

# **Steps towards inclusive education in the Netherlands: a long and winding road.**

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## ***Introduction***

From 1900 on a small-scale system of special schools for various groups of children gradually emerged in the Netherlands. Special education was regulated for the first time through special regulations under the heading of the Primary Education Act of 1920. In 1967 the so-called 'Special Education Decree', specifying the regulations for schools for special education, was issued. In 1985 this Decree was replaced by the Interim Act for Special Education and Secondary Special Education (ISOVSO). In the Netherlands school attendance is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 16. From the age of 16 there is a two-year, part-time compulsory education phase. Children generally attend primary school at the age of 4, until 11 or 12 years of age.

The educational system in the Netherlands basically consists of regular schools and special schools. Compared to many other European countries, the special education system in our country is extensive, differentiated and segregated. In the past 50 years Dutch special education has developed into a wide-ranging system for students expected not to be able to attend regular schools. The Dutch system for special education distinguished in its hey-days 15 types of special schools. It was said that we had in effect, for every disability a separate school type. Not only the number of school types, but also the number of students attending these schools grew. Fifteen years ago 4.2% of students between 4 and 11 (Dutch primary school age) attended one of the special education school types (Pijl, 1997), while 30 years ago this was a mere 2.2% (Meijer, Pijl & Kramer, 1989). This development –from 2.2 to 4.2 per cent in fifteen years- was primarily caused by the growth of two major special education school types: LOM schools, which cater for Mild Learning Disabled students and MLK schools, for Educable Mentally Retarded students.

This practice of referring students with special needs to segregated special schools became increasingly criticized. A first step towards inclusion was the Primary School Act of 1985. This Act stated that the major goal of primary schools is to offer appropriate instruction to all students aged 4 to 12, and to guarantee all students an uninterrupted school career. Ideally, each student would receive the instruction that fits his or her unique educational needs. However, in the years after 1985, the expansion of segregated schools for special education did not stop.

### *Segregation maintaining factors*

There are several factors relevant in maintaining segregation in education. The separation between regular and special education was maintained through legislation, regulations and funding. Regular and special education had its own laws and regulations. Special and regular education work independently and it is this system aspect, among other things, which stimulates referral to special education. Special support was only available after being admitted to school for special education. Funding for special needs in the Netherlands is mainly provided by the central government. The municipalities are responsible for the costs of transporting students with special needs to schools and for making school buildings accessible for these students. The amount of funding in regular schools to meet students' special needs, thereby preventing referral to special education, was always much smaller than the amount of funding available for students in special education. That mechanism proved to be a tremendous incentive to refer students to special schools. Legal obstacles made it difficult for the two separate school systems to organise this support in a more flexible way. It is difficult to realise collaboration between regular and special education, because each school has its own financial, administrative and staff systems. This means that the student with special needs has to be taken to the facilities instead of vice versa. The responsibility for the student is then passed on to another part of the educational system.

Teachers in regular school seeking support in order to avoid referral to segregated settings were only able to ask additional support from services located outside the school building: in schools for special education, school counselling services and similar support institutions. Bringing in support from outside the school supported the 'specialness' of the students involved. Without additional support the only way out for teachers was to refer students with specific needs to schools that have more time, extra funding and expertise: the separate schools for special education (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1990).

Developments in society are regarded as important factors as well. There is more pressure on output in terms of performances and parents have become much more active in demanding high quality education for their children. The differences between students seem to increase and schools were not able to deal with these growing differences. As a result more and more children ended up in the referral danger zone. Despite all the educational innovations of the past decades, it is clear that education mainly focuses on the average student. If there are too many students with specific needs in the classroom, teaching becomes a complex problem.

Referral to schools for special education is an attractive alternative: it offers special provision for students with special needs. It is the system itself that deprives regular education of the possibility

of helping students under the same conditions. In this sense, the provision enhances the need (the law of supply and demand).

