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1 The canon - the pros and cons

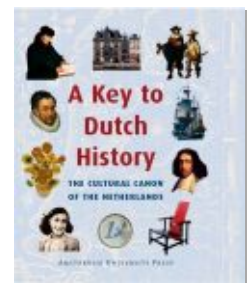
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CHAPTER 1

The canon – the pros and cons

Grounds, assignment, analysis, points of departure

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In former times [...] all children were [...] well educated, which is something they no longer are these days. The world was a much better place in those times.

THOMASIN VON ZERKLAERE, SHORTLY AFTER 1200

1.1 Administrative grounds

In January 2005, the Education Council published some recommendations entitled *De stand van educatief Nederland* [The State of Affairs in Dutch education]. In this report, the Council reflects on five years of Dutch education policy and establishes that – in addition to all the good things – there are four trouble areas. One of the most significant is a lack of “a focus on the ‘canon’ as an expression of our cultural identity”.⁴ The Council placed the word canon in speech marks, because it is a general term. A lot could be said on this matter, but this is not the place to do so. In the context of our goal we can make do with the working definition used by the Council, namely “the valuable aspects of our culture and history which we wish to pass on via education to new generations”.

This observation in relation to the canon was the reason why the Council argued that education should fulfil a socialisation task and that its social responsibility be strengthened. The integration problem observed by the Council played a clear role in this vision. Certainly given the large number of children of foreign origin, the Council regarded the proper teaching of Dutch history and culture at schools to be even more important.

4 This and the following quote in *Onderwijsraad* 2005, p. 119-120.

The Education Council's analysis and recommendation were generally well received.⁵ In the public arena, the report was welcomed with open arms by quite significant numbers of opinion leaders. This was, in itself, probably a reflection of the change in attitude as regards the canon. After all, in 1989, the committee that had dared to draw up an obligatory reading list of Dutch literary masterpieces for use at school, had been tarred and feathered.⁶ *De stand van educatief Nederland*, and more particularly the views expressed on the canon, struck a broad sympathetic chord in parliament as well. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science, to whom the Education Council had directed its report in the first instance, considered this sufficient grounds to adopt the main recommendations and to set up a *Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon* as of 1 September 2005. This committee was not made up of representatives from umbrella organisations or – as was originally the idea – of chairs from influential advisory bodies, but of eight individuals with a variety of expertise.⁷ The committee was given a year to produce a concrete draft for the content of the Dutch canon, plus a vision on how this could be implemented in the education system. In addition, the committee had to focus on the role of cultural institutions in the matter and submit a proposal on how the canon could be periodically re-evaluated in the future.

In the following chapters, this “canon committee” details its response to the above questions, and its views on a number of other issues. Before that, we wish to summarise the deeper and more substantive background to the canon concept – including the criticism that has been levelled against it – and explain how our committee chose to respond.

1.2 The desire for a canon

The Education Council's recommendation was born out of the emphatic conviction that something is wrong with the knowledge today's young people

5 Apart from the link with Dutch identity, which was the focus of most of the criticism (see below for the reasons). Mainly positive responses came from, for example, Kleijn & Pleij 2005, Van Empel 2005 and Kieskamp 2005. Hekster 2005, Klein 2005 and De Rooy in Duursma 2005a were more critical.

6 See CVEN 1991. There was also a sensitive substantive difference: see note 37.

7 The chairs were interviewed briefly by Duursma 2005. The letter of instruction and personal details of the committee members are included in Appendices 1 and 3.

have of Dutch history and culture.⁸ Such laments about the demise of general knowledge are, of course, nothing new. In his *Entheticus maior* from around 1150, the poet, philosopher, churchman and scholar John of Salisbury – translated into Dutch by Jan van Laarhoven – derides the “innovators who are irritated by old friends; only that which generates pleasure or profit brings contentment:

If you love authors, refer to the classical writings,
People everywhere call out, “Where is the old donkey off to?
What is he doing here with his outdated ideas and actions?
We, we are wise of our own accord!”⁹

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There is, therefore, reason enough to suppress any feelings of nostalgia. The fact is, things in the garden were not all rosy in times gone by either. For example, most members of parliament who took part in the controversial questionnaire organised by the *Historisch Nieuwsblad* in 1996 and, by doing so, exposed their historical ignorance (“William of Orange was murdered in sixteen-something near Dokkum”¹⁰) had attended school before the 1963 Secondary Education Act, that is in what are now considered to be the thorough years. Moreover, research in Europe and the United States shows that large numbers of young people elsewhere also left secondary education with an inadequate knowledge of their own country’s history.¹¹ The problem is, therefore, certainly not limited to the here and now.

