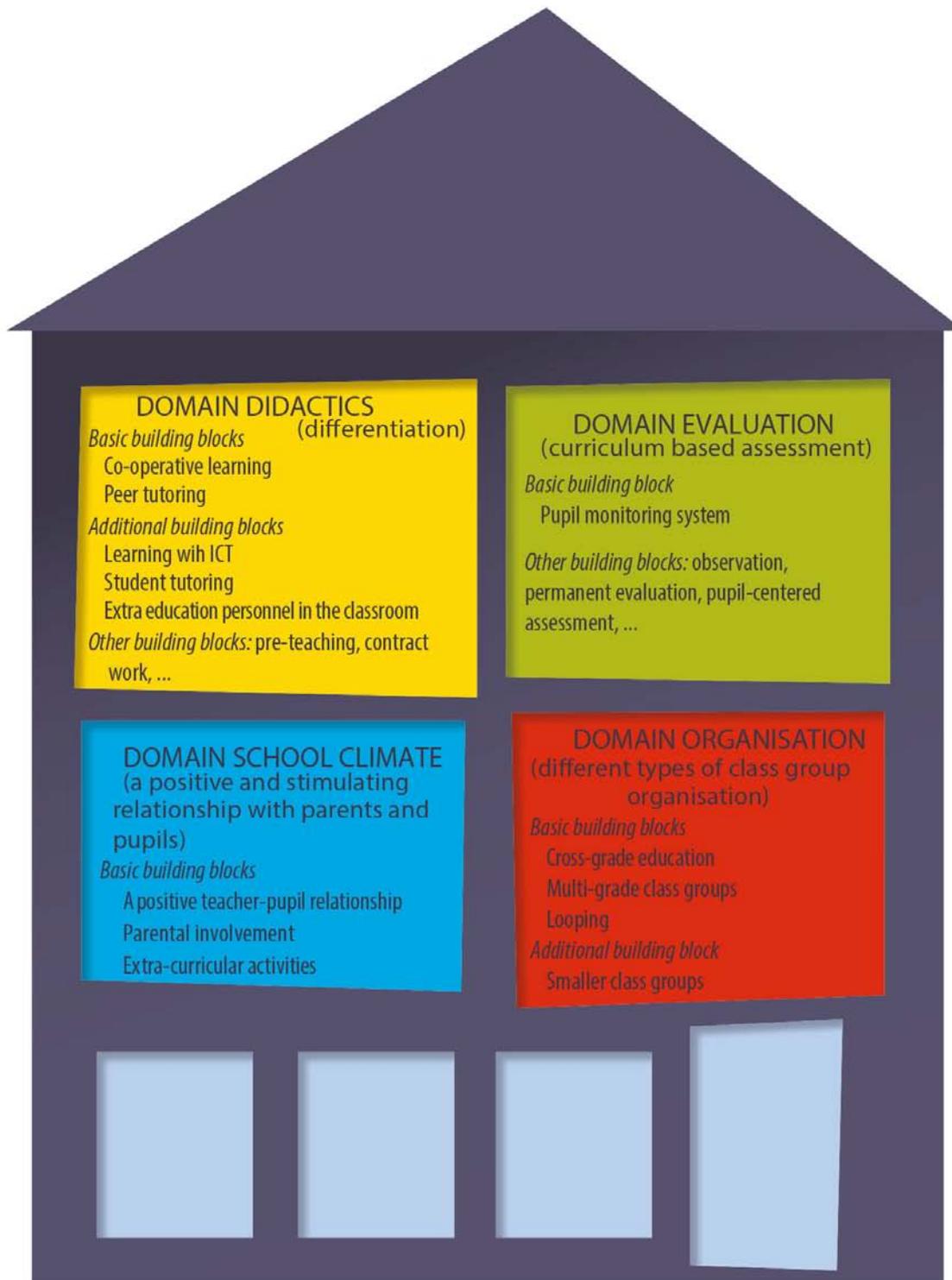


Figure 2

DOMAIN: Didactics

Differentiation is the key to this domain. After all, children can not only be grouped by their ability level, but they can also be grouped heterogeneously. Two examples of didactic methods, which optimise the learning process of all pupils in a heterogeneous class group: co-operative learning and peer tutoring. Both methods assume that pupils learn not only from interacting with the teachers, but also from each other.

Three additional building blocks (learning with ICT, extra educational personnel in the classroom and student tutoring) belong to this domain as well, because they can help teachers in differentiating on several levels between pupils in the class room.

BASIC BUILDING BLOCKS

Co-operative learning

CHARACTERISTICS

Co-operative learning entails that pupils have to work together in order to complete a task successfully. The class is divided into small, heterogeneous groups, in which pupils discuss the subject matter with each other, provide each other with information and explanations, test each other and complement each other's weaknesses.

According to research, co-operative learning only works when teachers take into account the following five basic conditions:

1. Positive reciprocal dependency: The teachers could for instance make the task complex to the extent that pupils need each other's help and efforts to successfully complete the task. It may also be useful to give each group member a specific role (e.g. moderator, reporter, time keeper etc.)
2. Individual responsibility: To make sure that each pupil feels responsible for the end result, the teacher could for instance hold back who eventually has to present the work, or let individual test results weigh in on the end mark that the pupils receive for the teamwork, at the end of the project.
3. Direct interaction: A sufficient amount of productive interaction is important. The teacher should accomplish this by not making the groups too large (two to four pupils).
4. Attention for co-operation skills: The teacher should coach the pupils in these skills and let them practice co-operation beforehand.

5. Evaluation of the group process: The results with regards to content/product and process have to be evaluated. Pupils may be involved in this evaluation, so that they can reflect upon their own role within the whole.

EFFECTS

According to international research co-operative learning leads to higher educational achievement than individual learning, if the above-mentioned preconditions are met. This applies to both low- and high-achieving pupils. Additionally, co-operative learning has a positive effect on pupils' self-confidence and social skills.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

- Pay attention to the aforementioned, essential preconditions.
- Carefully consider the group compilation with regard to the pupils' educational level. Low-achieving pupils benefit the most from heterogeneous groups and average pupils gain the most from homogeneous groups. High-achieving pupils learn as much from heterogeneous groups as from homogeneous groups. An appropriate example to satisfy the learning needs of each pupil is the creation of two sorts of co-operative groups: groups consisting of both low- and high-achieving pupils and groups consisting of average-performing pupils.
- Make sure there is a well-balanced number of boys and girls.
- Provide rewards for individual learning results on the basis of an individual report or a quiz which tests the acquired knowledge.
- An adequate management is by the teacher is necessary.

Peer tutoring

CHARACTERISTICS

Peer tutoring is an educational practice in which one pupil (the tutor) helps another (the tutee) and coaches him or her in the acquirement of a new skills or concepts.

There are three forms of peer tutoring;

- Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (RTP): the pupils take turns with the roles of tutor and tutee so that both of them benefit from the practice.
- Class-wide Peer Tutoring (CPT): all pupils in class work in pairs on a certain task, while they take turns with the roles of tutor and tutee.
- Cross-age Tutoring: a pupil from a higher grade instructs a pupil from a lower grade.

EFFECTS

According to research, peer tutoring has a positive effect on the educational achievements, school-related attitudes (e.g. ability to concentrate and learning attitudes), and the psychosocial functioning (e.g. pupil well-being and academic self-concept) of both the tutee and the tutor.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

Observe the following conditions during the implementation:

- The peer tutoring program should not last too long (approximately six weeks).
- Train the tutors in skills such as interaction (e.g. offering positive feedback) and time management, and let them acquire knowledge of the subject matter beforehand.
- Provide pairs who co-operate well with each other with a form of reward (e.g. work of their own choice when the task has been completed, class privileges or cards and stickers).
- Make sure that high- and low-achieving pupils take turns in the roles of tutor and tutee.
- Pairs consist of pupils of the same sex.
- The age difference between the tutor and tutee ought not to be too large (maximum four years).

ADDITIONAL BUILDING BLOCKS

Learning with ICT

CHARACTERISTICS

ICT (Information and Communication Technology) can be brought into action particularly to additionally support education and pupils with specific educational needs. In this way it can help the acceleration and enrichment of the individual learning process.

EFFECTS

Several positive effects can be observed because ICT can offer made-to-measure educational support. ICT can for instance increase pupils' motivation, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and ability to concentrate, make the inclusion of pupils with special needs possible, and make the subject matter more accessible.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

Learning with ICT is especially effective if:

- The pupils quietly work in pairs.
- The pupils work in a quiet environment outside the classroom.
- The educational programs supply instructions directly and practice new skills.

NOTE: Learning with ICT is an additional building block which can also apply to the domain 'organisation'. ICT can support the head teachers and teachers as well and facilitate the school organisation.

Extra education personnel in the classroom

CHARACTERISTICS

Extra education personnel in the classroom means that teaching assistants, special needs teachers and other kind of teachers are employed during class hours and in the classroom.

EFFECTS

Additional assistance in the classroom has several benefits according to researchers, especially when it concerns one-to-one tutorials for poor readers by teaching assistants. The effects are not always as positive. Teaching assistants have to be employed in an efficient manner; otherwise the effects can even be negative. The danger is that teaching assistants often pass too much time with one of the low-achieving pupils or a small group of low-achieving pupils, and as a result these pupils are too withdrawn from the conventional education system.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

If you want to employ teaching assistants in the class environment, you should try to avoid the hazards of this alternative as much as possible. The following conditions therefore have to be observed:

- Make clear agreements on the assignment and duties of the teacher and the assistant. Who is responsible for an individual pupil or subgroup and when?
- Make sure that the majority of communication between teacher and assistant takes place outside class hours. During class hours as much time as possible should be reserved for instruction.