### ***Debate on inclusion***

For a long time the highly differentiated and extensive special education system was seen as expressing the concern for students with special learning needs in Dutch education. Nowadays this point of view is the subject of much debate. A growing group of policy makers, educators and parents think segregation in education has gone too far. A gradually increasing number of parents want their special needs child to attend a regular school because they like to send their child to the same school as their other children, to a neighbourhood school and to educate their child with other non-special needs children. They want their child to receive a normal schooling as possible. Compared to other countries, parents in our country were never very prominent partners in the inclusion debates. There is no tradition of parent pressure groups in the Netherlands, who actively advocate inclusion of students with special educational needs. The one exception is the association of parents of children with Down's syndrome (Scheepstra & Pijl, 1996). This association has succeeded in influencing many regular primary schools to place children with Down's syndrome. It has been pointed out, that special education placement does not diminish the problems and academic difficulties of the students referred and that it often functions as safety-valve: i.e. as an additional means of relieving regular education of difficult-to-handle and time-consuming students (Pijl, 1989). In this sense the high costs and side-effects of a segregated system, such as labelling or a shattered school career, are unjustified. The advocates of inclusion further believe that inclusion is possible by pointing at examples in other countries (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, England and the United States) and experimental projects in the Netherlands.

The discussion also refers to a wider societal context. The segregation of these students is considered in conflict with widely accepted human rights, socially undesirable, and a perhaps convenient, but not necessary way to provide special services. Those who argue for inclusion see the issue primarily as a civil rights issue: segregation should be avoided and teachers will just have to learn to accommodate students with special needs. They also claim to have great difficulty distinguishing major parts of the students with special needs from slow-learners in regular primary schools. In their view, in spite of referral, there is a considerable overlap between the two groups. Among politicians, administrators and certain teacher and parent groups there is a fair consensus that a halt should be drawn to the growing numbers of special education placements. However, substantial numbers of both regular and special education teachers as well as parents of students now in special education question inclusion. Special school staff's jobs may change. Many

special education teachers will start working in regular schools, for example as special need consultants within schools, for at least a part of their time. The teachers do not principally reject the push for more inclusion, but believe students with learning difficulties and/or mental retarded are better off segregated because they need the highly differentiated, individual and therefore more effective, teaching and counselling in special education.

### ***Policy-making on inclusion.***

The educational system in the Netherlands is administered at a national level by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. Although we have quite a history of segregated special education there is no separate department for special needs education. The government launched three policy programmes, all aimed at stimulating the inclusion of students with special needs.

The Dutch inclusion policy is in fact a rational continuation of the policy on primary education in earlier decades. In 1985, the Primary Education Act was passed. The major goal of primary schools, documented in this Act, is to offer appropriate instruction to all children and to guarantee all children an uninterrupted school career (Wet op het Basisonderwijs, 1985). Teachers should learn to practice adaptive instruction and by doing so they should try to prevent learning problems to occur. Ideally, each child would receive the instruction that fits its unique educational needs. As a consequence teachers were supposed to change their policies on grade retention. If primary schools are able to offer adaptive instruction, it was expected that the number of special needs students would decrease more or less spontaneously. Several projects were initiated that supposed to promote inclusion policies of schools.

In the years after 1985 it became clear that the goals mentioned above were not sufficiently met by the average school, even though the educational policy was truly supported by most schools. Whole class teaching, the predominant model of classroom organization, did not disappear rapidly and students were still being retained in nearly all primary schools (Reezigt, 1993). In addition, the expansion of special education did not stop. In 1988, our Ministry tried to stop this expansion once again, this time by fixing the number of appointed special education teachers. However, this arrangement turned out to be contradictory to educational laws and the fixation of teacher formation was not implemented.

In 1990, a government policy document, 'Together to School Again' (the so-called WSNS policy) intended to make a fresh start in integrating students with special needs. Under this policy, all primary schools and the special schools for mild learning disabled and mild mentally retarded students have been grouped into regional clusters. It resulted in mainstream and special schools working together; special needs co-ordinators being appointed in every mainstream school,

launching of training programmes, passing of new legislation, and in drawing up new regulations for funding of mainstream and special schools. All these measures are supposed to act as a push towards inclusion.