Nevertheless, something now seems to be going wrong. In recent decades, Dutch education has undergone developments which are sure to have had an effect on knowledge of the canon. To name but a few:

- 8 Previously, a similar conviction had caused the De Wit 1998 committee to advocate the introduction of a canon into historical education. De Rooy 2001 – who had been commissioned to develop that canon – eventually limited his work to a “frame of reference” comprising ten periods. See also Wilschut 2004 and Wilschut 2005, p. 31-43.
- 9 Van Laarhoven 1987. Quote (slightly abbreviated) on p. 471-472 (with thanks to medio Latinist Onno Kneepkens). The reverse also occurs: in 1532, Rabelais had the old giant Gargantua write to his son Pantagruel (who was studying in Paris) that “by the grace of God, light and dignity are now being assigned once again to language and literature and I can see such an improvement that I would have trouble being admitted to the first year at primary school... me who at a mature age was rightly regarded as the greatest scholar of that century”.
- 10 Rensman & Bossmann 1996.
- 11 See for Europe Angvik & Von Borries 1997, for the UK Henry 2004, and for the USA Kearl 1994.

- The time reserved for historical-cultural teaching has decreased, both at schools and in the teacher-training courses.¹² The consequence is that both students and young teachers are insufficiently equipped in this field.
- In general terms, less value is attached to the transfer of knowledge than skills training.
- As far as knowledge itself is concerned, general education is losing ground, and this process starts at an early stage. It is significant that the CITO [National Institute for Educational Measurement] test, which pupils take at the end of primary school, does focus a lot on the area of “knowledge of the world”, but this does not then count for the determination of the famous CITO score which is used to indicate the type of education the pupil should be advised to attend next.
- All manner of subject-oriented developments have also played a role. In the case of Dutch language – at school and at university – the focus shifted from literature to linguistic competence. History teaching methods were also affected by changes which were not conducive to the canon, such as less of an accent on the classical (and class-based) narrative element and the fear of being branded elitist. In addition, a shift could be observed from primarily chronological to primarily thematic education, and the undeniable increase in focus on academia also reduced superficiality in favour of (selective) deepening.¹³ The inevitable disadvantage of this was that students educated in this way easily lost sight of the connection between the individual items and the overview. Like prototype trainee research assistants, they knew a great deal about a small number of subjects but sometimes had to admit to embarrassing gaps in their knowledge in areas which, to previous generations, were the actual mainstays of historical-cultural

12 A critical opinion on the part of a number of teachers on this decline can be found in the article entitled “*Hoe belangrijk is onze geschiedenis eigenlijk?*” in: *Dagblad van het Noorden* (8 March 2005).

13 The consequence was that pupils are confronted by terms such as “primary social connections” in the context of how families used to live. Such expressions come from the domain descriptions of the national history exam, but are channelled directly to the pupils (see for example the very pleasant site www.bronnenuitamsterdam.nl). For the canon and history education see, for example, Groot 2006.

knowledge. This very significantly applies, for example, to knowledge of historical chronology which is often sorely lacking among many young people.¹⁴

In this report we do not want to go overboard when it comes to providing examples of the need for a new canon. Many are enough to make you laugh and cry at the same time. Suffice to say that we do not need to have any illusions about the answers today's Dutch students would give if, for example, they were to be questioned about the dates and chronology of Charlemagne and Charles V.

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We wish to reiterate, for the sake of complete clarity, that our committee has not carried out any research of its own into the state of the Dutch canon. In line with the ministerial assignment, we have adopted the point of departure that considerable improvements can be made. The committee has, in the meantime, by no means had to worry about having a bad conscience with regard to accepting this premise. Both the Education Council's diagnosis plus subsequent responses and the above analysis of developments in Dutch education make it more than plausible that there is a worryingly low level of knowledge of the canon.