- Determine the minimum requirements which apply for each pupil.
- Determine a fixed and written plan of action for each pupil.
- Preserve the unity between the learning objectives and strategies handled by the teacher and those handled by the assistant.
- Make sure that all pupils pass the majority of their time with the rest of the class group. Extra sessions with the teaching assistant should not last longer than twenty minutes per day.

Student tutoring

CHARACTERISTICS

Student tutoring implies that a student from higher education (the tutor) coaches low-achieving pupils (the tutees) from primary or secondary education. This happens in small groups or individually, usually at school, outside the regular class hours. Student tutoring could also imply helping pupils with their homework at home and coaching parents how to be involved in the learning process of their child.

EFFECTS

Student tutoring produces several positive effects on the attitude of the tutees. Researchers reveal that the tutees show more interest in class, absorb more of the taught knowledge and have fewer difficulties with the subject matter. Additionally, student tutoring can improve the following: the educational achievements and homework quality, the behaviour of the tutee during classes, presence at school and the attitude towards the course in which they get extra support. The tutors, on the other hand, gain insight into the way pupils assimilate the subject matter and how they can assist pupils in the best possible way.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

An effective and successful implementation of student tutoring needs the following:

- An umbrella organisation with a school co-ordinator.
- Institution-wide communication in order to create broad support for student tutoring.
- The establishment of communication between teachers and tutees, including information on the objectives and the creation of realistic expectations.
- The establishment of communication between teachers and tutors, with mutual feedback on the (learning) process.

- The establishment of communication between teachers and parents, including information on the objectives and the expansion of a participative model of parental involvement.
- The provision of a pupil monitoring system after the conclusion of the project.
- The full participation of the pupils: the lessons must be voluntary (in consultation with the parents) and free.
- Enriching assistance, not limited to the remedying of the specific learning deficit(s).
- Focus on the responsibility and self-efficacy of the tutees: the tutor must aspire to make him- or herself redundant.
- Surveillance of the tutor-tutee ratio.

DOMAIN: Evaluation

Research reveals that a school where teachers differentiate adequately, produces higher levels of learning gains for all pupils: not only for low-achieving pupils, but also for high-achieving pupils. An efficient system for monitoring pupils progress which is not too time-consuming, is thereby indispensable. The aim is to detect the difficulties of a pupil in a certain subject as soon as possible. When a pupil is in danger of falling behind, a plan of action must be established in order to accelerate the learning process with intensive and preferably individual supervision. In this segment we shall discuss one method to monitor the learning progress of pupils, namely curriculum-based assessment.

BASIC BUILDING BLOCK

Curriculum-based assessment: timely intervention in the case of learning difficulties

CHARACTERISTICS

Curriculum-based assessment enables a school to regularly measure the learning gains or possible learning difficulties of pupils in subjects such as arithmetic, spelling, reading and grammar. Consequently, the school staff should draw up an individual plan of action, which consists out of several actions to improve the educational achievements of the pupil concerned or, in other words, to accelerate and enrich the pupil's learning process.

EFFECTS

Research indicates that curriculum-based assessment improves pupils' educational achievements significantly.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

Curriculum-based assessment can be accomplished in five different steps:

- 1) Assess the learning gains of a pupil in a certain subject via a pupil monitoring system.
- 2) Search for possible explanations if the pupil does not perform satisfactorily or if he or she no longer makes any progress.
- 3) Examine the possibility of the explanations via specific tests, observations and interviews and identify the problem.
- 4) Establish an individual plan of action on the ground of these observations. This plan consists of a well-described purpose and an instruction strategy to overcome the problem. Also must

be described where and when this strategy will apply and of how much time will be assigned for this end.

- 5) Check whether the efforts produce the desired results. If not, the problem should be re-analysed and another attempt must be made to overcome the difficulties.

DOMAIN: School climate

A positive school climate is an important element in the acceleration of the learning process, especially for low-achieving pupils. International research indicates that positive relationships between schools and teachers on the one hand and pupils and their families on the other hand, can break the chain of social vulnerability. It can also encourage pupils to try harder in those subjects which are difficult for them. Literature distinguishes three factors which contribute to a positive school climate: a positive teacher-pupil relationship, parental involvement and extra-curricular activities.

BASIC BUILDING BLOCKS

A positive teacher-pupil relationship

CHARACTERISTICS

- 1) Attachment: This implies warm and open communication which offers pupils a sense of security.
- 2) Autonomy: Being too dependent restrains the pupils from exploring the learning environment and from mingling with their peers. Both of these activities are important for pupil well-being and motivation.
- 3) Lack of conflict: Disputes with teachers might cause a pupil to become less attached to the school environment and to develop a negative attitude towards school.

EFFECTS

A strong and warm relationship between teacher and pupil improves the pupil's educational achievements and consequently decreases the risk of grade retention. This is because pupils find more enjoyment in going to school, are more motivated to learn, are more ready to help each other and are more able to work independently. Teachers who have a good relationship with their pupils are more motivated as well, and they are more inclined to put a large amount of energy and time into improving their pupils' educational achievements.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

A teacher can establish a closer, but independent relationship and without conflict, by being more sensitive to the individual needs of the pupils, by observing the interactions between pupils carefully, by paying attention to pupils' views and by providing a sufficient amount of freedom of choice and movement.

Parental involvement

CHARACTERISTICS

Parents are to be involved in the education of their son or daughter, at home and at school. At home parental involvement is founded on the following aspects: interest in school matters, a positive attitude towards school, a solid and safe environment, homework assistance, parent-child conversations, language activities such as reading and high, but realistic expectations for the child's future. At school parents can show their involvement by keeping in touch with the teacher, by participating in school activities and by taking up responsibilities in the parents' committee.

EFFECTS

According to research parental involvement can raise pupils' educational achievement with 30%. In addition, parents' participation also positively influences pupils' psycho-social functioning (e.g. behaviour, motivation, social skills, the teacher-pupil relationship and the mutual relationships between pupils).

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

Frequently, schools and teachers expect from parents that they will get in touch with them if they have any questions or comments (e.g. in connection with homework). However, this threshold is often too high for socially disadvantaged parents. To bridge this gap and to increase parental involvement, schools must reach out to the parents (e.g. via house calls) and regard parents as important partners in their children's education. We provide the following recommendations:

- The pedagogical project should be emphatically brought to parents' attention, by means of involving parents as partners in guarding and improving the quality of the school.
- Involving parents who are difficult to reach into the education of their child ought to be high on the school's agenda. Schools will actively have to take up the responsibility of more interaction with these parents.
- School staff ought to work out a policy concerning the continuation of interaction with (specific groups of) parents in order to balance the education at home and at school.
- Annually, school staff ought to try to survey the opinions, expectations and experiences of all parents (e.g. via surveys and specific research into the school's image) and (try to) take these issues into account within the school policy.
- Teachers ought to, as professionals, communicate openly with all parents. This can for instance be achieved by inviting parents at the start of the school year for a group discussion,

in which agreements are made at group level on the exchange of information and opinions, and on the responsibilities of both parties.

- Teachers should get various possibilities to educate themselves in the interaction with parents so that they can interact with them as a fully-fledged conversation partner.
- Teachers should be informed at their appointment that parental involvement in school activities and in the classroom is part of the professional standard for teachers.
- At their entrance at school, parents should be informed about parental involvement and participation, and of what is expected of them on behalf of the well-being and development opportunities of their children.

Parents are more inclined to be involved at school and in the learning process of their children when they believe that they can substantially contribute to their child's learning progress. In order to avoid grade retention, the acts of the school concerning parental involvement must strive to strengthen this belief. It is therefore crucial that the school proceeds from and relies on the strengths of all parents.

Extra-curricular activities

CHARACTERISTICS

Extra-curricular activities emphasise and strengthen the non-academic and social aspects of education. In this sense, these activities can be called extra-cognitive. The activities can take place during or outside class hours. During class hours examples are: drawing-lessons, handicraft, music-lessons, swimming-lessons, quests, sports days, museum visits, school excursions, school camps, etc. Outside class hours, you can consider after-school activities such as nature and drama clubs, school newspapers and bands, and events such as school dances, school musicals, film afternoons, etc. It is essential that the extra-curricular activities are not purely considered to be something extra, but that they become an integral part of the school's education policy. They should be rightly valued as much as the activities which are essentially aimed at the cognitive.

EFFECTS

Disadvantaged pupils who participate in extra-curricular activities at school derive more enjoyment from going to school and feel more attached to the school. They also cherish higher academic ambitions, have a more positive self-image and are less susceptible to early school leaving. In short, extra-curricular activities bring about a greater sense of unity with the school. This unity can lead to a heightened level of motivation and higher achievement levels.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

- Develop non-academic activities and especially highlight those activities in which pupils exceed. In this way, each pupil gets the chance to gain successful experiences.
- Make sure that each pupil, and especially the low-achieving ones, can be included in these activities (for instance by not charging any costs). Otherwise, the extra-curricular activities will not attain their end. It could also be a means for parental involvement.

DOMAIN: Organisation

A school could operate a policy that does not shun diversity at school and in the classroom. It could strive for a heterogeneous compilation of the class group, which supports an uninterrupted educational career. A heterogeneous class group in which each pupil is challenged sufficiently can be achieved by means of: cross-grade class groups, multi-grade class groups and looping.

In this domain there is also an additional building block: smaller class groups.