The inclusion policy in our country also had a financial goal. The goal was not to realize any budget-cuts, but to stop the expected growth of the number of students in special education, resulting in a more or less fixed expenditure (Meijer, Meijnen & Scheerens, 1993). However, many educational practitioners were somewhat sceptical in this respect. The average costs for learning disabled and educable mentally retarded students in special education are twice as high as the costs for regular education, so a reduction of these costs would of course be appreciated by the Ministry.

Under the new WSNS legislation the special schools for learning disabled and mild mentally retarded students became part of the regular school system. In 1995, parliament decided to change the funding system drastically: each of the 250 school clusters was to be funded equally, based on the total enrolment in primary education. Regions had to adapt their special education provision to the new funding structure. Some regions had to close special schools, especially in areas where there was a high degree of segregated provision compared to other regions, while other areas received additional funds as a reward for a regional effective inclusion policy.

Funding special needs education in mainstream schools has long been restricted. Under current regulations, however, more SEN funding was made available to mainstream schools. The 'Together to School Again' policy allows regular schools flexibility in realising various special needs provisions. School clusters may decide to maintain special provision in special schools. They can also decide to transfer parts of that provision to mainstream schools in one form or another. The key factor is that regular schools participate in the decision-making process concerning the structure of special education provision in their cluster. Each of the school clusters is funded equally, based on the total enrolment in primary education. By 2002 the new funding structure was fully operational. The new funding system is intended to stimulate inclusion, as it enables schools to take the services to the students instead of transferring students to the services.

For secondary schools offering education for students with learning difficulties and mild mentally retarded, a restructuring of mainstream secondary education and secondary special education was proposed in 1995. The idea was to rearrange the lower forms of mainstream secondary education and secondary special education into different instructional programmes. Next to these programmes an individual support structure was developed. This can be seen as the individual variant of each of the programmes, using a methodology, didactic and pedagogical approach more suited to the individual needs of students. Students not expected to obtain a certificate, even with considerable

extra support, can attend the 'practical training' programme. This prepares them for low-skilled jobs.

A regional referral committee decides on the eligibility of students for separate learning support or practical training. The committee applies centrally developed criteria to decide on placement. The criteria relate to IQ range, level of learning backwardness and/or social-emotional problems. This policy changed the legal status of parts of secondary special education. Secondary special education for students with learning difficulties and mild mentally retarded was no longer part of a separate special education law, but became an integral part of the new secondary education law. In line with the inclusion policy for the elementary special schools - the WSNS policy - schools for secondary education and schools for secondary special education now work together in school clusters. The funding for the clusters is based on the total enrolment in this section of secondary education. The special needs support structure has been gradually phased in over a four-year period, ending in August 2002.

For the education of students with other types of special needs (sensory, physical, or mental impairments or behavioural problems) a separate line of policy development was started. Until 2003, most of these students could only receive the support they need after admittance to a full-time special school. This financing mechanism (funding special schools on the basis of the number of children that are placed) was changed in favour of linking financing of special services to the student involved, regardless of the type of schooling. The system changed from supply-oriented financing to a system in which the means are forwarded to the person requiring the services: demand-oriented financing. The policy is known as the 'back-pack' policy: students take the funding with them to the school of their choice (see development of inclusion/inclusion). If a student meets the criteria for this so-called 'student-bound budget', parents and students can choose a school, special or mainstream, and take part in decision making on the best way to use the funds in order to meet the student's special needs. The eligibility criteria for a 'back-pack' are largely based on existing practice. Criteria for the visually impaired are a visual acuity:  $\leq 0,3$  or a visual field:  $\leq 30^\circ$  and limited participation in education as a result of the visual impairment. For hearing impaired students a hearing loss  $> 80$  dB (or for hard of hearing students 35-80 dB) and limited participation in education are required. The decision to provide extra funding for mentally impaired students will be largely based on IQ ( $< 60$ ), for physically impaired and chronically ill students medical data showing diagnosed disabilities / illness are needed. The criteria for behaviourally disturbed students require diagnosis in terms of the categories of the DSM-IV, problems at school, at home and/or in the community and a limited participation in education as a result of behaviour problems.