On the other hand, many people believe that such knowledge is, in fact, very important these days. They see (knowledge of) the canon as a way of countering all kinds of internal and external disintegrative factors. In this context, Europe has for years been presented by certain people as an example of such a disastrous outside force. In the process of unification, the countries are said to be losing themselves and their individual cultures. In more recent times, the same sensationalist effect has been attributed to the way new

14 The important reports drawn up by the De Wit 1998 and De Rooy 2001 committees went against this current in a movement which has since gained in strength and from which the canon committee evidently also has its roots. For example, professors Bank and De Rooy published a piece in *NRC Handelsblad* entitled "Een canon van het Nederlandse verleden. Wat iedereen moet weten van de vaderlandse geschiedenis." [A canon of the Dutch past. What everyone must know about our country's history] (In the printed version – Bank, Van Es & De Rooy 2005 – the title reflected a typically Dutch aversion to coercion in that "must know" had been changed to "wants to know"). Other publications included those of Beliën 2005, Van der Horst 2005, Lendering 2005 and Palm 2005. Of course, the canon committee endorses such comments, including those of Kempers in 1999, and the *Academische boekengids* (edition 24, December 2000) which was devoted to the canon.

Dutch citizens are dealt with. People are often heard to say that newcomers' naturalisation courses should include a, perhaps obligatory, large Dutch history and culture component. In such arguments, the canon serves as an integration resource with which to provide newcomers with a sorely-needed insight into (and a feeling for) the country in which they live, and as a means of establishing a link and of building bridges between them and native Dutch people. Collective terminology such as "newcomers" and "native Dutch" can, incidentally, be as unsavoury as they are inadequate. Such opinions are often accompanied by the insistence that the Netherlands must learn to reassess its identity and that, as regards the latter, it would not do any harm if Dutch people, who often tend to be contemptuous of their own culture, were to engage in more open displays of their love and pride for what this country has achieved over the centuries. In this context the canon becomes a guiding principle.

Comments like those above came thick and fast in response to *De stand van educatie in Nederland*, albeit in varying formulations. At the same time, such responses were also the reason for increased criticism of the canon.

1.3 The canon under fire¹⁵

Sceptics and opponents of a canon for the Netherlands pointed out that a national framing of cultural history can easily lead to distortion, anachronisms, narrow-mindedness and a desire for annexation.¹⁶ If, on top of this, such a canon is also cross-fertilised with national pride, it will have already caused an extensive falsification of history. The situation certainly does not get any better if the canon is presented as a mirror of our national identity which is, once again, such a questionable concept which is said to have evolved, wondrously enough, by means of intelligent design in the centuries during which the nation did not even exist. A national canon requires "hollandocentrism" and that, by definition, means exposure to misrepresentation. Lastly, the concept of a "canon" is certainly not above criticism. The idea that principles which are open to objectification might exist and provide the grounds for putting forward certain events, people and artefacts for special

¹⁵ This section includes elements taken from the volume by Maaikje Meijer et al 1991.

¹⁶ See, for example, Ribbens 2004, Grever & Ribbens 2005, Klein 2006, Stuurman 2006. There are also voices of dissent, for example Palm 2005, Pels 2005.

status to then create *the* canon appears to be an illusion to more people than just fervent postmodernists and those of a politically-correct persuasion. Something like this will always be plagued by blind spots and sly mechanisms of exclusion as regards cultural minorities, women, all that is considered valuable in the so-called margins, right through to individual cases of flagrant misjudgements. In the nineteenth century, the colourful *Reis van Sint Brandaan* was denounced by all and sundry as “the greatest piece of trash that we have retained from the Middle Ages” (according to P. Leendertz jr.)¹⁷. However, since the pioneering work of Maartje Draak – who was also someone who came to the fore from the margins – it has been regarded as one of the most fascinating and richest texts in Middle Dutch literature. Whether the literary canon is that of Kloos, Knувelder or Komrij, the variation reflected in their selection illustrates the greater influence of subjective preference than is usually assumed in the case of such authorities.¹⁸

On the other hand, as yet, few success stories can be reported from countries that have recently tried to implement a canon as an inter-subjective process overseen by groups of experts. In the United States, the introduction in 2003 of the “history standards” – a core curriculum defined by the federal government relating to American and world history – led to heated debates and heavy criticism.¹⁹ In Denmark a “Kulturkanon” was published in January 2006 and was followed, in June, by a “Historiekanon”. The basis of support for the cultural canon as an instrument in education will become apparent once 175,000 copies of the accompanying book have been distributed to schools and related institutions. The first responses were rather moderate and have stressed, above all, the relative character of the choices made. The publication of the history canon in June generated a frank and sharp-worded response.