BASIC BUILDING BLOCKS

Cross-grade education

CHARACTERISTICS

In cross-grade education pupils are not continuously grouped by age, but also grouped by their level of achievement. Cross-grade grouping is possible for one or several subjects. When a pupil in a certain ability group attains the desired level of knowledge, he or she moves up to the subsequent ability group. In this way, pupils can learn at their own pace, without having to retain or skip a grade. Consequently, cross-grade classes benefit both low- and high-achieving pupils.

EFFECTS

Teachers can teach groups which are homogenous with regard to ability more efficiently for certain subjects. Research revealed that teachers have higher expectations of low-achieving pupils in cross-grade class groups. Pupils can attain higher achievement levels more rapidly.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

Cross-grade education does not have to be established for each subject. It is better to only implement this program for one subject, preferably for reading.

Multi-grade class groups: pupils of several grades in one class group.

CHARACTERISTICS

In multi-grade class groups, pupils from different age groups and with various levels of ability are taught by the same teacher (e.g. fusion of two grades). Accordingly, pupils are able to develop in their own pace and also learn from children who are at another level of development. Research points out the following benefits:

- Younger pupils learn from the educational and psycho-social behaviour of older pupils.
- The self-regulated behaviour of the older pupils improves because they know they act as an example for the younger pupils.
- Imparting new knowledge and skills to younger pupils enhances the understanding of these skills among the older pupils.
- Gathering children from different age groups in the same class group increases pupils' well-being, because this type of class group often recreates the warm feeling of a family.

EFFECTS

Multi-grade class groups do not affect pupils' educational achievements directly, but they do contribute to their well-being and academic motivation. However, multi-grade classes bring teachers under more pressure because they require more planning and preparation time than same-grade class groups. For the teacher, it is also more difficult at an organisational level to divide the instruction time between all the pupils and to keep up with the learning progress of each pupil.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

Because of the increased workload which teachers have to deal with, the implementation of multi-grade class groups requires the full support of the entire school staff and additional training.

Looping: the same teacher during several grades

CHARACTERISTICS

Looping implies that one group of pupils is taught by the same teacher for a number of years. The assembly of a certain teacher with the same group of pupils for several years is sometimes called a 'loop'; hence we use the term 'looping'.

Looping can especially help teachers in becoming better acquainted with pupils and their parents. This can have all sorts of benefits. Because of the closer acquaintance, teachers are able to provide the education which suits each individual pupil and increase parental involvement. Furthermore, a considerable amount of time is gained because teachers no longer need to get acquainted with the pupils' specific learning needs and expectations at the start of each school year. Additionally, low-achieving pupils acquire more time to overcome their educational delay without repeating a grade. It often happens, in present primary schools, that teachers advise low-achieving pupils to retain a

grade because they would otherwise have to 'pass them on' to their colleague of the subsequent grade.

EFFECTS

The small number of studies which examined the efficiency of looping indicates that it produces positive effects on both pupils' educational achievements and their psycho-social functioning.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

The following points should be taken into account for implementing the practice of looping:

- The class groups should be carefully compiled and it should be made sure that the instruction style and personality of the teacher match the learning needs and character of the pupils.
- Loops should preferably last for two grades. In this way, pupils benefit from the looping, but at the same time they will not become too dependent on a certain instruction style and personality of a teacher.
- Teachers should be provided with enough opportunities to make themselves familiar with the curricula and methods of the different grades.
- Pupils should be transferred to a different loop if it appears that they do not get along well with the teacher after all.
- Looping should only be implemented if every teacher at the school fully supports this educational practice.

ADDITIONAL BUILDING BLOCK

Smaller class groups

CHARACTERISTICS

Smaller class groups allow teachers to give more individual attention to pupils.

EFFECTS

Contrary to expectation, it appears that research is not conclusive about the effects of smaller class groups on pupils. Researchers usually conclude that young, disadvantaged pupils benefit the most from class groups which comprise fewer than twenty-one pupils. Among older, disadvantaged pupils and high-achieving pupils the effects are less apparent. Researchers also notice a positive effect on

the psycho-social functioning of pupils and on the teacher-pupil relationship. Additionally, teachers are more content and enthusiastic in a smaller class group, and therefore more dedicated.

However, these beneficial effects depend greatly on the pedagogic behaviour of the teacher. They disappear if the teacher devotes too much attention to the individual supervision of certain pupils and because of this, allows a large group of pupils to work without any supervision for a long while. Teachers also pay less attention to class management and task-related interaction in smaller class groups.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH?

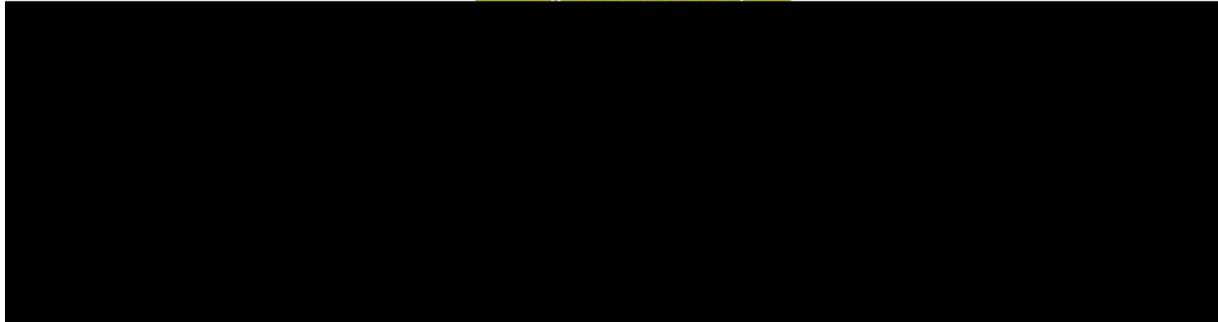
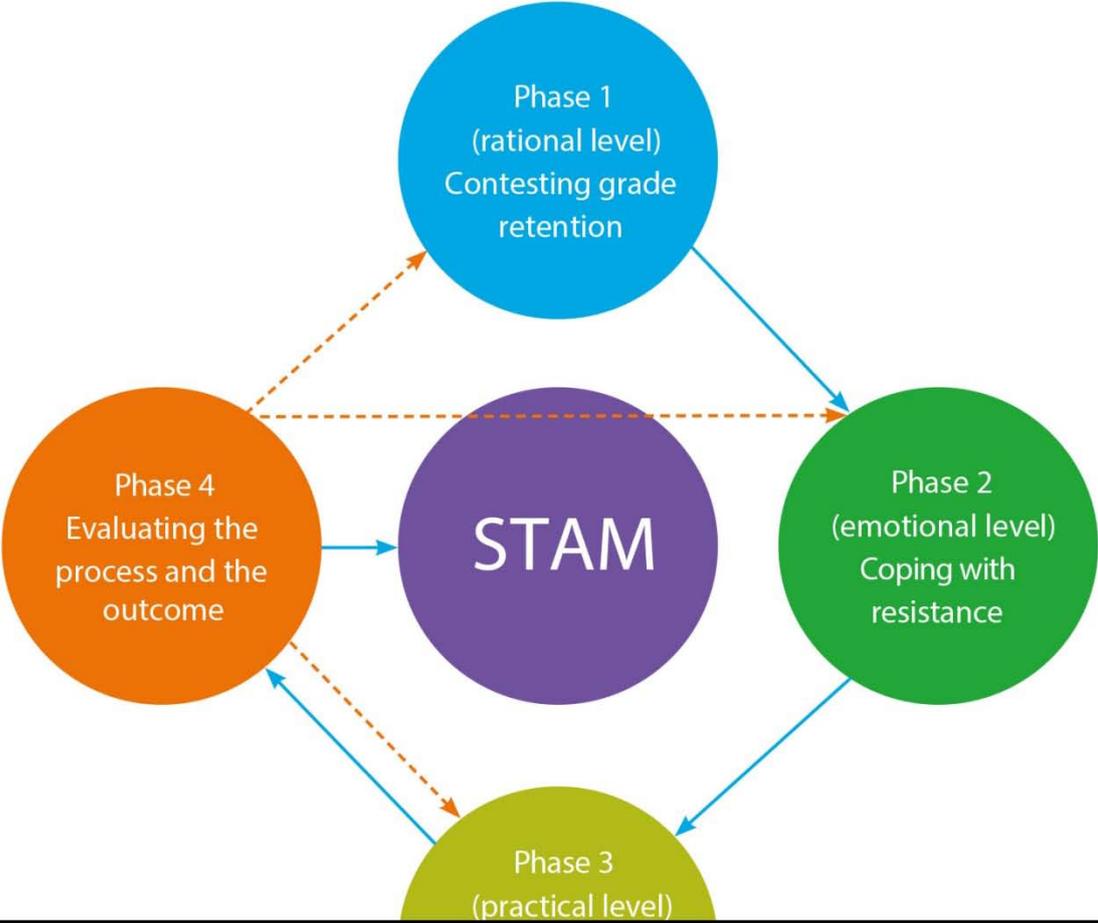
If you want to organise smaller class groups, the following guidelines ought to be considered. Smaller class groups are especially effective when:

- They consist of twenty-one pupils at most.
- They are created for pupils who still need to acquire basic skills (namely pupils in the first grades of primary school).
- There appears to be competent class management and a strict teaching plan.
- There is a balance between individual work and in-class instruction.
- There is not too much communication between teacher and pupils which is unrelated to the tasks.

