The shadow side of a seemingly innocent job

A few months ago, I once again found myself tutoring a secondary-school pupil. He had just barely failed his final exams, and would therefore be unable to graduate, so there was quite a lot of pressure to wield a magic wand and turn the resit into a success. Which is exactly what we did, with a week of intense practising. The pupil was happy with his diploma, and I was happy to be able to buy groceries for a few more weeks (or days, with the inflation rates we’re having these days). All is well that ends well. Right?

As it turned out, this pupil was not the only one in class who had failed. One of his friends had also barely missed the boat. As the son of two refugees, however, it was financially not so easy for this young man to ask a tutoring institute for a week of intensive help. Unfortunately, he failed his resit.

Such experiences leave me with an unpleasant aftertaste, and invite me to reflect on the shadow side of a seemingly innocent job, and the broader social phenomenon behind it.

In the Netherlands, the Compulsory Education Act was introduced by the Pierson Cabinet in 1900. This cabinet went down into history as the ‘Social Justice Cabinet’. That a Compulsory Education Act should fall in this category is only logical. Finally, every child in the Netherlands was given the right to blossom with a sound basis in education. A springboard that gave people the power to reach greater heights, materially and spiritually. In my opinion this kind of equality of opportunity is a perfect example of social justice.

Clearly, there was still much work to do in the context of the Education Act, let alone when it came to studying, where factors like social class and gender played a key role in the opportunities people had. Our education therefore continued to develop as a dynamic struggle for emancipation, but one where real progress was being made. A century after the introduction of the Compulsory Education Act, our education was not only absolutely more accessible and better, but the Netherlands also appeared in the top 10 of global indices when it came to education and social mobility.

Today, 22 years into a new century, our education system is once again under pressure. We’re facing an enormous and growing shortage of teachers in primary and secondary schools. The level of basic skills such as arithmetic and reading has consistently and quickly deteriorated since the turn of the century. And as for me, seven years into the game, and I’m still a student!

With education as the ‘great equaliser’, this is bad news for equality of opportunity in our country. The fact that this equality is disintegrating was recently confirmed again by CPB. But these problems also exacerbate inequality in another way, one that is at least as damaging. The shortages in our public education system increasingly drive people to seek
solace in private education. Pupils (or rather, their parents) enrol in private schools that offer customised gymnasium-level programmes for tens of thousands of euros a year, the number of homework and tutoring institutes has increased by 61% in the last five years, and there are even companies that promise to groom their clients into passing selection procedures for advanced training programmes, for a paltry few hundred euros a day.

Clearly, there's nothing wrong with a bit of tutoring here and there. But the significant sums involved mean that while children from rich families are offered a whole world of additional educational support, poor children have to make do with a faltering public system. A public system that also has to manage with fewer teachers, as some are seduced away by the higher salaries into that same private education sector.

Many of you have probably heard of this problem, although I'd wager that few of those present here today have actually experienced it as a 'problem'. In fact, it is often people like us who end up on the 'right' side of the educational gap and who eagerly make use of such private offerings.

But even if we become aware of these problems, what can we do? Experts tell us that a simple call for 'more money' won't solve the problem, certainly not in the short run. On the other hand, a total ban on private education is very hard to implement, and may possibly mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater. But we can in any case start by having a good hard look at ourselves.

Should I for example so easily accept well-paid tutoring requests, and see myself as a simple provider of a service that could be offered by anyone? Did you perhaps find yourself reaching out for private education for your child, because that grade 7 was not good enough, or because they absolutely had to have a pre-university diploma? It's not just policy, but the total sum of our behaviours within these frameworks, our educational culture, that conspires to normalise the educational gap and the excessive performance and status pressure.

But besides a shift in mentality, we also need collective educational reform. I invite everyone, especially the lecturers among us, to think along and speak up about any structures that may help us solve these problems. As the slogan of our University says so well: You have a part to play! So let me start with a small contribution of my own:

Many students are looking for flexible and enjoyable jobs. Why doesn't the government offer all students such a job, by inviting them to offer tutoring lessons every week at secondary schools, in their own discipline, and on an enrolment basis? In exchange, the government could offer these students a good salary and a yearly didactics course. A fun side job that would allow them to acquire didactic skills, deepen their knowledge of their field, and contribute to solving a social problem. For schools and their pupils, this service
would be free of charge. They could register on a weekly basis whenever an extra hour of practice after school was needed. A win-win for all involved!

We cannot change where a child is born. But we can deploy our education system to do everything in our power to give every child equal opportunities. Let us not limit this theme to today only, but take it with us into the coming year. In the words of the recently canonised former lecturer of Radboud University Titus Brandsma: ‘Let us not be so egocentric as to lock ourselves in and stare ourselves blind at our own interests, but realise instead that we have a calling, and that therein lies a great joy, the joy of knowing that we can make others happy.’ I wish everyone a wonderful new academic year full of creativity, compassion, and of course, opportunities!