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Individual modernity and the decline of illiteracy in the Netherlands, 1775-1875

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0. Abstract

In the Netherlands, illiteracy came to an end in the 19th century, at a time when compulsory education laws had not been enacted, schooling cost money, and reading and writing skills were of minor importance to a majority of the people. In this paper, it is argued that it has not been the improved quality and quantity of 19th century teaching to play a role in this respect, but the changed perspective from which people valued society and their position wherein. Illiteracy came to an end because even illiterate parents had become convinced that education was well worth the expense.

To prove this argument, an analysis is made of regional variations in the decline of illiteracy rates in the Netherlands, 1775-1875. It is shown that it is in the Dutch Bible Belt, a large region in which most people adhere to a very traditional protestant belief, that the decline was slower than elsewhere.

1. Literacy, illiteracy, functional illiteracy

Last week, there was an item in the newspaper, stating that there are one million illiterates in the Netherlands at the moment. Of course, this is nothing new. Every so often, similar news items of this kind are being published. A month ago there were two million illiterates, and next month, there will be three million, or again one million. Who knows. Every odd number seems to be correct, so long as it is high and startling. How can this be possible, one would ask. There is a compulsory education law in the Netherlands which is more than 100 years old, so there is no reason why we all should be able to read and write by now. And we can, of course. Only the definition of what illiteracy is, changes again and again. Nowadays, illiterates are not defined as people who cannot read or write, but as people who have not enough skills to function properly in modern society. They are called functional illiterates.

This definition of functional literacy is very awkward, because there is no agreement whatsoever on what skills one should have to function properly in modern society.

Our former prime minister shocked the nation when he showed that he does not know how to use the mouse of his computer - so is he an illiterate?

And what about me - and most of you I assume? We know how to read, but what about this piece of text:

IIG IKVJOU
WHCO IXJE
SUC6 XIZZ.

This is plain Dutch - if you know the spelling rules young people use when they send small messages to their friends with their cellular phones.

In ieder geval ik hou van jou
We houden contact, ik zie je
succes en kusjes

Anyway I love you

We keep in touch, see you
success and kisses

So, it is a matter of definition as to which one is called an illiterate and which one doesn't. This holds true when doing research into literacy and illiteracy in the nineteenth century. It seems obvious that people who could not read and write at that time should be called illiterates. But historians do have a point when they say that for some people, especially farmers and unskilled workers, or people living in isolated areas, there was no need at all to be able to read and write: they could function perfectly and properly without such an education. So, a large number of illiterates could also be called "functional illiterates", which once again shows the uselessness of the concept. And others also have a point when they say that - at least in protestant countries - reading might have been functional, referring to the ability to read the Bible of course, but that this was not necessarily true for writing.

However, despite these variations, in historical research, it has become customary to separate literates from illiterates by their ability to put a signature on an official document and therefore by their writing skills. This seems to be a logical choice. First of all, because people learned to write only after having learned to read, so that putting a signature points towards a man who can both read AND write. Next to that, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, there are mass records available which do contain signatures. Marriage registers, for instance, contain signatures of the bride and the groom, as well as their parents and a number of witnesses. Of almost the entire population in the nineteenth century, therefore, we can gather information whether they were able to put their signature on these official documents or not, and, by consequence, whether they were literate or illiterate, provided of course that these mass records are available.

In the Netherlands, we are very fortunate to have such mass records available, and to have what is called the Historical Sample of the Netherlands. This dataset is a random sample of people who were born in the Netherlands between 1812 and 1922. It consists of data on 77,000 men and women, who are followed through their lives, from birth until death, that have been sampled from mass records such as birth registers, marriage records and death registers. This sample gives us ample opportunity to map the development of literacy and illiteracy in the Netherlands over more than a century. Unfortunately, the Historical Sample has not been completed yet. But even from the limited set of data which IS available at the moment, some interesting facts and figures may be derived. There is for instance a complete sample from the birth registers. And on every entry in the register, there is the signature of the man who has come to inform the municipal registry that a child has been born.