CHAPTER 3:

The implementation process for replacing grade retention with alternatives to enrich and accelerate the individual learning process

STAM offers a systematic and logical approach (figure 3). We worked out an implementation plan for schools that want to convert STAM into their daily school practice. This plan consists of four phases of implementation:



Phase 1 and 2 focus on grade retention and the necessity to replace this practice. Phase 3 focuses on the alternatives and their implementation. And lastly, phase 4 pays attention to the evaluation of the entire process and the evaluation of the selected alternatives. After the fourth phase it might be possible that some corrections need to be made in one of the phases of implementation and the evaluation must show where exactly. It could be that grade retention was not, or not enough, contested among the school staff, that not all resistance against developing alternatives to grade retention was overcome, or that some adjustments are required at the level of the (mixture of) building blocks.

We should again emphasise that the concretisation of the alternatives starts only in the third phase. We have thus chosen to direct much of our attention to creating a broad support at school. As it happens, STAM can only succeed if the entire staff strongly backs the starting points and principles of STAM. It is crucial to win everyone over and that everyone enters this process together. This requires not only agreement on the alternatives for grade retention, but also the rational and emotional conviction that grade retention ought to be replaced with alternatives which will both enhance the school's quality of education and reduce the number of retained pupils.

Questioning the practice of grade retention and changing the convictions of those who are pro-grade retention requires dedicated pioneers at the start of the process. The role and task of the pioneers differs in each phase. Especially in the second phase the actions of the pioneers are vital to the success of STAM.

Before the pioneers commence the process of STAM, a few matters ought to be checked and taken into account:

1. If the head teacher him- or herself is not a pioneer: What is the position of the head teacher with regard to grade retention? How does he or she feel about the contestation of grade retention and the implementation of STAM? In case that the head teacher does not support STAM, or if he or she has serious objections against it, it is vitally important to convince him or her of the value of this process. After all, the explicit and visible support of a head master can be essential to the success of STAM.
2. If you are alone as a pioneer before the start of the program, we recommend that you look for other teachers that might be enthusiastic about STAM and are willing to become actively involved. Make sure there is a core group of people who support each other and stir each other's enthusiasm. It is thereby important for the core group to meet at a regular basis. Consider during the first meeting your place within the school (e.g. are you an outsider to the

school staff, or rather a key figure? How much influence do you have on the other members of the staff? etc.). Develop a plan of action as well. How and when will you carry out certain initiatives? Thereafter the meetings with the core group serve especially to discuss the progress, and possibly to make corrections to the selected approach.

3. Make use of the members of the core group on the basis of their strengths. Some members might have more influence on staff members than others (important in phase 2), while some members might make a good initial analysis (important in phase 1).

3.1 PHASE 1: Contesting grade retention (rational level)

OBJECTIVE: To make the school staff aware of the fact that grade retention is not a self-evident practice and that there (could) exist several more effective alternatives to deal with pupils who fall behind.

HOW: Make all parties reflect critically and enter a discussion on their (school's) own practices and views about grade retention.

OUTCOME: All parties can see grade retention as a problem and consider it meaningful to think about further alternatives.

Clarification

Research has shown that many teachers and head teachers in Flanders consider grade retention to be a constructive practice to deal with pupils who fall behind. However, international and Flemish studies into the effects of grade retention on educational achievement and on the school career of retained pupils do not confirm these beliefs. Grade retention can have a beneficial effect in short term, but in the long term this effect disappears or reverses. Moreover, retained pupils are more likely to leave school early. In this sense, the contestation of grade retention means:

- Listening to what differs from what we, as a team/teacher, (think we) know and consider self-evident.
- Questioning the effectiveness of the grade retention practice.

The current (school's) own practices and views are held up to the light, going from a critical and reflexive perspective. This happens in two stages:

1. Initial analysis: To consider the practices and views which are present at school analytically, it is necessary to obtain adequate insight into the actual practices and views on grade retention at school. The school's own practice should be scrutinised and the working points, successes and gaps should be disclosed. The goal is also to go further than the mere enumeration of the actual practices and views. Critical questions and reflexivity arise when the results of the initial analysis are brought into a discussion with, and compared to, other views and the results of empirical research into grade retention.
2. Concluding moment: This phase ends with a concluding moment in which the initial analysis is presented and the teachers unanimously make the decision to continue with STAM.

In this phase, the pioneers or core group will especially need to collect and analyse data. The aim is to obtain an accurate view of the initial situation. How many pupils are in school with grade retention? What is their profile? How do teachers support pupils with grade retention? What do the various members of the staff think about grade retention? Is there a consensus about some aspects of grade retention among the school staff or not? How do they react to research results or observations that question grade retention? In this phase, the pioneers should not yet try to adjust the convictions of their team members. They should principally provide good summaries of discussions on grade retention, a good registration of data, and a recognisable analysis which is presented at the concluding moment. Finally, it can also be inspirational or motivational for a core group to make contact with the core groups of other school or to visit to a school who already progressed further with STAM.

3.2 PHASE 2: Coping with resistance (emotional level)

OBJECTIVE: To overcome resistance with the intention of making a positive choice as to replacing grade retention with alternative educational practices.

HOW: By means of a broad, thorough and reflexive debate which further defines and explains the contestation of grade retention. The essence of this debate is the problematic link between grade retention and educational delay.

OUTCOME: The school reaches a collective diagnosis which explains why grade retention needs to be contested and why better alternatives ought to be decided on. The entire school staff recognises and supports this diagnosis, and backs the vision of STAM together.

Clarification

In the first phase we stimulated the school staff to seriously consider their practices and views about grade retention. The question is whether the mere enumeration of empirical evidence, which emphasises the harmful effects of grade retention, is enough to shake some people's deep-rooted convictions about grade retention. Nevertheless, it is of great importance to stir these convictions into motion. Researchers noticed after all that (head) teachers who are in favour of grade retention apply this practice considerably more often than their colleagues who (rather) disapprove of the practice. Convictions play therefore a crucial part. They are responsible for the fact that grade retention is such a self-evident educational practice in Flanders. If you want to reduce the number of retained pupils in a certain school, you must alter the resistant convictions which are the foundations of this established practice.

But what is a conviction exactly? The notion 'conviction' is closely related to terms such as view, opinion, attitude, values and emphasises thereby emotional and personal dimensions. People whose convictions are challenged often react with a lot of resistance or even outright confrontation, mainly because of the emotional dimension of convictions. In reverse the same applies: a conviction can be a significant source of energy which can motivate people to act according to their convictions. Convictions also have an important personal dimension because they are based on personal experiences, on the opinions of the group to which one belongs (e.g. public opinion, the school in which one teaches, etc.) or on one's own history and upbringing. People can also be influenced by other fellow human beings who are important to them (e.g. relatives, friends, colleagues, etc.). Research into the convictions of teachers about grade retention confirms this statement. Teachers are especially pro-grade retention if they have personally experienced the positive effects of grade

retention in their own practice. Memories of previous teachers, the school structure in regard to grade retention, or their own educational history can also contribute to the teachers' convictions.

Whoever believes that grade retention is a meaningful practice considers grade retention to be a solution to educational delay. According to them, grade retention provides pupils with a sufficient amount of time and enough opportunities to reduce their educational delay. The correlation between grade retention and educational delay they make, in this sense, is positive: grade retention brings about a reduced amount of educational delay and more successful experiences. We have already pointed out that empirical research weakens this argument and even completely reverses it. Grade retention is not a solution but a harmful link in a pupil's school career which increases the chances of school fatigue and of early school leaving. The correlation between grade retention and educational delay is in practice rather negative. In short, grade retention is an ineffective practice to deal with educational delay in the long term. It is even part of the problem because it leads to more educational delay and less future opportunities.

The resistance

This message against grade retention can be confrontational. Whoever conveys this message, says to teachers that their personal experiences, which lie at the basis of their convictions, are 'wrong'. He or she asks of teachers to leave the safe and familiar course. A message contra-grade retention will thus encounter resistance. The practice which always has been considered to be the appropriate method is suddenly contested. In order to alter this resistance, it is necessary to examine together what lies beneath the surface of the resistance or to make a diagnosis of the issue. Which view on education, educational delay, pupils and themselves makes that teachers keep defending grade retention, even when research results demonstrate the contrary? Which fears, lamentations and dilemmas of their daily professional practice cause them to reach for grade retention? It is indeed possible that beneath those pro-grade retention convictions lies a large amount of frustration concerning the lack of alternative methods to favourably influence the individual pupils' learning process.

After the views, convictions and feelings underneath the resistance are brought into picture, it is important to develop an alternative and collective vision on education (on learning, on pupils and on themselves as teachers). A vision with which teachers, individually or as a group, no longer feel the need to reach for the method of grade retention. This means that the teachers' professionalism should be reinforced and that teachers should be stimulated to think together about how they can fulfil their fundamental educational task in the best possible way. Making sure that each pupil reaches his or her full potential and that as much pupils as possible obtain a qualification is after all

the task of every teacher. There are of course many factors which impede this primary task, but you should strive for a vision that is based on the idea that a solution can be provided for each of these obstacles without any need for grade retention. Only when you have acquired such a collective vision, teachers will be motivated to choose, work out and try out alternative methods.

The objective of phase 2

In order to succeed in STAM, it is essential that everyone is convinced that grade retention is problematic. Teachers then ...

1. ... refuse to use grade retention as a strategy to reduce educational delay;
2. ... want to search for better alternatives to deal with educational delay.

Grade retention can therefore no longer go hand in hand with the suggested alternatives of STAM, but must be replaced by them. The alternative methods should accelerate and/or enrich the learning process of children in such a way that grade retention should become unnecessary.