17 Vor der Hake 1908, p. 16.

18 Incidentally, this is something that someone like Komrij will undeniably acknowledge (and even welcome), but is also something that can be forgotten in the application of their work. In that context *The classic hundred* (Harmon 1990) is more inter-subjective. This is a selection, from canonical miscellanies, of the one hundred most popular English poems which one then dared to label as “the greatest hits of English poetry” (with “The tiger” by William Blake occupying the top spot). The questionnaire compiled by the BBC was more democratic. It invited the British people to indicate what they regarded to be the one hundred most important books in English literature. First place went to Tolkien’s trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. See *The big read*, www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread.

19 See for example Draper 2003.

Canons in Denmark

The Danish Kulturkanon consists of a selection of 108 works, twelve for each of the following nine disciplines: architecture, visual arts, trades and design, film, literature, classical music, popular music, theatre and youth culture. For each discipline a separate subcommittee, consisting of artists and experts, drew up the criteria on which choices could be made. The objectives for the composition of a cultural canon including the “greatest and most important works from Danish culture” were articulated in the introduction to the report as follows:

- to contribute to the cultural debate by presenting a yardstick for quality which will, of course, at the same time generate a welcome discussion of quality criteria;
- to specify what is good and what is worth preserving for posterity;
- to offer Danes an insight into Danish cultural history so that they can find out more about themselves;
- to provide points of reference for what is typically Danish in a globalising world;
- to strengthen society by identifying common historical baggage.

The committee chairman, Prof. Dr Jørn Lund (director of the Danish language and literature association who, in 2002, was also chairman of a committee for a literary canon), also emphasised the fact that Danish art and culture has, in many respects, international connections. A lot of what was selected for the cultural canon has been affected by those very influences. A focus on that which is Danish is not, therefore, synonymous with isolationism. The choices made within the various disciplines were the result of a range of different criteria which all have to do with the inherent qualities of the work, the importance of someone's

total oeuvre, the significance of a certain artist, historical and geographical distribution, etc. This means that the 108 works do not jointly constitute a “summary” of Danish art and culture, but primarily a guideline on how to deal with the products of the various disciplines over the centuries (from the Sun Chariot which dates from around 1400 BC to the film *Festen* from 1998). Since August 2006, the Kulturkanon has been developed in more detail to include an interactive section on the website of the Ministry of Culture (kulturkanon.kum.dk).

Besides this cultural canon, the Minister for Education and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Bertel Haader, set up a committee in January 2006 “to strengthen the subject of history at the *folkeskole*”. The reason was the government’s intention, supported by parliament, to make knowledge of Christianity, history and social studies examination subjects at the end of primary education (*folkeskole* – nine classes). In June 2006, this same committee (chaired by historian Prof. Dr Knud Jespersen) issued a report on the organisational changes and core competences which the introduction of these changes would require as of 2008, plus a first draft of an obligatory history canon. This history canon consists of twenty-nine national and international “subjects” or rather key words, such as “Columbus”, “the battle at Dybbøl in 1864 (the Second War of Schleswig)”, “female suffrage”, and “9/11”. This canon generated a heated discussion in the Danish media.²⁰

In short, the canon is conceptually vulnerable, ideologically questionable and, on the one hand, even suspect. It is, as a construction, a lot more fragile than the pretences suggest and certainly not guaranteed to be a success as a collective process. Given all these deficiencies, one would be forgiven for concluding that the supposed canon for the Netherlands ought not to be designed by a committee nor imposed on anyone.