2. The informer

All informers are men, and in most of the cases (in 86 percent of the cases to be exact), they state that they are the father of the child whose birth they have come to register.

As stated before, the Historical Sample of the Netherlands has a total of 77.000 entries from the birth registers, which do or don't bear the signature of the informer. This collection of informer's signatures will be the basis of the analyses to come.

Please note that this collection is no longer a random, representative sample of the Dutch population. There may be a bias. Fathers who have entered a lot of children will be overrepresented; people who did not get any children will not be represented. And informers, who happen to be not the father of the child, may be biased as well: there may be an overrepresentation of doctors, for instance.

But because the percentage of informers who are not the father of the child is rather small, the possibility of misrepresentation will be small as well. I am convinced that the data we are going to use give us an accurate view of the level of illiteracy in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.

3. Three analyses

With the current set of Historical Sample data it therefore is possible to analyse the development of literacy and illiteracy in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century more deeply. The nice thing is that is even possible to cast a glance into the eighteenth century as well. Those who informed the municipal authorities about the birth of a child, as they were obliged to do from 1812 onwards, were of different age, so that, from birth certificates that were registered from 1812 to 1825, we get an idea of the ability to put a signature from a man who was born in the 1770's or 1780's.

Apart from the informer's signature, there is more information about him on the birth certificate: his name, his age, his profession and, of course, the municipality where the birth certificate was issued. On the basis of these data, the following analyses can be made:

1. An analysis of the development of male illiteracy from 1775 to 1900, on the basis of signatures put on the birth certificate.
2. An analysis of regional, that is municipal, differences in illiteracy decline, on the basis of the place of birth;
3. An analysis of occupational differences in illiteracy and illiteracy decline, on the basis of the occupations the informers stated on the birth certificate;

These analyses will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

4. The development of illiteracy in the Netherlands, 1775-1900

It is always assumed that illiteracy in the Netherlands was a phenomenon that has been peripheral from the sixteenth century onwards. These assumptions are based on the idea that Protestantism gained influence in our country, especially when the Dutch Reformed Church became a state religion. The Protestant church stimulated people to read their bibles by themselves, which of course was a major incentive for people to learn to read. But we don't have much hard evidence on the reading and writing capabilities of the Dutch population. One of the few exceptions comes from the wedding registers of Amsterdam. They have been saved from 1578 onwards. And the registers tell us a story of a slow, but steady decline of male and female illiteracy throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Illiteracy rates in the Netherlands, 1630-1780

Male illiteracy declined from 43 percent in 1630, 30 percent in 1680, 24 percent in 1730 to 15 percent in 1780. With women, the development was from 68 percent in 1630, via 56 percent in 1680, 49 percent in 1730 to 36 percent in 1780. Although the illiteracy decline of men and women show a similar trend, it must be noted that the decline of female illiteracy lagged behind: with men illiteracy levels went down with 67 percent over the whole period of time, whereas female illiteracy levels went down with less than 50 percent.

We are better informed about the nineteenth century. This has to do of course with the introduction of standardized mass registers, like birth registers, marriage registers and death registers in 1812, registers from which the Historical Sample of the Netherlands derives much of its material.

The Historical Sample is not the first to make use of such data for literacy research. There has been historical interest from the 1970's onwards, when Ad van der Woude, from Wageningen University, started research on this subject by making a sample of marriage registers throughout the country. However, the results of this research have never been published properly. Only a few results have been published in scattered places, for instance in one of the volumes of the General History of the Netherlands, and in a book about the illiteracy decline in the city of Eindhoven in the nineteenth century. What these scattered data tell us is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Illiteracy rates, men and women, 1812-1890

The graph shows the decline of illiteracy for men and women between 1820 and 1890, according to their signatures on the marriage licenses. Again, a steady decline is shown, especially for men. Women catch up later, from around 1850. They reach an illiteracy level of 25 % in 1870, a level which had

reached men already in 1820. And in 1890 women reach the 10% level, a level men had reached already 15 years before.

