

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

THE DUTCH SCHOOL ‘DE SCHAKEL’

Wilna Cornelisse

‘De Schakel’ is a Dutch School in Western Australia, which was established in 1995 by Dutch educator Wilna Cornelisse. The purpose of the school is to assist Dutch expatriates living in Western Australia (WA) to maintain educational standards for their children, which are still relevant to the curriculum in The Netherlands. Since the start of 2014, ‘De Schakel’ (means The Link) has been taken over by a Dutch educational organization. Since then the school acquired the name LanguageOne Perth and it is now part of a worldwide umbrella for Dutch schools abroad.

The school’s aim is to make it possible for expatriate children to slot back seamlessly into the Dutch education system, after a few years in Australia. LanguageOne also believes that mother tongue proficiency strengthens the foundation for acquisition of language skills and academic achievements of students. Mother tongue education is an essential investment in future success, especially for children growing up abroad.

It is not the only Dutch school that Western Australia has ever had. There was a Dutch Primary school at Fairbridge Farm in 1945-1946 and a High School at Burt Hall, St Georges Cathedral immediately after WWII, for the

Figure 1
Teaching in the Dutch room at the Quintilian School 2014. Courtesy: Wilna Cornelisse.



children of the second evacuation out of The Netherlands East Indies at the close of war.

The students of LanguageOne Perth are partly drawn from the fairly large Dutch expatriate community residing in Western Australia, brought here to service Dutch institutions; mainly Mining and Geophysics companies. These include *Fugro*, *Royal Netherlands Shell*, *ING Group*, *Rabobank Boskalis ABN-AMRO*, *Fortis*, *AEGON*, *Unilever*, *Delta Lloyd*, *Philips*, and *Akzo Nobel*.

Before leaving The Netherlands to work for these companies, some Dutch expatriates had to undergo orientation training in The Hague, designed to familiarize them with the socio-economic, physical and emotional environment in which they would need to operate, including its customs and traditions. However, this program did little to help the children overcome the disadvantages associated with the disruption to their education. Parents had few options but to send them to local schools or pay the high fees for an International School education, which incidentally they would also need to maintain on their return home.



Figure 2
In the Quintilian Room - reading and talking
about a picture book.
Courtesy: Wilna Cornelisse.

Consequently ‘De Schakel’ emerged just in time to fill a much-needed gap in the system. Its founder and coordinator Wilna Cornelisse – who is also married to a Dutch-Australian migrant whose parents settled in Australia in the 1950s and later returned to The Netherlands – had been a teacher in both The Netherlands and abroad for over 20 years. However, as Wilna now recounts, the school’s beginnings were modest.

Wilna began by tutoring just one student, and at that time could never have guessed that her endeavour would develop into an official Dutch school that would attract funding from the Dutch Government.

Wilna currently employs a group of 10 qualified Dutch teachers who work with the students on weekdays between 7.30 am and 7.00 pm. Parents can choose to have their children taught individually, or in small groups of two to three at a location of their choosing. However, around eighty per cent of the lessons are taught during school time at their usual school. Children are taken out of their general classrooms and given intense instruction in Dutch curriculum subjects. The home-schooled are taught at home before or after school. Comprehensive liability insurance covers both student and teacher in every teaching situation.

The educational package offered at LanguageOne Perth follows the Dutch curriculum and is supervised by the Dutch Ministry of Education. Every student of 2 years and 9 months who has at least one Dutch speaking parent, is welcome to the school. Extra aids are available including; a free up-to-date library of over a thousand books for 2 to 17 year old children, text books for the same age ranges, the newest educational computer software developed in The Netherlands, a variety of puzzles, mind teasers, games, Dutch DVDs, movies and educational television programs, celebrations and activities around *Sinterklaas*, Children’s Book Week, the King’s Birthday, a yearly school camp and other social events.

The school keeps up to date with any changes to the Dutch curriculum by communicating actively with the *Stichting Nederlands Onderwijs in het Buitenland* (NOB), Cito and other LanguageOne locations around the world. Working together on cultural festivities, enables them to invite children’s book authors to come over from The Netherlands every year to work with the children. Another way the school maintains its Dutch standards is by a yearly trip to The Netherlands by several of its teachers, to attend educational courses organised by LanguageOne and NOB.

LanguageOne Perth currently has 130 students and 10 teachers. One teacher is located in Karratha and the others work at 16 different schools scattered around the Perth metropolitan area. Its broad educational program is directed at children from 2 years and 9 months to 17 years of age.

Approximately 50 per cent of its students are expatriates and the remainder are children of Dutch birth or descent, whose parents wish them to keep up a familiarity with the Dutch language. LanguageOne Perth also runs four

pre-kindergarten groups: three at the community centre in Claremont and one in Marangaroo.¹

LanguageOne's structured and schematic approach to the children's Dutch education has shown results in the past years. Those students who have returned to The Netherlands, found that they were able to merge back into the Dutch education system without any great difficulty.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In The Netherlands, the equivalent term to kindergarten is kleuterschool. From the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century the term Fröbelschool was also common, after Friedrich Fröbel [who opened the first kindergarten in Germany in 1840]. However this term gradually faded in use as the verb Fröbelen gained a slight derogatory meaning in everyday language. Until 1985, it used to be a separate non-compulsory form of education (for children aged 4–6 years), after which children (aged 6–12 years) attended the primary school (lagere school). After 1985, both forms were integrated into one, called basisonderwijs (Dutch for primary education). The country also offers both private and subsidized daycares, which are non compulsory, but nevertheless very popular. (Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kindergarten#History>).

Sinterklaas, Leah van Lieshout
Leah van Lieshout - a second generation Dutch artist - grapples with her identity as being between two cultures.
Courtesy: Leah van Lieshout