Directly linked to the new funding system was a re-organisation of special (including secondary) education. The different school types have been re-organised into four so-called expertise centres: those for the visually impaired, those for students with communication disorders, those for physically and mentally impaired and those for students with behaviour problems.

The regulations do not force regular schools to place students with special needs if the parents and the student should request this. However, only in cases where a school can clearly demonstrate to the school inspectorate and parents that it is incapable of providing suitable schooling for a special needs student is placement denied.

Late 2002 definite legislation was accepted.

### ***Numbers of students in regular and special education***

Table 1 shows the number of students in different regular and special schooltypes. The table shows that the number of students in separate elementary regular schools for special education goes down. In percentages (see table 3): from 3.17% in 2000 to 2.66 in 2010 (see also figure 1). The number of students in segregated special schools is rather stable. In percentages (see table 2): from 1.86 to 2.12%.

The second part of table 1 shows a growth in the number of students in secondary special education. The number of students has almost doubled in 10 years: from 15499 to 34648. In percentages (see table 2): 1.7 to 3.56% (see also figure 2).

Table 1 Numbers of students in regular and special education<sup>1</sup>

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Bao</b>	1.546.548	1.549.968	1.549.139	1.548.969	1.553.332	1.534.362
<b>SBao</b>	51.558	52.077	50.088	46.310	44.055	42.821
<b>Bao:Special needs<sup>2</sup></b>	-	-	11000	18500	22100	21100
<b>SO</b>	30325	33068	34092	35836	34540	34215
<b>VSO</b>	15499	18626	21651	26084	31724	34648
<b>VO</b>	894.120	913.671	934.761	942.773	934.560	939.629
<b>VO:Special needs<sup>2</sup></b>	-	-	3500	10200	14500	15700

<sup>1</sup>Bao = Elementary education, SBao = Regular schools for special ed, SO = special education, VSO=Secondary special education, VO = secondary education.

<sup>2</sup>Students formally labelled as having special needs. These students can attend Bao or SBao schools in elementary education and VO schools in secondary education.

Since the introduction of the back-pack funding system in 2003 the number of students formally labelled as having special needs has gone up seriously. In elementary education from 11000 in 2004 to 21100 in 2010 (see also figure 3 BAO line). The same goes for the students in secondary education: a growth from 3500 in 2004 to 15700 in 2010 (figure 3 VO line).

Table 2 Percentages of students with special needs

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
<b>BAO</b>	94,97	94,8	94,85	94,96	95,18	95,22
<b>SBAO</b>	3,17	3,18	3,07	2,84	2,70	2,66
<b>SO</b>	1,86	2,02	2,08	2,20	2,12	2,12
<b>VSO</b>	1,70	2	2,26	2,69	3,28	3,56
<b>VO</b>	98,3	98	97,74	97,31	96,72	96,44

These students largely attend regular schools. It is assumed that most of them were in regular schools without any funding and were referred in order to secure additional special needs funding after the new regulations came into force. These student are counted twice in table 1. Table 1 is in fact a mix of the numbers of students in different schooltypes and ways of funding.