The approach

Changing a self-evident practice such as grade retention requires most of all the alteration of the underlying, and often deep-rooted convictions pro-grade retention. In order to achieve this, it is crucial that these resistant convictions are heard. Quickly brushing them aside, because they might lead to conflict, is not an option.

This can be achieved by developing a strategic approach which has a broad, but in-depth debate in mind on the correlation between grade retention and educational delay. It is during and in such a debate that a change of mentality could occur.

The school must go through an intensive process to alter the deep-rooted conviction that grade retention is a solution to educational delay. It might appear from the initial analysis that the members of the school staff have divergent convictions, that some teachers doubt the effectiveness of grade retention for a certain pupil, or that there is a consensus about the inefficiency of grade retention for a certain group of pupils. The pioneers or core group must commence phase 2 with these conclusions and anticipate them.

Furthermore, you should realise that the people concerned with a certain (positive or negative) conviction about grade retention will intentionally or unintentionally use their conviction to influence others. The pioneers can do this as well. The pioneers or core group should consciously and strategically launch and test new views on education which make grade retention redundant.

Adjusting these views can be necessary to win other teachers over. The more pioneers there are, the better their convictions are adjusted to each other, and the more they believe in these alternative visions, the likelier they are to succeed. Therefore it is crucial to gather the pioneers of STAM or those who intrinsically believe that grade retention is not a solution to educational delay, on a regular basis and employ them in the long and intensive process of changing the mentality of the rest of the school staff. It is only natural that this phase can become very emotional. Patience, understanding and caution are therefore required.

The profile of the pioneers

In this phase, the key is to employ the pioneers of STAM as ‘prophets’ at the school. To effectively change the thinking and acting process of other people, pioneers must have certain competences, which make them able to influence prejudices and deep-rooted convictions:

- They should be capable of launching an alternative vision which, on the one hand, suits the principles of STAM and, on the other hand, meets with enough resonance from the school staff. In order to achieve this, you should try to phrase the vision in such a way that it corresponds to the vision of the school or to the prevailing values, convictions, practices and experiences in the school, so that it remains recognisable. Something which is recognisable can more easily motivate other teachers.

For example: A certain school has worked out a vision in which pupils are provided with an appropriate amount of care and are allowed to develop in their own school as much as possible (instead of directing them to special education for instance). This corresponds with the touchstone of ‘in-depth and broad learning’ which places ‘faith in the progress of each child’ at the centre of its vision. The school’s vision of care and the principle of STAM can subsequently be brought together in an alternative vision. The school could for instance consider an ‘inclusive vision’ on education wherein the school chooses to keep pupils together and challenge them at their own level in all sorts of educational domains. Grade retention does not match with this vision because it excludes certain pupils and also does not offer the appropriate care (i.e. pupils study the same subject matters all over again). If the initial analysis shows that the advisements of grade retention leads to a large number of parents enrolling their child in another school, one can question whether these advisements go against both the prevailing vision of the school and the ‘inclusive’ vision on education.

- They should be able to rephrase the prevailing convictions about grade retention or redefine grade retention all together. Hereby it helps if the pioneers use their own personal

experiences, experiences of other teachers or school-related examples. Gently countering decisions of grade retention and suggesting alternatives, makes other teacher reflect on the practice. As we said before, patience, understanding and caution are required.

For example: It appears from the initial analysis that pupils with special needs in the third year of nursery school often repeat a grade on account of a lack of school readiness. This is by no means coincidental. The teacher of the third year of nursery school is convinced that grade retention is the best solution to the lack of school readiness. The initial analysis also reveals that in the first or second grade these pupils face a substantial educational delay once more. The result is that these pupils have to repeat yet another grade or are advised to enrol in special education. During a staff meeting one of the pioneers asks the question whether it had been a good idea to advise these pupils to repeat a grade in nursery school and whether or not it would be sensible to consider other options to deal with a lack of school readiness. This comment provides the teacher of the third year of nursery school with thought. Her view on grade retention starts to shift. Together with some of her colleagues, she is prepared to think about alternatives which can take care of a lack of school readiness.

- They are able to merge the existing convictions, which suit each other, but not yet have been joined, into one co-ordinating conviction. The more inclusive and flexible a vision is, the higher the chance that everyone will accept it.

For example: in the first example the school's vision and the principle of 'In-depth and broad learning' were united and fit into an inclusive vision on education.

- They have a certain position of authority at the school, because the other people concerned should feel that they can rely on them.

It is not advisable to choose a top-down strategy in which you would try to enforce support for the philosophy of STAM. It is more important to make the teachers enthusiastic about a vision in which they are able to believe. The key is that the people concerned will realise that the changes, to which this new vision will lead, will benefit both pupils and teachers and will enable everyone to make learning gains. As mentioned before, however, the support of the head teacher is of great consequence. The head teacher can after all use his or her formal position to influence the process. But, next to the role of the head teacher, do not underrate the role of small groups of teachers (e.g. special needs provision, deliberations between teachers of the same grade or stage, project groups, etc.) and other groups (parents' council, exchanges between teachers from different schools, the school board). These groups can play a significant mediating role by encouraging each other, overturning resistant opinions and questioning prevailing prejudices and convictions.

3.3 PHASE 3: Selecting, outlining and implementing the building blocks (practical level)

OBJECTIVE: To choose building blocks which enrich and accelerate the individual learning process and to devise a school-specific plan of action.

HOW: The school should devise a step-by-step approach of realistic initiatives to approximate the ideal school where grade retention is no longer necessary (appreciative inquiry), starting from the good, prevailing practices and the ideas of what the school and teachers need to realise their ideal school.

OUTCOME: The school has developed a school-specific plan of action which combines basic, additional and other building blocks from different domains, on the basis of the initial analysis (phase 1), the diagnostic framework (phase 2), and the appreciative inquiry from this phase. This announces the actual launch of STAM!

Clarification

The selection of building blocks is a phase in which many partners could and should be involved. Not only the (head) teachers are able to reflect upon a new pedagogic vision, but parents and pupils can make interesting contributions as well. Within this phase it is of major importance to gain the support of all the people concerned by giving everyone the opportunity to express their opinion. The school and its staff went through the first two phases of STAM successfully and as a result, the time has come to carry out this vision of STAM to all stakeholders.

This can only be effective when the entire school staff (or at least a large part of it) supports the idea of STAM and carries out the message. Only then the involvement of parents and pupils can be successful and can be avoided that the program encounters a great deal of resistance among parents and pupils. It is hereby necessary to bring the message to parents and pupils in a positive manner. Focus on the fact that the school has chosen to improve the educational quality and therefore wants to implement several innovations. If the positive communication towards the parents and pupils focuses on the need to enrich and accelerate the learning process of each pupil so that they all, without exception, can reach their full potential, the possibility of determined resistance among parents and pupils is rather small. Try therefore to focus less on grade retention itself, but focus rather on the enrichment and acceleration of each pupil's learning process. Parents and pupils who

have been confronted with grade retention before may react sharply to the research results concerning grade retention.

In the following we will present the method of the appreciative inquiry. This method which exists of four steps will be used to select, outline and implement building blocks at school.

Appreciative Inquiry – step 1: DISCOVERY - Exploring existing good practices at school. Where have we been successful in the past?

The purpose of this segment is to find a connection with a real and positive moment from teachers' individual experiences. Building upon personal successful experiences corresponds to what teachers are already acquainted with, to their already established competences and to those actions which they know to be successful.

Course

1. Teachers must answer the following question individually. Ask them to note down their findings.

'Give an example of an action which you have taken in your classroom, and which has succeeded to accelerate and/or enrich the learning process of one or more pupils.'

If necessary, postulate some extra questions to facilitate their search for concrete actions from their own practice:

- When did this happen?
- Did your action help one or several pupils?
- What did you do exactly?
- Did you receive any help or support from someone else?
- What was the effect? How did it make you feel?
- What made this action successful? In other words, what exactly did you do that accelerated and/or enriched the learning process of one or more pupils?
- ...

NOTE: Explain, if necessary, what we mean by the acceleration and enrichment of the learning process (See Chapter 2). Mention why grade retention does not belong here. It might be difficult for some teachers to name concrete examples or actions. Point out that they should look for an action of which they are proud, or a different approach which made a pupil understand the subject matter better. They can of course indicate more than one action.

2. Dialogue: each teacher relates his or her concrete action to another teacher (and vice versa). Prepare a brief report which describes the action, at the end of the conversation. (In small teams this stage could be omitted.)
3. Each pair (or individual teacher) shares its actions with the whole group. The moderator of the discussion (e.g. the head teacher, one of the pioneers or an external person) tries to put the actions, which have been presented in the dialogues, in order according to the framework (i.e. the house of STAM) of building blocks in the four domains (didactics, evaluation, social climate and organisation). For this purpose it is advisable to draw the house of STAM (for instance on a large sheet), divided into the four domains.
Arranging the actions on the level of the building blocks is unnecessary. Observe whether some of these actions recur and try to figure out why these actions accomplish to accelerate or enrich the individual learning process. Examine thus if there are actions which have led to successful experiences with several teachers. Find out whether these actions, which have been brought into the group by the teachers individually, are once-only initiatives or embedded structurally in the school week or school year.
4. Final stage: What do you take along from this discussion for your own educational practice? It is important to put into words some sort of conclusion at this stage. Notice, on the sheet with the framework of STAM, in which domains the most actions are formulated. Are there domains in which there are recorded hardly any successful actions? In short, in which domains are your actions plenty and frequent, and in which domains have you had less success?