The data from the Historical Sample tell a similar story. See Figure 3.

Figure 3. Illiteracy rates among boys, 1775-1900

Of all the boys that were born around 1775, a vast majority, 75 percent to be exact, did learn how to read and write. But there was a minority of 25 percent that did not learn these skills. They remained illiterate. But, as time went by, this minority became smaller and smaller. It went down to 20 percent in 1800, to 15 percent in 1820, to 10 percent in 1830, to 5 percent in 1860 and to almost zero in 1880. It just goes down and down. There are in this process hardly any moments of speeding up or slowing down. Maybe the decline gains speed between 1795 and 1810, and also maybe between 1845 and 1870. And maybe there has been a period of retardation between 1820 and 1840, and after 1875, when the last hurdles towards universal literacy had to be taken. These periods in time, when the decline gains momentum, seem to coincide with certain political and cultural changes in the Netherlands. The first school laws in the Netherlands, defining the content of basic education and standards for school teachers, came into being in the very beginning of the 19th century. And the emancipation of the Roman Catholic church, which started in 1854, led to the introduction of basic education that was based on a Roman Catholic religious world view instead of a Dutch Reformed one, as a consequence of which, catholic parents were stimulated to send their children to school instead of keeping them at home. This may have an effect on the extra decline in illiteracy levels in the 1850's and 1860's. But other political events, such as the prohibition of children under the year of twelve to work in factories in 1872 and eventually, the law enforcing obligatory school enrollment in 1901 do not seem to make a difference at all. On the contrary, these measures were taken on a moment in time that literacy levels were almost down to zero already.

Therefore, one is inclined to think the decline of illiteracy as an ongoing process, which started at the beginning of the seventeenth century and ended 250 to 300 years later, when hardly any boy was born without getting a proper basic education.

5. Regional differences in illiteracy decline

Van der Woude also published data for each province. See Figure 4.