Table 3 Number of students in elementary special schools

	2000/'01	2002/'03	2004/'05	2006/'07	2008/'09	2010/'11	2011/'12
<b>Total nr students in special schools</b>	30325	33068	34092	35836	34540	34215	34272
<b>Cluster 1</b>							
<b>Visual disabled students</b>	516	514	506	330	367	366	370
<b>Complex disabilities</b>				178	145	132	132
<b>Cluster 2</b>							
<b>Deaf students</b>	271	245	437	451	442	400	389
<b>Hard of hearing</b>	1192	1180	960	639	514	518	532
<b>Deaf-blind students</b>			32	34	25	27	27
<b>Deaf &amp; cognitive disabilities</b>			327	275	213	214	209
<b>Hard of hearing &amp; cognitive disab.</b>			173	74	70	46	51
<b>Speech /language disabilities</b>	3747	4198	4841	5541	5643	5660	5656
<b>Cluster 3</b>							
<b>Cognitive disabilities</b>	9021	10122	9921	9506	7965	7091	6955
<b>Physical health problem</b>			1409	1235	1203	1132	1098
<b>Motor disabilities</b>	1333	1247	1333	1428	1415	1422	1402
<b>Complex disabilities</b>			3839	4257	4304	4400	4291
<b>Cluster 4</b>							
<b>Behaviour problems</b>	3593	3926	4030	4602	4961	5225	5601
<b>Students in assesment institutes</b>	1522	1600	1813	1919	1889	1885	1933
<b>Mental health problem</b>			4471	5367	5384	5697	5626

Source: Central bureau of statistics



Table 4 Number of students in secondary special schools

	2000/'01	2002/'03	2004/'05	2006/'07	2008/'09	2010/'11	2011/'12
<b>Total nr students in special schools</b>	15499	18626	21651	26084	31724	34648	35865
<b>Cluster 1</b>							
Visual disabled students	194	186	206	189	190	203	201
Complex disabilities				27	57	58	48
<b>Cluster 2</b>							
Deaf students	154	126	211	221	217	225	215
Hard of hearing	1160	1321	1440	1606	1690	1713	1819
Deaf-blind students			30	28	32	28	23
Deaf & cognitive disabilities			82	74	100	77	72
Hard of hearing & cognitive disab.			92	1231	142	172	72
<b>Speech /language disabilities</b>							
<b>Cluster 3</b>							
Cognitive disabilities	4855	5724	6515	7397	9296	9477	9412
Physical health problem			368	545	655	761	798
Motor disabilities	1316	1439	1405	1296	1328	1057	1068
Complex disabilities			499	921	1027	1638	1902
<b>Cluster 4</b>							
Behaviour problems	6273	8067	9441	11791	13661	15077	15670
Students in assessment institutes	108	115	133	141	212	303	351
Mental health problem			1229	1727	3116	3859	4095