NOTE: Make sure that a report is compiled of this meeting and that everyone receives this report as soon as possible.

Appreciative Inquiry – step 2: DREAM – Where do we want to go?

The purpose of this segment is to envisage the desired future, together as a team. The intention is that the members of the staff unleash themselves during the visualisation of what, according to them, their ideal school could/should look like. At this stage, you should try to think outside the box. In the subsequent segment these visions will be brought back to reality, but in this segment all restraints are shaken off.

Course

1. Each teacher must reflect individually upon the following question: *'Imagine if there were no restraints as for money, personnel and other resources. In this way, you could make any suggestion that occurs to you. Bearing this in mind, how does the ideal school look like according to you? In this ideal school, the school staff can accelerate and/or enrich the individual learning process of EVERY pupil to the maximum, so that all pupils can reach the end of their educational career together.'*

NOTE: Give them a sufficient amount of time to note down the different aspects of the ideal school in detail.

NOTE: Ensure that teachers reflect exclusively upon the ideal school which serves the learning process of pupils. Ideas such as *'a staff room furnished as a lounge with a fully automatic coffee machine'* do not belong here. A more appropriate example would for instance be *'a staff room with adequate ICT support for the teachers'*, if this is deemed necessary for the acceleration and enrichment of the pupils' learning process.

Additional questions to support the thinking process:

- How would your daily schedule look like?
- How would you evaluate the pupils? How would the school report look like?
- How would the pupils' time table look like?
- What would be the head teacher's role?
- What would be the role of the class teacher or the special needs teacher?
- What kind of extra training would you need?
- How would the classrooms, the playground and the other places at school look like?
- What partners would you need to achieve these ends (from inside and outside the school)?
- What would be the relationships with parents and pupils?
- What kind of additional resources would you need?
- What materials/facilities would you need that are not available to you yet?
- ...

2. Dialogue: teachers discuss their ideas in pairs of in small groups and make a brief summary.
3. Each pair or group presents its vision for the future in front of the entire group. The moderator of the discussion (the head teacher, one of the pioneers or an external person) notes down every idea on a blackboard, a computer with beamer, large sheet or something else, so that everybody can see the summary.

4. Final stage: Link the answers to the domains and building blocks of STAM. Go over the answers from this visualisation stage with all the people present. Consider hereby the various domains and building blocks of STAM: for which of these is it hard/easy to envision a future?

NOTE: The moderator (in consultation with the group) could link the different answers to the domains and specific building blocks of STAM while each pair presents its vision for the future to the rest of the group. If this seems too difficult, it might be useful if one of the pioneers wrote down and structured all the answers in the framework/house of STAM, before presenting them to the school staff.

NOTE: To set a more elaborate discussion going, you could use the background information of the first publication of STAM (see Chapter 2) on the alternatives, and start a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. Initiatives from STAM which were not spontaneously suggested by teachers can be discussed as well. The question then becomes: *'Does this initiative fit in your vision for the school's future (as well)? Why (not)?'* This discussion sheds light on the thoughts of the different parties on the specific building blocks.

Appreciative Inquiry – part 3: DESIGN innovation – To what do we dedicate ourselves?

The purpose of this segment is to choose the building blocks to which the school wants to dedicate itself. This happens at the basis of the initial analysis and the previous parts of the appreciative inquiry. Here it is the task of the pioneer(s) to make a synthesis of the preceding stages. In this synthesis, the input of all the people concerned is collected. If parents (and pupils) went through the appreciative inquiry as well, their input can be compared to the input of teachers. The summary on the basis of the house of STAM with the domains in which there have been successful experiences (the situation 'as is' from part 1) should be compared to the ideal which everyone wants to achieve (the situation 'to be' from part 2). The intention is to gradually come closer to the ideal from the second part and this on the basis of realistic and implementable steps. From the synthesis of the two previous stages can be deduced which existing actions can be accommodated within the framework of STAM, which can be implemented at short notice, and which building blocks have a broad enough basis to be deployed in the long term.

Course

1. Organise a meeting with the school staff (perhaps with parents and a selection of pupils as well). At first, let everyone get individually acquainted with the synthesis of the previous stages. Then, the staff members or partners should do the following:

- Write down three initiatives/actions from the synthesis of in which you personally think the school should dedicate itself in order to accelerate and enrich the learning process (supported by the initial analysis of phase 1 and the diagnosis from phase 2) and to make grade retention redundant. At this stage, you should determine your priorities.
- Subsequently, note down three initiatives/actions from the synthesis which you consider to be easily implementable: *'Which actions could we actually already start to implement tomorrow?'*

NOTE: This can be assigned as homework as well, because it requires a lot of thought. Ask everyone to motivate their choices.

NOTE: The domains and building blocks in which the school already has had many successful experiences and in which teachers have a sense of expertise, are probably the easiest to accommodate or to realise at short notice by the entire team.

2. Make groups of three to four persons (if parents and pupils are present, the groups ought to be mixed). Everyone presents their findings to the group, after which the group makes a list of priorities in consensus. The group formulates both **five concrete actions** which are easily implementable and which the staff should actually start the following day, and **a list of three prior building blocks** which they consider to be necessary in the process of STAM.
3. Each group presents the consensus they have reached to the entire group. All of the concrete actions and lists of priorities should be written down on a large sheet or blackboard so that you prepare a summary of all the initiatives to which the members of the school staff attaches importance.
4. If you feel that there is a broad consensus between all partners and staff members, choices can be made. A mixture of building blocks can be selected, with concrete actions in the margin which are easier to implement. Bear in mind that the selected building blocks can have implications for existing practices in other domains. Try to name these implications and discuss them.

NOTE: This process can also be done in group by providing all teachers with stickers in two different colours (minimal three stickers of each colour, but not too many). Ask teachers to individually mark the initiatives/actions in one colour of which they think are a priority and can be implemented more

or less easily. The second colour are for those actions of which teacher individually think they are vital for the school and to the objectives of STAM, but more difficult to implement.

NOTE: If there still exists a large amount of disagreement, it is advisable firstly to discuss these matters again in smaller groups (e.g. during a meeting between special needs teachers, a meeting between teachers of the same grade or stage, during project groups, etc.). At a certain point, however, decisions must be made. The length of this process is very school-specific.

Appreciative Inquiry – part 4: DELIVERY – Work out a school-specific plan of action to implement the educational innovations

In the last stage of the appreciative inquiry, we want to find out how the selected mixture of building blocks and initiatives can be implemented in the school. At this stage, the educational innovation can start off.

Course

1. Establish three working groups which, for a longer period of time, will attempt the implementation of one of three selected building blocks and hold the responsibility for its success. Via the pupils' council or in-class discussions, pupils can be consulted as well. Provide teachers (parents and pupils) with the choice as to which working group they join. In this way, the most motivated teams are put together. During the first meeting, each working group must tackle the following question and try to reach concrete points of action:

'How should we develop or organise this building block so that it accelerates and/or enriches the individual learning process? What circumstances and essential preconditions should be observed for this end?'

Answer the following questions for each building block in your plan of action:

- What concrete actions are needed?
- Are there any actions which have been described as 'easily implementable'? Start with these.
- What do we mean to achieve through the various actions?
- How do we want to achieve these objectives? And when?
- Which persons or groups should be involved? How shall we involve them?

- What are the expected effects of the action? (e.g. the reduction of grade retention with 50% in four years)
- Are there any points of contact with the other work groups and the other selected building blocks?

NOTE: Schools which have a tradition of parental involvement with relation to pedagogic decisions can include parents in these work groups as well.

2. Make sure that the working groups report to the entire school staff on a regular basis (e.g. by making it a fixed point on the agenda of staff meetings). Ask the groups to formulate their points of action as concrete and measurable (i.e. clear and unambiguous) as possible. This facilitates the evaluation process afterwards.

NOTE: The objectives should be described in a 'SMART' way. Each objective should be:

- **Specific:** Is the objective unambiguous?
- **Measurable:** Under which (empiric/measurable) circumstances are the objectives met?
- **Acceptable:** Is the objective acceptable for everybody?
- **Realistic:** Is the objective not too idealistic?
- **Time span:** When (in time) do we aim at reaching the objective?

3.4 PHASE 4: Evaluating the process and the product

OBJECTIVE: To evaluate the implementation and the effects of STAM in order to confirm and strengthen the initiatives which are going well and to adjust what is going less well.

HOW: Via a process evaluation (i.e. a continual evaluation, directed at the implementation) and a product evaluation in the course of time (i.e. a measurement of the effects, directed at the outcomes).

OUTCOME: A clear overview of what works and accordingly should be strengthened, what needs to be adjusted and what has to be dismissed.

Clarification

Continual evaluation or constant monitoring is needed as soon as the program of STAM starts off in schools. This is what we call process evaluation. How do people involved get going? What are their experiences with STAM? Where do difficulties occur during the implementation? How are new teachers introduced into the developed framework and plan of action? *The questions* of the process evaluation are meant to keep the discussion going on the experiences of STAM of the school staff and other people involved. Intervening alterations to the school-specific plan of action can be made on the basis of this evaluation. In the course of time (e.g. after two years) a product evaluation should be carried out. A product evaluation is similar to the initial analysis. The purpose of the product evaluation is to provide schools with the tools to measure the effects of STAM. Has the amount of grade retention in fact decreased and has it been replaced by alternatives without a loss of educational quality and a lowering of pupils' educational achievements?