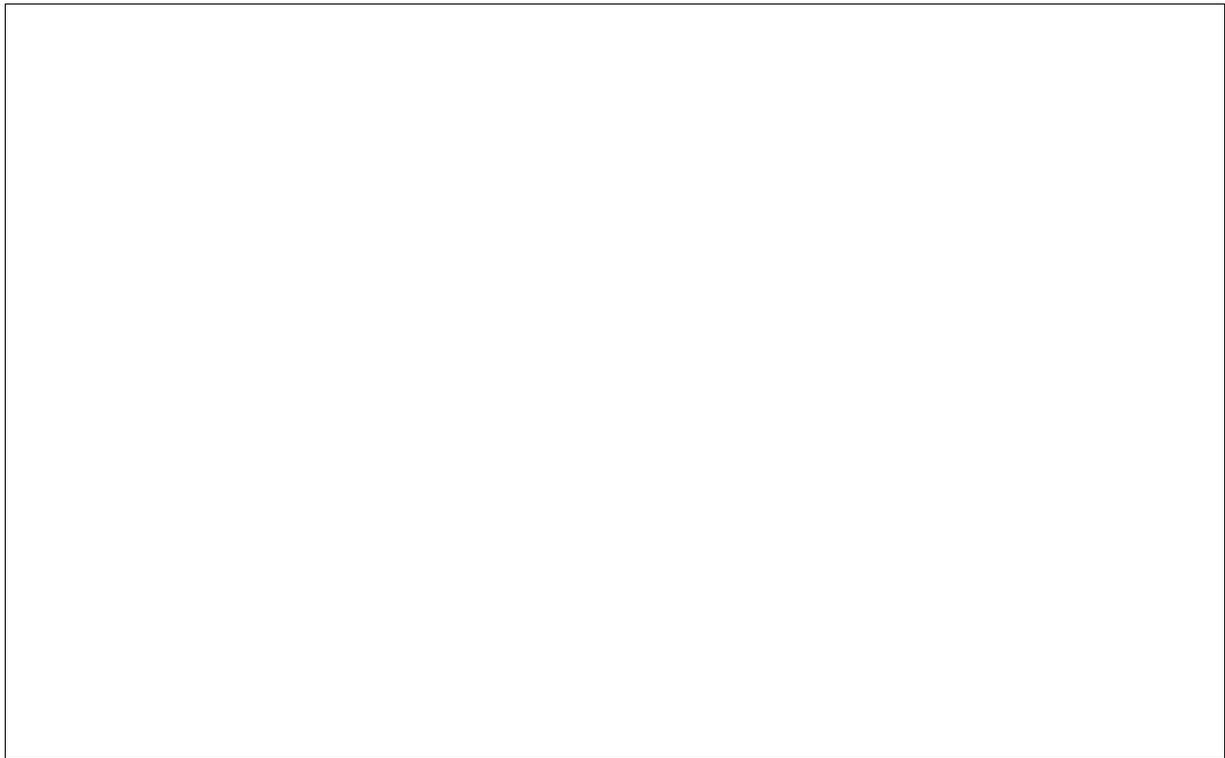


Figure 4. Provincial illiteracy rates in the Netherlands, 1820-1900

In 1820, there is a clear division between the north, centre and south of the country. The provinces of Groningen, Friesland, Drente and North-Holland have a rate of less than 20 percent. The provinces in the centre, Overijssel, Gelderland, Utrecht, Zuid-Holland and also Zeeland have rates between 20 and 30 percent, whereas the southern provinces of Noord-Brabant and Limburg have rates which average above 30 percent. In 1830, it is Drente that takes the lead. In 1840, Zuid-Holland falls below the 20 percent mark, followed by Overijssel and Gelderland in 1850, and Utrecht and Zeeland in 1860. Groningen and North-Holland come below the 10 percent mark, whereas Drente, surprisingly, goes up again, only to drop below the 10 percent mark in 1870, together with Friesland and Zuid-Holland. Followed by all other provinces in 1880, except Noord-Brabant, which comes to that point in 1890.

Figure 4 shows that there is a decline in illiteracy rates throughout the century, and throughout the country, among all provinces. But the provincial levels are very different at the beginning of the nineteenth century, causing the various provinces to reach the 10 percent mark at various moments in time. One can say that there was a group of provinces who are forerunners: Groningen, Friesland, Drente en Noord-Holland, and a group of provinces that lagged behind: Limburg and notably Noord-Brabant. All other provinces fall between these groups.

There are two provinces that don't follow the normal trend: the province of Noord-Brabant, because the decline was much slower than elsewhere, and the province of Drente, where the illiteracy rate was hardly any lower at the end of the nineteenth century than at the beginning.

With the Historical Sample it is possible to visualize the decline of illiteracy on the municipal level instead of the provincial level, allowing for much more regional variation.

This causes a few problems, however. There are a few very small municipalities where the number of births within a 25-year interval is so low that it makes quite a difference when there appears to be an

illiterate informer instead of a literate one. However, the following maps give some extra clues on the regional decline of illiteracy in the Netherlands. See Figure 5.

Before the nineteenth century, there were only a few places in the Netherlands where illiteracy was almost non-existent. These were the very isolated villages in Friesland, West-Friesland, on the Frisian islands and in Drente, where liberal protestantism reigned and the school as well as the church were at the centre of the community.

From there, the end of literacy trickled down: between 1800 and 1825 along the river IJssel towards the Achterhoek, and along the Northsea coast, and between 1825 and 1850 even further south, along the river Maas into the province of Limburg, and from the left as well as from the east, towards the central areas of the Netherlands.

The effect is that between 1825-1850 only a few “pockets of illiteracy” remain: the central part of Noord-Brabant, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, Twente, and a stretch from Zuid-Holland, via Utrecht to Gelderland, the so-called Dutch bible belt.

But after 1850, these pockets of illiteracy make way already, leaving only a few scattered areas with a relatively high illiteracy rate: the regions of West Brabant and Zeeuws Vlaanderen, and East Brabant, and some municipalities in Overijssel and Drente. The first form the Catholic Diocese of Breda; it may be that education there was not up to standards. The last three regions are characterized by a rapid influx of numerous unskilled workers who come to cut the peat soils. But even there, after 1875, the end of illiteracy was reached.



