Chapter 5
A brief history of school sports in the Netherlands

Based on:
The relationship between sport and the school system

For a better understanding of the potential of school sports in the Netherlands, it is important to sketch the historical, cultural and social context of school sports. Because the complete and detailed history of the relationship between the education system and sports in the Netherlands is beyond the scope of this thesis, a brief history of school sports in the Netherlands will be outlined in this chapter.

The tradition of school sports in the Netherlands is shorter and less extended compared to for instance Great-Britain or the USA (Stokvis, 2009). The relative short tradition of extra-curricular school sports in the Netherlands can at least partly be explained by the historically problematic relationship between sport and physical education in the Netherlands.

Physical education (PE) in the Netherlands has long been influenced by German, Austrian and Swedish ‘turnkunst’ or gymnastics and Dutch medical authorities (Hilvoorde, Vorstenbosch, & Devisch, 2010). This type of PE was characterised by a resistance against sport, because it was regarded as an activity with an ‘unpedagogical’ emphasis on winning and competition (Stegeman, Lucassen, & Faber, 2001). In addition to this ideological argument, a more practical reason was responsible for the lack of sport in the school context. Physical educators were hesitant to stimulate sport participation, as the main purpose of PE was to compensate for the lack of exercise during other classes in school. Therefore, physical educators were afraid that their profession would become redundant if pupils would be physically active outside of PE (Stokvis, 2009).

This may explain why, in contrast to the USA, extra-curricular school sports did not develop strongly in the Netherlands. Sport was organised outside of the educational system in clubs that were completely independent of the schools (Bottenburg, 2011; Bottenburg, Rijnen, & Sterkenburg, 2005; Stokvis, 2009). In addition, Stokvis (2009) explained these dissimilarities between the USA and the Netherlands on the basis of the different relationships between school officials and pupils in the Netherlands and the USA. Furthermore, he suggested that differences in the social composition of the student populations in high schools in the Netherlands and the USA might explain the dissimilarities in school sport development. As a result, sport was kept out of the PE-curriculum and extra-curricular sports were not stimulated by physical educators in the Netherlands for large parts of the 20th century.
A chronology of school sport in the Netherlands

Despite the distance between PE and the sporting clubs, sport gradually entered the education system from the 1950s onwards (Stegeman, et al., 2001). In the beginning this was mainly through school sport tournaments during the school holidays, in which teams of one school or different schools competed against each other. This competitive approach to sport was in line with the competitive focus of sporting clubs in the Netherlands at that time. Although children were able to become a member of sporting clubs, they played the same game as adults and no special rules or variants of sports were offered to them (Heer, 2000).

However, during the 1960s and 1970s, youth sports and recreational sports were introduced in sporting clubs and sport was not regarded as merely competitive anymore. Youth sport was characterised by a pedagogical focus on the development of children, with adapted rules to optimise the sports performance and fun for children (Heer, 2000). This shift towards recreational and youth sports opened up the door of PE for sports, as the basic principles of recreational and youth sports were more in line with the pedagogical values of PE. However, the relationship remained fractious and sport and PE were still considered separate activities (Smit & Bottenburg, 1998). Nevertheless, school was seen as a context in which pupils could be introduced to different sports, by means of extra-curricular sport activities within or between schools (Stegeman, et al., 2001). During the 1960s and 1970s, school sports and PE were also starting to be mentioned in sport policies and campaigns to stimulate sport participation.

The 1980s can be considered a key period in which the role of sport in PE and school sports changed. During the 1980s, sport was increasingly regarded as a socialisation force in which children could be taught all kinds of relevant competences, such as discipline, group work or perseverance. This contributed to the increasing rapprochement between the education system and sports. In 1985, this resulted in the formalisation of the “School Sport Development Model” by the Overleg Orgaan voor School en Sport [Consultation body for school and sport] (Stegeman, et al., 2001). This model was mainly intended to introduce pupils to sports, with the aim of increasing club sport membership and participation. Local governments and sport organisations used this development model to base their policy regarding school and sport on. In 1986, a special commission for sport and physical education (Commissie Sport en Lichamelijke Opvoeding, 1986) indicated that school sport could act as an intermediate between the school context and sporting clubs and organisations. This advice illustrates the changing role of school sport during this decade and a changing attitude towards sport within the field of
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PE, although not many advices of the commission were implemented (Buisman, 1996).

In the 1990s, school sport was still considered a means to introduce pupils to sports with a possible transfer to sporting clubs and long term sport participation (Smit & Bottenburg, 1998):

“Physical education and school sport are important ways to move youngsters to sports, because all youngsters can be reached through school”
(Ministry of VWS, 1996, p. 31)

In addition, the ‘societal relevance’ of (school) sport was gaining importance and the (political) idea that school sports could contribute to the development of pupils grew and a large number and types of activities were organised under the umbrella of school sports (Smit & Bottenburg, 1998):

“In the school context [...], sport has an important impact on society”
(Ministry of VWS, 1996, p. 14)

The integration of sport within the school was now considered normal and the project “Jeugd in Beweging” [Moving Youth] (1995-2001) (Raad voor het Jeugdbeleid, 1995) intensified sport projects in and around school, with the aim of generating all kinds of positive effects (Heer, 2000). Although different types of activities were defined as school sports, a general shift was observed from sport tournaments within and between schools to sport introduction and sport orientation.