Our committee regards this criticism as perfectly justified and worthy of consideration. It is also a salutary counterbalance for unrealistic expectations relating to the canon or even its abuse. However, the committee believes this should not lead to negativism. (If the situation had been different, the committee could not, of course, have accepted the assignment.) Put more positively, the committee believes firmly in the power of the canon.²¹

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1.4 The power of the canon

Indeed, the canon does appear to be a poor choice as a basis for a presumed Dutch identity. Although it is logical that the canon will sometimes include phenomena which – not least in the eyes of foreigners – can be regarded as “typically Dutch” (for example, our highly developed corporate life, known in more informal terms as the “polder model”), it is not acceptable to see the canon and a country’s identity as one and the same. Acquiring an insight into the canon is complex enough without hypothecating it with the equally ponderous and tenuous concept of national identity. By far the best approach would appear to be to disconnect the two concepts.²² The canon may perhaps mirror a country’s collective memory, but never its identity. Incidentally, there would appear to be every good reason to rethink the whole concept of “national identity”. It is now less valid than it ever has been, if indeed it ever was. In today’s international, multicultural world it is a deceptive and even dangerous concept.²³

21 This is much more in line with Doorman 2004, Zeeman 2002 and 2004 and Scheffer 2005.

22 Cf. Davids 2005.

23 Cf. Said 2004, p. 24 ff and p. 55. Even at an individual level, cultural identity is a tricky concept given that many have, in effect, multiple perceptions of what identity is: “a man will not just be gay, but gay and Catholic and Croatian”. Cf. Sen 2006 and Appiah 2006 and the discussion of their cosmopolitan view in *The New York Review of Books* dated 22 June 2006 (which incidentally features Hugo Grotius as an inspiring law philosopher).

Our committee is less dismissive, but still open-minded, about the association of the canon with naturalisation. Of course, there are reasonable grounds to argue that, after knowledge of the Dutch language, knowledge of the related history and culture can make a substantial contribution to accommodating newcomers to this country.²⁴ Nevertheless, the committee does not regard this as the primary motive for compiling a canon. At any rate, the fragile knowledge of the canon is a problem for all Dutch people and certainly not specifically for immigrants. Of course, newcomers will adopt a different attitude to certain elements of the Dutch past and this can, on occasion, require teachers to be particularly sensitive. However, the difference appears to us to be one of progression rather than one of principle. The point is that this canon has to do with the country that we jointly inhabit. In that sense, the canon can certainly contribute to citizenship. Knowledge and understanding of how this country has developed, of the valuable things it has produced, and what it has meant in the world to date is a meaningful and enriching learning goal and provides society with a frame of reference that generates a yield whenever there is interaction and whenever Dutch people operate in the world. It is, therefore, the canon of both Boulahrouz and Beatrix.

Arguments for a canon based on identity and/or citizenship appear to be rooted mainly in concern for the current intellectual climate in the Netherlands. The committee would like to see a less defensive and more positive perception of the canon. Our focus is primarily on the value of the canon in itself. Not as the supposed solution to a special problem, but as the gilt-edged basic knowledge of Dutch cultural history which is so meaningful and welcome for future generations that learning about it at school requires no special justification. Of course, such comparisons always fall short. However, the committee regards knowledge of the canon as a no less self-evident fundamental learning goal than Euclidean geometry or the periodic table of elements. Even the winners of the quiz show “*Twee voor twaalf*” do not know everything and most people get by perfectly well with a lot less. We are convinced, however, that everyone should be familiar with essential points of reference. The fact that all of these

24 Just as, conversely, finding out in class about non-western cultures can be very educational for native Dutch children. More can be found on this matter in a number of proposals (see p. 51) and the body of thought behind the book by Nasser D. Khalili 2006, *Tijdslijn van de islamitische kunst en architectuur* [Timeline of Islamic art and architecture], whose English edition was distributed to 40,000 British schools thanks to a private initiative.

can now be found on the Internet is not a valid reason to refuse to learn them like one used to do, by referring to an encyclopaedia, or to reject the multiplication tables because we now have calculators, or knowledge of topography because of the existence of route planners. In fact, it is only on the basis of a certain degree of fundamental knowledge that the Internet can make its riches known to users, without even counting the time that people today are not attached to a fibre optic cable. It is perhaps a rash claim after all the above palaver, but the committee means what it says, namely that getting to know the canon is a goal in itself.

