

# Creating equal opportunities at school: Empowering students from less-advantaged backgrounds through teaching academic language.

**LINEKE VAN TRICHT & LIANNE HOOGEVEEN, NETHERLANDS**

Students from a less advantaged background, for example because of a low socio-economic status or a native language other than the language spoken in school, do not always fulfil their potential in terms of academic success. The project 'Creating Equal Opportunities at School: Empowering students from less-advantaged backgrounds through teaching academic language', co-funded by Erasmus+, contributes to bridging the gap between these students' current academic success and their cognitive talent by means of teaching the Dutch academic language in schools in the Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders).

In this article we share our experiences with setting up and carrying out a project such as this. All through our process we have been so fortunate to being inspired and advised by Ian Warwick of London Gifted & Talented, who set up the REAL<sup>1</sup> project in the UK. Because of this good practice we didn't have to re-invent the wheel, but we could build on available knowledge and expertise. We would like to give you a similar head start by using this article in your process to creating equal opportunities at your school(s).

## Why

Inequality in education is a problem in many countries. Prosperous countries like the Netherlands and Belgium belong to the 10 countries in the world where the socio-economic status has the largest impact on school success<sup>2</sup>. The socio-economic status is the position people have in society. Examples of indicators that are used to measure the socio-economic status are: the language spoken at home and the income, professional status and the educational level of their parents<sup>3</sup>. Inequality in opportunities means that background and socio-economic status, instead of cognitive or academic abilities, can determine academic success<sup>4</sup> to the

detriment of the learner. Language seems to play an important role in this<sup>5</sup>.

It is essential that schools, students and parents become aware of this problem. It is also important that they should know where to find and how to make use of the learning materials that are available to teach students 'school language', also called academic language. Many students have an apparent fluency in a language which masks severe gaps in their actual (especially academic) vocabulary. The purpose of this project is to improve the academic language skills of cognitively talented students from less advantaged backgrounds. It aims at increasing the chance that these students' academic success is in line with their potential because language is no longer a barrier, leading to growth in their motivation and self-confidence.

## Our mission statement:

This project will uncover and develop unseen cognitive talents of students from disadvantaged social groups by improving their academic linguistic strategies.

From a broad perspective, the end goal should be that the influence of socio-economic status on talent development, school results and school success will be diminished. This fundamental change will ultimately lead to a more diverse and equal society.

## How

A team was formed of various schools and experts from the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom, working together in

this project, benefitting from each other's experience and expertise. The schools, Rijswijks Lyceum / Van Vredenburg College and Zuider Gymnasium in the Netherlands, and Lucerna College and Stedelijk Lyceum Pestalozzi in Belgium, are experts on working with a very diverse population. LondonG&T advised and inspired us with their REAL project, aimed at learners of English as a foreign language as well as native born students for whom 'academic' English is essentially also a foreign language. Thomas More University of Applied Sciences developed an intelligence test that is less culturally biased and therefore suitable for our target group. The Radboud University has expertise on giftedness and Bureau Talent is expert on giftedness in secondary education.

As a team, we formulated two questions:

1. How can we identify gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds?
2. How can we improve their language skills in order to improve their opportunities for success at higher education levels?

## What

1. How can we identify gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

The first step in the Erasmus+ project is to select cognitively talented students from less-advantaged backgrounds through a culturally less biased test. The 10% to 20% best scoring students per school were invited to participate in the language

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.realproject.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Office of Research (2017). Building the future: Children and the sustainable development goals in rich countries. Opgehaald van [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14_eng.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2016). De staat van het onderwijs [Onderwijsverslag 2014/2015]. Opgehaald van <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/documenten/publicaties/2016/04/13/staat-van-het-onderwijs-2014-2015>

<sup>4</sup> Onderwijs in Cijfers (2018). Eindexamens voortgezet onderwijs 2016/2017. Opgehaald van <https://www.onderwijsincijfers.nl/kengetallen/vo/leerlingen-vo/prestaties-eindexamens>

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, L. (2002). Measuring vocabulary size in English as an additional language. *Language Teaching Research* 6,2 (2002); pp. 145–173.

<sup>6</sup> Magez, W., Tierens, M., Huynegem, J. van, Parijs, K. van, Decaluwé, V., Bos, A. (2015). CoVaT-CHC Basisversie: Cognitieve vaardigheidstest volgens het CHC-model. Psychodiagnostisch Centrum en CAPvzw.

<sup>7</sup> Giezenaar, G., e.a. (2017). Wijze woorden. Woordenlijst Academisch Nederlands met idioom oefeningen. Intertaal.

<sup>8</sup> Reints, M., & P. Merckx (2017). Examenbundel 2017/2018 vwo Nederlands. ThiemeMeulenhoff.

programme. There were two cohorts: the first one from November 2019 until March 2020; the second one from March until July 2021.

In our project we used the CoVaT-CHC<sup>6</sup>, an intelligence test that can be administered as a group screening and consists of verbal and non-verbal subtests. The non-verbal subtests were used to select the cognitively most able students. The verbal subtests were used to measure progress in language abilities.

## 2. How can we improve their language skills in order to improve their opportunities for success in higher education levels?

The selected students were invited to participate in the programme, consisting of an online programme to help them learn academic Dutch and small-group learning sessions with a teacher.

Teachers and experts worked together to compile a list of academic words, based on previously developed lists<sup>78</sup>, amongst others an academic wordlist developed

for newcomers in the Netherlands or Belgium who want to study at a university.

The online programme allows students to study and use the words on their own. The small-group learning sessions with the teacher are aimed at discussing and using the words. Playing with the new words and looking for the words in new contexts are also part of these lessons. The aim of the programme is that students will be able to recognize and use academic language in formal school settings as well as in their everyday lives so that a lack of language skills no longer forms a barrier when it comes to academic success.

The project will be finalized in the autumn of 2021. In the next issue of ECHA News we hope to bring the results of the research. In meantime we are working on continuation of the project. Are you interested in participating? Please contact Lineke van Tricht: [lineke@bureautalent.nl](mailto:lineke@bureautalent.nl).

**Prof. Dr. Lianne Hoogeveen**, current President of the European Council for High Ability (ECHA), is Programme Director of the Radboud International Training of High

Ability (RITHA). She coordinates the master specialization 'Gifted Education' at Radboud University. As a mental health psychologist, she examines and counsels adolescents and adults with high abilities at CBO Talent Development in Nijmegen. As part of the Behavioral Science Institute (Radboud University), specifically in the research group RATiO she is involved in research on giftedness and education, cooperating with colleagues of Dutch and international universities.

Contact: [lianne.hoogeveen@ru.nl](mailto:lianne.hoogeveen@ru.nl)

**Lineke van Tricht** is founder and director of Bureau Talent, centre of expertise in the development of cognitive talent (10-18 years old). After having worked in secondary education as a teacher and school leader, she specialized in gifted education and took the training to become an ECHA-specialist in Gifted Education. At Bureau Talent, she leads several projects on gifted education, both nationally and internationally. Beside her work at Bureau Talent, she is a freelance teacher at the Radboud International Training of High Ability (RITHA).

Contact: [lineke@bureautalent.nl](mailto:lineke@bureautalent.nl)

## QUOTATION

# Advanced Placement is the best predictor of success at college

Susan G. Assouline