Source: Central bureau of statistics

Fig 1

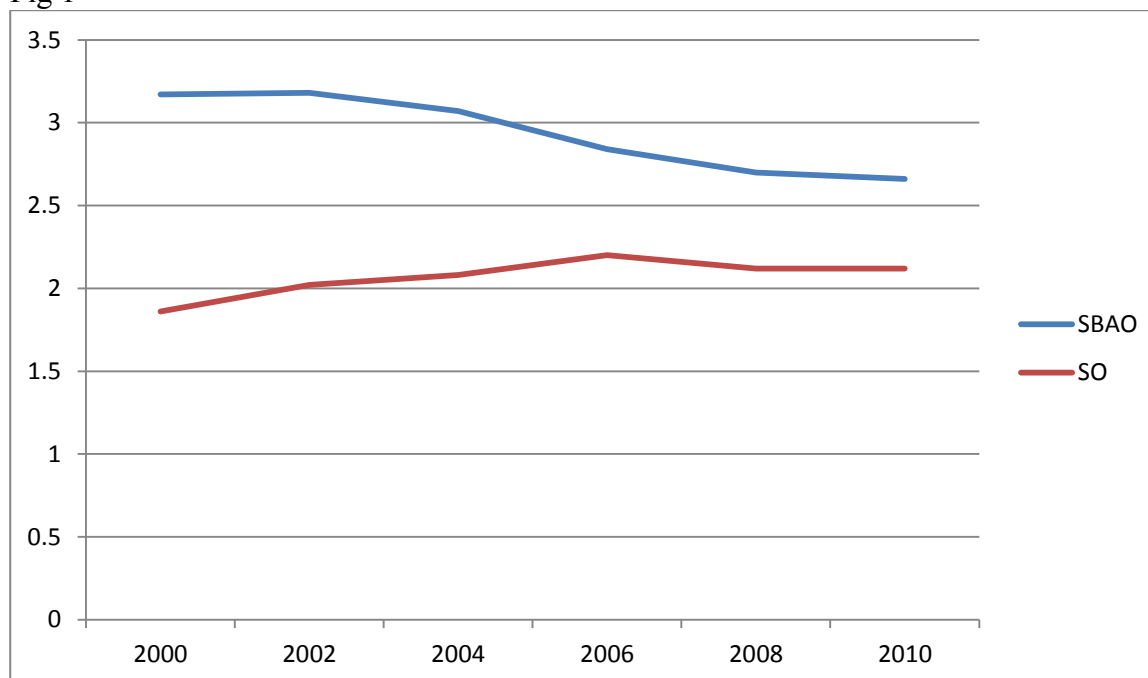


Figure 2

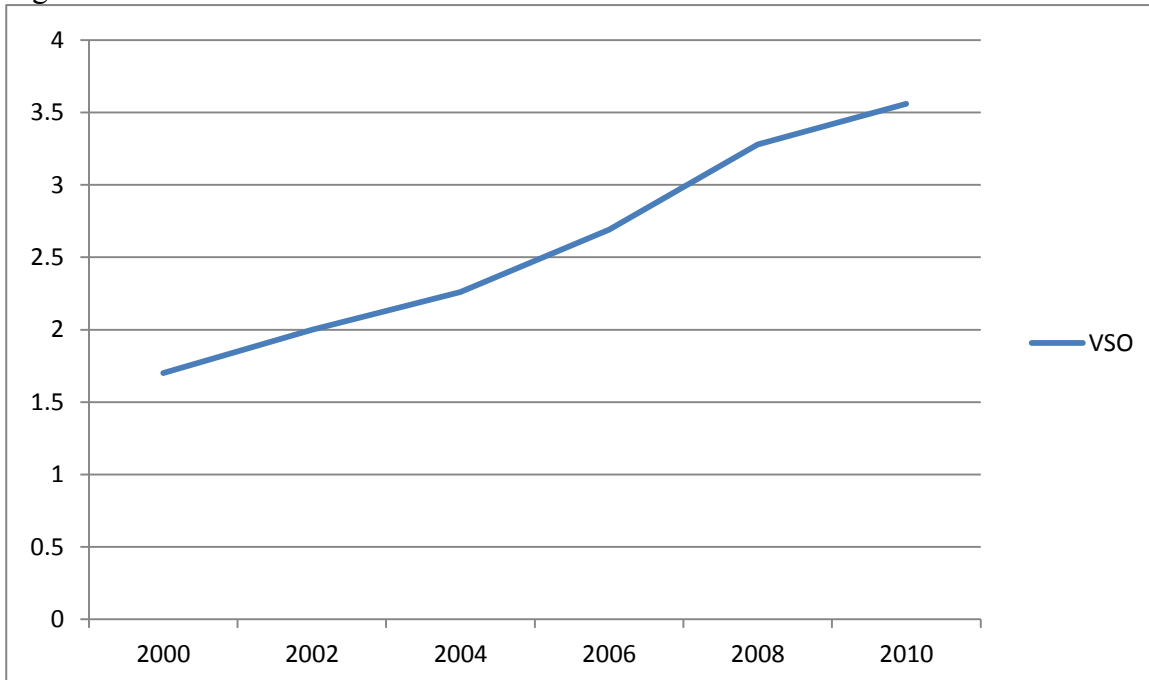


Figure 3. Percentage of students formally labelled as having special needs