In addition, the canon not only enables people to retain knowledge but also beauty. This explicitly applies to the musical dimension of the canon, as well as for a lot of the important historical and idealistic elements. There is, of course, a link – albeit not exactly one to one – between the canon and quality. It is often thanks to a special allure that people, places and events acquire a place in the canon. Likewise, it is no accident that the Colosseum and St Peter's in Rome are top attractions, nor that the opera house consistently plans repeat performances of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. To connoisseurs, such choices may sometimes seem slightly obligatory. Even they like to hear things they recognise and may indeed be curious about how a new director interprets this classical piece. Thus, the canon also contains stories which are told over and over again, which are inexhaustible and which are rejuvenated again and again.²⁵ They thank their durability, at least in part, to intrinsic qualities which are certainly worth finding out about and appreciating.

In this context, the example of Edward Said (1935-2003) is particularly interesting and inspiring. He himself had a Palestinian background and was educated in some of the best institutions in the West. He became world famous in academic circles due to his deconstruction of the Eurocentric canon in which he revealed how this was often an instrument of cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life, he and his friend Daniël Barenboim performed *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* in the occupied territories of the Gaza Strip. He wrote a respectful introduction to *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach's book on the literary canon, from Homer to Virginia Woolf, and argued passionately

25 A major example is *Maus* by Art Spiegelman that retells the story of the holocaust in the form of a strip cartoon about cats and mice. The story was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1992, the highest literary distinction in America.

for a revitalisation of classical virtues such as humanism and philology as a badly needed dam to stem the tide of modern coarseness. He professed a passionate belief “that we must in some perhaps almost instinctual way continue to hold on to a wonderfully stable order of great works of art whose sustaining power means a great deal to each of us in his or her own way”.²⁶

30 Our committee is much more receptive to such positively composed arguments for the canon than the call for cultural “dyke-watching” or testy knowledge restoration. However, the canon will only be able to flourish in this affective form if it is a *living* canon and no wall of urns, if it is not imposed by dogmatic decree but is presented with enthusiasm, and accompanied by a candid invitation to look for more, in accordance with each person’s personal talents and interest.

By far the most important vehicle for achieving this is education. This too has always been the case. The canon and school are like brother and sister. In his masterpiece *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, which was published in 1948 and which was conceived as a cultural antidote to the glorification by Nazism of Germanic characteristics, Ernst Robert Curtius showed just how much the entire culture of the Occident (to him this meant everyone from Homer to Goethe) was a united whole. According to Curtius, this was due to the canon of ancient culture which had been passed down in schools since the Middle Ages to (the elite of) each new generation. These days we would no longer present it in this form. However, the fact remains that education still has a crucial task to fulfil as regards the transfer of the canon – not least to children who are not familiarised with it in their home environments.

The fact that schools teach pupils about the canon does not imply anything like state education or cultural despotism, no more than the learning of Dutch topography or knowledge of nature do. It is nothing more or less than the historical-cultural translation of the assignment in which education and compulsory education are rooted, the only legal form of indoctrination known to any civilised country.

Our committee is primarily interested in the canon, as offered at school, as an *inspiring foundation*. *Foundation* induces a restriction in size, at least in the first instance. The committee has made an explicit choice for this, and would prefer to see its draft extended in the long term rather than it running the risk of surfeiting education and entangling the canon in a surplus of material and good intentions. *Inspiring* implies a lot of attention not only for the content of the canon, but also for the (didactic) form. It is therefore essential that the canon is given an expressive, open and inviting character. As will hopefully become apparent, modern technology can play a formidable supportive role in this respect. Modern times do not, by any means, have to drown out the past, but can enable it to express itself in a way that has never been heard.

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Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we are interested in a canon for *all* Dutch people. Translated into the school environment, this means a canon which not just the teachers must know (including those who teach gymnastics), but also the school management team, the interim manager, the caretakers and the cleaners – and of course the parents and the parents' council, who will hopefully attach some importance to how their school deals with the canon. Such an explicit, not-exclusive-but-inclusive, canon requires an anchoring in the years of compulsory education. That is the reason why the canon committee has focused most on primary education and on the lower secondary school years. The following chapter contains details on the concrete canon we have drawn up.