Figure 5. Provincial division of illiteracy rates in the Netherlands, 1775-1900

I think that it has become clear that a provincial division of the Netherlands is not suited to inform us about regional differences in the decline of illiteracy. There were small regions in Friesland and Drente that were far ahead of all others, and there were other small regions which lagged behind. There is retardation of some areas of Overijssel, Noord-Brabant and Limburg in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In these regions, for the most part the catholic regions of our country, illiteracy rates remained relatively high. This indeed has something to do with religion: until the 1850's the Roman Catholic Church rejected the idea of general - protestant! - education and advised parents against sending their children to school. But beware: the church may have advised against sending children to school: the majority of the parents did send them to school anyway. However, when around 1850 and 1860 Catholic congregations started their own schools for denominational education, the Catholic Church changed its attitude and became very supportive. But not everywhere at the same time: the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch clearly was ahead of the diocese of Breda.

But it is not only the catholic regions where illiteracy remains at a relatively high level. It is in Drente and the Peel, whereto the lower classes flocked to go and work in the peat industry, and it is in the

protestant Bible belt. Obviously, these protestants too rejected liberal protestant education and kept their children at home. They realized that education meant modernization, and therefore something to oppose. Only when catholics and Calvinist protestants were allowed to set up their own schools, illiteracy levels dropped to almost nothing.

This leads to the conclusion that the process of declining illiteracy rates in the Netherlands went slower in catholic regions, but also in the Dutch Bible belt. The end of illiteracy came when catholics as well as conservative protestants were allowed to start schools of their own.

6. Occupational differences in illiteracy decline

Because we know the occupation of the informers, we are able to make an analysis of differences in illiteracy levels between occupational groups.

I discerned the following six social classes:

1. Upper class
2. Higher middle class
3. Merchants, manufacturers, shopkeepers
4. Farmers, farm labourers
5. Skilled workers
6. Unskilled workers

Figure 6 shows the development of illiteracy levels among these groups.

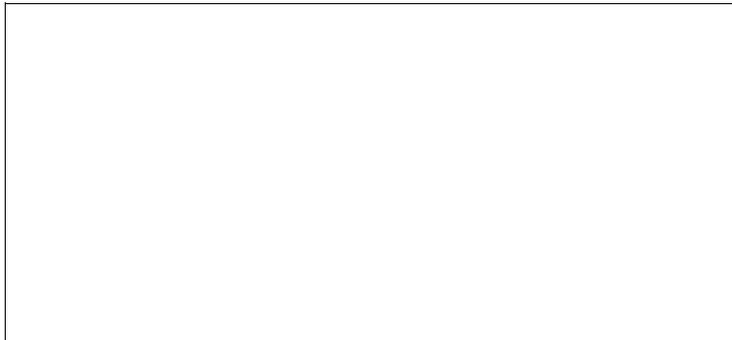


Figure 6. Occupational differences in illiteracy rates, 1775-1900

Figure 6 shows that illiteracy has always been a lower class phenomenon. Illiteracy is found among farmers and artisans as well, but the rates are considerably lower than among unskilled labourers and seem to adjust to higher class rates a bit faster. The graph therefore shows that the decline of illiteracy was a top-down diffusion process.

But we must not forget that the graph also shows that illiteracy was not predominant among all social classes. Even among the unskilled workers who were born in 1775, the majority was literate.

Figure 6 shows social differences in illiteracy rates, Figure 5 regional differences. Figure 7 shows that illiteracy was almost restricted to the lower classes of the southern provinces.

