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“Welcome in the ratrace”. On the social constraints of testing in primary schools

This paper discusses why in the Netherlands the Cito-test (a scholastic aptitude test) at the end of the primary school has become so important, while at the same time parents, primary and secondary school teachers and educational professionals argue that no excessive weight should be placed on the test results. An analysis of the coverage of the Cito-test in five national newspapers in February 2004 shows two complexes of reasons. The first is the early selection moment for entrance to the hierarchical ordered secondary school system in the Netherlands. Selection finds place at the end of primary school. At that moment pupils are sorted out for the higher valued general educational tracks or the vocational track. In the race for the highest educational qualifications parents stress the importance of gaining admission to the higher levels of secondary education. They know that secondary schools rely more and more on ‘objective’ admission criteria for the different levels and force the primary school to strive for good test results. At the same time parents judge primary schools on their ‘quality’. Quantifiable measurements, like the test scores at school level, are the easiest to judge, and are increasingly considered as an indication of the quality of the school. In the competition for pupils, elementary schools feel obliged to demonstrate their quality by obtaining high average test scores. In the second place, state policy is increasingly focused on management by accounting. Schools have to prove their worth by accounting for their achievements. This is true for both primary and secondary schools. For all schools it becomes important to obtain good results, and quantifiable results are easiest to assess. For primary schools this means good average test scores, for secondary schools it becomes important to admit students with the best prospectives of success or at least exclude those who threaten to be not so successful. Test scores are their selection instrument. In this way, all parties are under pressure to rely on the Cito-test, though every party admits the relativity of those scores and argue that they are less valuable than the advice given by primary school teachers.