CHAPTER 4:

Two practical examples of STAM

“De Dageraad”: Step-by-step learning to work more self-regulated

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| DIDACTICS | EVALUATION |
| SCHOOL CLIMATE | ORGANISATION |

“De Dageraad” is a school for nursery and primary education in the popular Antwerp neighbourhood Zurenborg. As a result of this neighbourhood’s popularity, its house prices have risen considerably in the last few years and consequently there are fewer inhabitants with a foreign background in the area around the school compared to other surrounding neighbourhoods. “De Dageraad” is primarily a reflection of the neighbourhood’s population, but also enrolls children from the nearby and more multicultural neighbourhoods, such as Borgerhout. Especially the head master Koen De Dapper and the special needs co-ordinator Katrien Scheltjens have set the educational innovation within the school going. They will both therefore share with us what has happened within their school in the past few years.

Educational innovation: what do we need to change?

The educational innovations which have been carried out in the past few years in the school “De Dageraad” are the results of the vision that all pupils deserve equal educational opportunities. It all started three years before, when the school formulated a new plan to give equal opportunities for pupils with special needs. The staff decided on prevention and remedy, alongside socio-emotional development. They therefore searched for ways to put this decision into practice. The seed for change had been planted, but how they intended to put their ideas into practice was still more or less unclear.

Seeking inspiration, the teachers visited other schools, with a camera at hand. The following day a one-day educational seminar took place. On this day each teacher had the opportunity to tell what they had learned from the visit. Nobody felt that they had found exactly what they were looking for.

Koen and Katrien: “We didn’t have a ‘wow’ moment anywhere. But when everyone shared their stories, experiences, ideas and pictures, a broad range of ideas were created. Not only the initiatives we were at first intended to visit were taken along. Other ideas also lingered and inspired us. I think visiting other schools was very productive.”

Each idea was put onto a card with a picture on one side and a small text on the other side, to bring some order in the multitude of ideas. These cards were hung up in the staffroom. The head master

then talked to all teachers in small groups to make sure that everyone would get a chance to ask questions and to express their opinions. A synthesis of these talks was given at the staff meeting. From the synthesis appeared that the teachers especially wanted to find a way to differentiate between pupils within the classroom, so that they could develop the potential of every child to the fullest.

To make this possible, they decided to focus more on independent learning: while a number of pupils work independently, other children can receive the specific help they need. Additionally, the children who do not need extra instruction can proceed independently (and more rapidly). This form of teaching offers the possibility to operate preventively as well. Teachers can instruct pupils in small groups or even individually.

In practice, they decided to introduce task boards in nursery school and in the first two years of primary school. This was a concept which they had seen in other schools. These boards visually represent the pupils' daily tasks. They also planned to introduce contract work (i.e. agreed assignments) on a daily basis as from the third year, and to expand this gradually to the sixth year, where the pupils are expected to be able to plan their own tasks more independently on a weekly basis.

Implementation: a challenging process

The introduction of task boards went fairly effortless in the first two years of primary school, because they already had been working in that direction for a while. In the other years, the school management and the teachers were still looking for the best way to implement a form of independent learning. Several possibilities were experimented with in the classroom, but not everything went exactly as anticipated. It became clear that they needed a better-phased and more collective approach. First of all they had to devise a clear-cut system of independent learning, before they would be able to differentiate. The school gradually developed a more unambiguous approach, through frequent deliberation and better communication between teachers.

Presently (school year 2012-2013), the implementation is about to be completed and the operation is frequently evaluated by the entire staff. This school year the head master is going to visit every classroom in order to check whether everyone respects the agreements, so that the members of the staff remain on the same frequency. The head master will also make suggestions to improve the process. The approach might function well in the classroom, but you should make sure that the entire school remains on the same level.

Koen and Katrien: *“You feel that it’s necessary to keep the discussion going, otherwise some of the important elements could fade away. Since the beginning of the third year, such discussion moments were a fixed point on the agenda: they became part of the process.”*

For teachers who just recently started, this way of teaching is not evident. Often, they have been instructed to teach in a more traditional way. It is therefore the responsibility of the entire school staff and especially of the co-ordinator who acts as a tutor to newly-qualified teachers, to guide these new teachers well, and to teach them the current methods as soon as possible.

Creating support for innovation is a requirement for success

At first, they did not pay much attention to the creation of broad support among all partners, mainly because of the fast and rather fragmented implementation. Some pupils indicated that the new method occasionally went too fast for them and that they did not fully understand its purpose. The new method caused some difficulties, especially among the older pupils. They had not been taught to cope with the responsibility of independent work. Not all pupils become skilled at independent learning at the same pace. Some children therefore had to be assisted more intensively by means of more structure and additional help with their task planning. Meanwhile, clear guidelines were drawn up by the school staff on the assistance of pupils who had difficulties (learning to) plan independently.

Moreover, the new method was discussed at a meeting of the parents’ council, to broaden its support among parents as well. The school staff explained why they had chosen this new approach. Some parents, who noticed the initial chaos, complained that they did not fully support this new vision and practice. After a while the complaints gradually subsided, because the staff dedicated itself more to open communication between them and the parents. The new method also started gradually to demonstrate its advantages.

Koen and Katrien: *“Parents worried for instance about certain details of the implementation of the system, which affected their children. Because of this, they sometimes object to the entire system. If the parents have questions, it is therefore important to observe their concerns and to communicate with them.”*

The school staff now clearly communicates the new method to new parents at the introductory meetings. Beside the structure of nursery school, the structure of primary school is presented as well, so that parents are fully aware of what they are choosing for.

Independent and self-regulated work

To create more room for independently working pupils, the school decided to invest in *additional classrooms*. Per stage an additional room was created with direct access to the classrooms. A considerable advantage of these rooms is that it provides a calm and quiet place for every pupil. The teacher for instance firstly introduces new teaching content in class or in a smaller group and thereafter pupils can start on their independent tasks, individually or in groups. During group tasks the groups can separate themselves in the additional classroom as to not disturb the other pupils or, the other way around, pupils who are working independently can find a quiet place in the additional classroom while the other pupils receive further, extended instruction. Pupils who completed their independent task early can relax in the additional classroom as well, with for instance a book, comic books or a creative activity. The creation of additional classrooms provides more opportunities for active and differentiated learning.

The independent and self-regulated work is built up and taught slowly through primary school. Individual and in-group independent work is gradually inserted into the most subjects. It is important that pupils steadily become more responsible for their own learning process. The pupils are expected to become skilled at independent planning, step by step. This does not imply, however, that the pupils are to be disorderly occupied with separate matters. This method requires a good planning and preparation from the teachers. First of all, they should make an overview of all the pupils and tasks. There they indicate which child has to perform which task. When the task has been completed and corrected, this is marked as well. This provides a well-organised view of the pupils' positions in the learning process. Not only the planning requires much from the school staff, also the differentiation in relation to the tasks and instructional formats is a real challenge. The instructional formats should enhance active and co-operative learning as much as possible.

Koen and Katrien: "We firmly believe in the advantages of the system. If you use it well, such as it is with every system, a lot can be gained through it. Teachers do have to devote more time and energy to this method, especially to the preparation and planning. During class hours you are constantly guiding the pupils as well. You devote more time to guiding individual children or small groups, but you are guiding the pupils who need it and not dragging along the entire class group. You notice at once which pupils need extra attention and which one's don't."

Allowing pupils to partially work independently has many advantages. Teachers for instance have more time to give additional explanations if necessary. The independent work allows teachers to offer differentiated tasks and additional support for those pupils who need it. Pupils who complete their tasks sooner than their peers can work further on their own with extra material. The frustration

that some higher and faster performing pupils have to wait until everyone has completed the task can be avoided. The independent work also allows teachers to give new, more difficult, subject matters in smaller groups. Moreover, pupils can learn a great deal from each other during independent group tasks. This often happens spontaneously. Children can sometimes explain a part of the content more understandable than adults can. This also strengthens the competences of all pupils.

Change required by the special needs teacher

The new method offers a great deal of opportunities for the *special needs trajectories* as well. Previous to the innovations, the special needs teachers⁴ tutored the pupils with learning difficulties usually outside the classroom. In the new method they can be enlisted more frequently in-class and more pro-active as well. In addition, the class teacher has more time to occupy him- or herself with individual pupils. In this way, the class teachers takes over a few important duties of the special needs teacher, and as a result the special needs teacher can be employed more often in the classroom to differentiate even better. The class teacher and special needs teacher should co-operate closely. The special needs trajectory is a plan which has been conducted in close consultation between the class- and special needs teacher. In this manner, they both take over some of each other's tasks. They co-operate in order to be able to assess each pupil completely and more correctly. Assistance for the pupils outside the classroom is still available, however. There is still room for remedying if needed, when this is the best solution for the pupil concerned.

Working on a safe classroom climate

Finally, each classroom accommodates a moment each morning in which all pupils sit together with the teacher and talk about their proceedings, questions and problem. In this way teachers are well able to follow pupils in their activities and tasks. In discussing the assignments, teachers can evaluate pupils' proceedings better and make adjustments if necessary. When difficulties arise and a certain task is not completed, teacher and pupil will together investigate why. Together, they will also search for a solution. Giving unfinished tasks as homework is not a solution in this case. Teachers and pupils make mutual agreements about what has to be completed and how the pupil should tackle specific problems. They also discuss how the pupil, in the future, can avoid that his or her tasks are not completed on time. The aim is that pupils learn that tasks and its difficulties can be discussed. The

⁴ Regular schools in Flanders have the opportunity to hire extra teachers in accordance with the number of 'high risk' pupils (pupils with a lower socio-economic status) enrolled in school. Schools have the autonomy to allocate these extra teachers as they please. In some schools the 'special needs teachers' especially teach individual pupils who fall behind outside the class room. In other schools these teachers are moreover present within the classroom and work hand in hand with the regular class teacher.

school wants to avoid that the completion of the tasks becomes a source of stress for pupils. Communicating often makes the independent planning easier as well. Teachers can also make their preparations more efficient by taking pupils' experiences into account. In addition, the 'talk' moments establish a warm, trustful, safe and caring environment between teacher and pupil. Pupils know that help will be provided if they have doubts or difficulties.