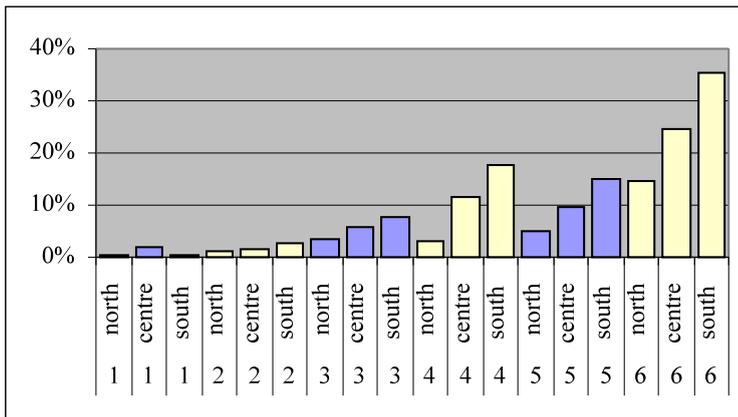


Figure 7. Literacy rates among farmers, skilled workers, and unskilled workers in the north, centre, and south of the Netherlands, 1850-1880.

Farmers in the north were almost totally literate, whereas among the farmers from the south, 18 percent was illiterate. Among the skilled workers from the north, 5 percent was illiterate, compared to 15 percent among the skilled workers from the south. And with respect to unskilled workers, there is a difference between 15 percent in the north and 35 percent in the south.

Therefore, it can be concluded that until 1850 illiteracy always as been a lower class phenomenon. After 1850, illiteracy came to an end within the lower classes as well. But even though it was a lower class phenomenon, from 1775 onwards, literacy has been predominant among all social classes – except maybe in the lower classes in Noord-Brabant and Limburg until 1825.

7. General conclusion

En dat naar school loopen was allemaal maar niks gedaan... daar leerden ze niks... met die kunsten van school konden zij niks doen... zij hadden geen lezen en schrijven geleerd en wat zouden ze d'r ook mee aangevangen hebben?... de schop en den riek, den dorschvlegel en de zeis aanpakken, dat was leeren.. Naar de school gaan alleen maar grootsigheid, waardoor de kinderen bedorven werden, opgroeiden tot niksnutters, deugnieten,... hoe grooter geest, hoe grooter beest, zoo was hun altijd voorgehouden... dat leeren in de school was ingevoerd door menschen die zelf slecht waren en de andere menschen ook wilden bederven en den godsdienst uitroeien... leeren was goed voor groote lui ... er moest gegeten worden en brood gaven de meesters in school niet...

H.H.J. Maas, *Het goud van de Peel*, 1944

Going to school was useless. There they didn't teach them what they should be taught. They themselves had never learned to read and write and why should they? Getting to know how to use spade and the fork, the flail and the scythe, that was what they should learn. Going to school was just pretentious, making children to become spoilt and good-for-nothing in the end.. The bigger mind, the bigger beast, they used to say.. Getting an education was invented by people who were bad themselves and only wanted to spoil all others as well and root out religion.. Learning was only for big shots... Food came first, and this the teachers at school didn't provide...

In this book, Maas stated that these were phrases he had heard from peat cutters in the Peel region at the beginning of the twentieth century. If we didn't know better, we would accept these words. These

peat cutters were very poor, and did not need to be able to read and write in order to do their work properly. Sending their children to school only cost money: money for tuition, for books and clothing and money because the kids could not do labour of their own during school days.

But the Historical Sample shows us that these views were to be found only among a very very small minority of the population. Nearly all people did send their children to school: not only the higher classes, but from 1850 onwards parents from all social classes, fifty years before enrolment became obligatory.

Why did they send them to school? I think that they sent them to school, because they imagined that being literate would be important to them in the end. Even illiterate parents had become convinced that education was well worth the expense. Even most illiterate catholic parents accepted protestant education for their children; it were only conservative protestant parents who rejected education as a dangerous vehicle for modernization.

Whether there really was a relation between education and modernization, remains to be seen. When more HSN data become available, especially data from the marriage registers, it will be possible to analyse whether there were people, from our sample of 70,000 Netherlanders, who did learn to read and write, whereas their parents could not, and really became more equipped to face the changes in the world surrounding them. In other words: then we can find out whether literacy had become functional throughout society and those who went to school really had become “functional literates”.