In recent years, the relationships between schools and sports were further emphasised in policy and endorsed by the national sport federation NOC*NSF (2009, 2012c), the national PE federation KVLO (2010, 2013) and the ministries of Sport and Education (Ministry of VWS, 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2011b; Ministry of VWS & Ministry of OCW, 2008). A partnership between the Dutch Olympic committee and the ministries of Sport and Education resulted in the “Alliance School and Sport” (2005-2008), which endorsed all kinds of collaborations between school and sports, aiming at different social, psychological and health outcomes:
School, sport and culture can make an important contribution to social cohesion. A coherent choice of educational, sport and cultural activities offer a rich learning environment in which children and youngsters have the chance to develop their talents, gain social skills and have fun” (Ministry of OCW, 2007, p. 1)

“Sports can contribute to the bond that students have with their school and, in alternation with the cognitive subjects, lead to better concentration and better school performance” (Ministry of VWS & Ministry of OCW, 2008, p. 1)

“By specifically aiming sport- and exercise interventions, the cabinet wants to contribute to the prevention and decrease of overweight among youngsters” (Ministry of VWS & Ministry of OCW, 2008, p. 9)

A typology of school sport in the Netherlands

The current collaborations between schools and sports in the Netherlands can be divided into three types: sports at school, sports near school and sports representing school (Pot & Hilvoorde, 2011).

Sports at school include the sport introduction and orientation within the (PE-)curriculum. Also the annual sports days, in which children from the same school play sports against each other, are considered sports at school. There is also an increasing number of “sport active” schools, who committed themselves to organise additional sport-related classes and programs for their pupils within the curriculum (Werff, Wisse, & Stuij, 2012). This type of school sport is not considered in this thesis.

Sports near school are the opportunities to play sports in and around the school building without too much involvement of the school. In this case, the facilities form the main connection between the schools and sport. For instance, there is an increasing amount of out of school care focussed at sports (Lucassen, Wisse, Smits, Beth, & Werff, 2011) and some sporting clubs provide training sessions at schoolyards in an attempt to overcome economic and time barriers to sport participation (Boonstra & Hermens, 2010). Another example of this type of school sports are schools that have athletic facilities around the school and sporting clubs and schools that reside on the same campus (see Chapter 6). In the Netherlands, this type of school sports is a rather new phenomenon.

Sports representing school are initiatives in which pupils from one school represent their school against teams from other schools. These can be local
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competitions between teams of different schools (see Chapter 7) or national tournaments between schools in different sports (KVLO, 2010).

School sports can be defined as sport activities that take place outside of the curriculum, in which participation is optional and which are organised in cooperation with the school (Acker, et al., 2011). Therefore, only sports near school and sports representing school are considered in this thesis.

Despite all these initiatives between schools and sports, club sport still remains the dominant youth sports context, as was evidenced by a representative study among Dutch youth (Stuij, et al., 2011). A mere 22% of these students participated in school sports, whereas 71% was member of a sporting club. In addition, the average amount of time spent in these sport contexts differed significantly: 157 minutes per week on club sports and only 18 minutes per week on school sports.

Conclusion

As was illustrated above, the relationship between the school system and sport organisations and clubs changed during the 20th century from friction and ideological distance to an acceptance of each other’s strengths and the willingness to collaborate (Brouwer, et al., 2011). This change in the relationship between the school context and sports coincided with a changing role of sport in society in general, with a stronger emphasis on the potential health, social, psychological and academic effects of sport participation. As the school context is considered an important socialising context, the expectations of school sport are enormous:

“Sport and education belong to each other and amplify each other. Sport and exercise is fun for most children and youth and contributes significantly to the motor, social and cognitive development and the health of children and youth. This may lead to better school performance and less school drop-out” (Ministry of OCW, 2012, p. 1)

“Sport and exercise form parts of a healthy and active lifestyle […]. Therefore, the coalition expresses the ambition to intensify sport and exercise in the education system” (Ministry of VWS, 2012, p. 4)

However, the evidence that substantiates these expectations of school sports have been critically discussed (e.g., Bailey, 2006; Coakley, 2009; Smith & Leech, 2010).
In Dutch policy documents hardly any references to scientific underpinnings of the expectations of (school) sports can be found, although some refer to a research report reviewing mostly North American school sport studies (Stegeman, 2007). Many of these North American studies reported relationships between school sport participation and all kinds of health, educational, psychological and social effects (e.g., Broh, 2002; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fisher, Juszczak, & Friedman, 1996; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Hartmann, 2008; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008).

As already mentioned, school sport in the USA has a different social function and organisation, compared to the Netherlands. In the next chapter, it will be argued that by basing the expectations of Dutch school sports on American studies, the important influence of the specific cultural context of school sports on the possible effects of school sports is neglected.