“Royal Atheneum Merksem”: The MaX-method - an approach made to measure the stage”

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| DIDACTICS | EVALUATION |
| SCHOOL CLIMATE | ORGANISATION |

In the school year of 2012-2013, the “Royal Atheneum in Merksem” (a school for secondary education in an Antwerp district organised by the Flemish Community) elaborated something which they call the MaX-method. It aims at helping all pupils to discover and develop their talents. Through this method the school strives for the development of a broad range of competences and for maximum learning gains for all pupils. *“The method requires a different school organisation and demands a different approach from the teachers”* explains Roel Buisseret, headmaster of the Atheneum.

Initial circumstances

The school struggled with a high number of ‘C-grades’⁵, especially in the first year. The staff was also looking for ways to involve and motivate pupils to a higher extent in order to improve their achievement levels. The school’s first answer to this issue was the establishment of a ‘repeaters’ class’. In this group, retained pupils met a few teachers every two weeks to discuss whether there were any obstacles which needed to be tackled. As it happened, grade retention did not necessarily offer a solution for the pupils’ educational delay.

Roel Buisseret: *“The retained pupils often caused more problems in the classroom, and their school results didn’t improve in the retained year. Sometimes we don’t give it enough thought that a pupil repeats a year because he wasn’t good at something. We expect pupils to catch up their delay by merely giving them more time. In this group of retained pupils, they worked on solutions and this had a considerable positive effect. These pupils indeed performed better.”*

The mentors of this ‘repeaters’ class’ reckoned that this extra attention for pupils with educational delay could be used preventively as well. In this way, grade retention could be avoided. This was the onset of a major change. At a one-day educational seminar about effective education in a changing society, the school did some brainstorming on which objectives they wanted to reach. Matters such as social climate (pupils’ well-being), differentiation (starting from the pupils’ environment and

⁵ Cfr. footnote 5 at page 7.

interests) and other didactic principles (learning to co-operate, more responsibility for the own learning process, etc.) were suggested during this brainstorming moment.

Among other smaller initiatives, this had led to the MaX-method. This new method, with its slogan 'an approach made to measure the stage', was supported by practically the entire staff. They all had the opportunity to contribute to the further development of the idea. Currently, the concept is continuously evolving because of the full participation of the staff, and they reflect on its functioning on a regular basis, so that they can amend some aspects if necessary.

The MaX-method

The prior objective of the MaX-method is to increase the active involvement of pupils in order to improve their achievement level. A different approach was developed for each stage of secondary school.

The first stage

In the first stage of secondary school, they have implemented the MaX-morning. This is a kind of cross-curricular project, which is scheduled every Wednesday before noon. Pupils look at a certain theme from different perspectives every time. In order to achieve this, teachers must use the curricula of various subjects. Teacher instructs the same class group on this central topic for four subsequent hours.

Roel Buisseret: "The MaX-morning implies the instruction of the same class for four hours in a row. The teacher must therefore be able to maintain the interest of all pupils during a long period of time. At first, teachers were worried. In the meantime everyone agrees that even if this segment lasted five or six hours, they could easily keep up with this."

They explored for instance the theme of 'travel'. This topic can contain several subjects, such as technology (e.g. visiting an amusement park and constructing their own entertainment attraction), visual arts education (e.g. creating an island or a planet to which they would like to travel and which meets a number of conditions), language and culture (e.g. compiling a quiz about 'a journey through Europe'), natural sciences (e.g. a journey through the human body/through the forest). For this age group the school focuses on basic skills, such as learning to summarise and to give presentations, but also on social skills, such as working together. The instruction of these general skills appears more or less in every subject, but because there used to be hardly any deliberation, there was a great deal of repetition. The MaX-morning joins these general skills and facilitates the transfer to all subjects.

Roel Buisseret: *“The time which is lost explaining certain activating methods, such as co-operative work, is regained because some of those basic skills were already taught during the MaX-mornings. This affects the other subjects in a positive way.”*

The second stage

In the second stage of secondary school, the Atheneum works with MaX-moments. The MaX-method for this stage had not yet been fully outlined when this story was written. Teachers are encouraged to use authentic contexts, activating methods, self-evaluation and so on, as much as possible. In short, they are encouraged to experiment within their subject. A cross-curricular structure however, has not yet been developed for this stage, but the school intends to do this at short notice.

The third stage

In the third stage of secondary school, there are MaX-modules, which are scheduled every Friday afternoon. The curriculum of the third stage contains subject-related attainment targets, specific attainment targets and cross-curricular attainment targets. The latter is now met with the MaX-modules. Pupils are allowed to choose any module they want on the basis of a passion for a certain subject. They have this passion in common with the teacher who organises the module. The modules also strive for a mixture of pupils from different grades (the fifth and the sixth grade) and disciplines (of both general and technical secondary education). In the first phase, the school’s own teachers realise these modules proceeding from their own expertise. Later on, exterior partners can be recruited as well. Knowledge and skills are acquired as much as possible by means of letting teachers and pupils simultaneously think about the learning goals. The pupils do not receive marks for these modules and are not formally assessed. Whoever passes receives an additional certificate for the acquired or practiced skills.

Roel Buisseret: *“Some people think that without marks or formal assessment, pupils will not put any effort in their school work. The contrary appears to be true. Pupils are involved because they are driven by an interest. Therefore they devote a great deal of effort to their school work. They often even try so hard that we have to remind them of their other school work. It causes the pupils to feel good. It almost automatically affects the rest of the school in a positive way as well, like for instance in the way they behave and put effort in their school work. I certainly don’t want to claim it’s a miracle solution, but it surely helps a lot.”*

During the MaX-modules, both the process and the product are evaluated, but never by means of a traditional exam or test. The evaluation can differ in relation to the module. The pupils can see each

other's work during demonstration moments. These moments also function as product evaluation. Outsiders (pupils who participate in other modules, parents, etc.) can ask for explanations.

Roel Buisseret: *"The groups within the MaX-modules strengthen each other wherever it's possible. A group that is occupied with photography can for instance join another group when they go on a trip to make pictures of the project of the other group. The ICT-group often supports other groups as well."*

The strengths and challenges of the MaX-method

The first challenge is to develop the MaX-moments in the second stage of secondary school. As mentioned before, these moments are still unstructured and without formal commitments. Therefore the MaX-mornings and the MaX-modules do not yet fully connected with each other. It is important for the entire school that a closer connection between these approaches is established. At the same time, teachers need room to experiment as well. Determining what works and what not is part of the learning process.

Moreover, a great deal of attention is paid to the further professionalization of the teachers. In-service training is provided internally if possible. The school makes sure that the number of lessons which are cancelled remains to the minimum and that teachers do not have to invest too much additional hours. A training agency now co-operates with the school for activating methods. Apart from the teachers who are directly involved in the MaX-method, there are some teachers who participate voluntarily. The group receives an intensive training every six or seven weeks.

In February 2012 a preliminary phase was started in order to launch the MaX-method in September of the subsequent school year. These months were needed to prepare the school and the teachers and to remove uncertainties. The teachers, who presently are doing splendid work in the project, had doubts about the feasibility and their own capabilities. They had to be prepared for the upcoming changes.

Roel Buisseret: *"Perhaps the most important message for teachers is that faults are allowed. You can, and often do, learn from your mistakes. This message is identical to the one we pass on to pupils, of course. You shouldn't be punished for your mistakes but you should use them to improve yourself."*

Lastly, the school wants to focus more strongly on the process, instead of only on the product. Evaluation on the basis of the product is still easier than the evaluation of how the pupil achieved this product. The submission of a product makes it easier to explain and account for the method to outsiders (parents, potential pupils, the board, etc.).

A number of these difficulties arise only in the course of the project. They frequently surface in more eventful phases. The staff's ability to adjust their approach, when needed, is crucial.

Roel Buisseret: *“We didn’t dive in head first without knowing whether we could swim, but we were aware of the fact that a number of problems would arise, which we couldn’t anticipate and to which we didn’t know the answer yet. The strength of the staff relies in their flexibility and ability to find solutions to problems when they present themselves.”*

A significant strength is that ‘working differently’ almost automatically leads to ‘evaluating differently’. Teachers start to experiment spontaneously and often exchange thoughts on this matter. In this way, a new evaluation policy develops naturally.

Finally, perhaps the most important realisation of the MaX-method is that teachers get to know their pupils in a different way. Pupils who usually did not perform very well at school, because of learning or language difficulties, now suddenly appear to be good at a great deal of things. These new insights are taken into account during class committees. Teachers are now more abreast of the pupil as a whole (with all its competencies, skills, interests and talents) and more willing to look for different solutions.

Roel Buisseret: *“Teachers are now more willing to try other things where the pupils used to fail because they put in no effort or because they performed too poorly. They less frequently place blame on the individual pupil and more often search for a specific approach and made-to-measure solution. In this way, the pupils are automatically provided with more opportunities.”*

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