Funding, population-density and government control as factors in exclusion in education

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Abstract

CONCEPT!!

1 Language check needed

2 Reference list not ready

3 Plan to implement some citations from the respondents

Introduction

From 1900 on a system of special schools for various groups of children gradually was established in the Netherlands. Special education was regulated for the first time by special sections in the Primary Education Act of 1920. Since then Dutch special education has developed into a wide-ranging system for students expected not to be able to attend regular schools. The educational system in the Netherlands basically consists of regular schools and special schools. Compared to many other countries the special education system in our country is extensive, differentiated and segregated. 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 the special schools grew (Dekker, 1999). In 1975 2.2 per cent of all students between 4- to 11- years old attended a special education school. This percentage almost doubled to 4.3 per cent in the following 20 years (Pijl, 1997; Smeets, 2007). In the period after 1995 the growth of the percentage of students in special schools more or less stabilized (4.78 per cent in 2010). The growth of 2.1 per cent between 1975 and 1995 was primarily caused by the growth of two major special education school types: LOM schools catering for students with so-called Mild Learning Disabilities, and MLK schools catering for students with Mild Mental Retardations. Having said that, it is noticeable that all other schools for special education (SE) also contributed substantially to the growth (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percentages in regular and special schools, 1975 - 2010

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2010
LOM	.75	1.05	1.50	1.85	1.80	2.66[1]
MLK	.84	.91	.92	1.23	1.31	
Other SE	.65	.70	.77	1.05	1.19	2.12
Total	2.25	2.66	3.20	4.13	4.29	4.78

Source: Smeets, 2007
1. In 1998 LOM and MLK were combined.

With so many special schools in a densely populated country, it is easy to attend special schooling. The practice of referring students with special needs to segregated special schools became increasingly criticized. A first modest step towards inclusion was the Primary School Act of 1985. The Act stated that regular schools should offer appropriate instruction to all students aged 4 to 11 (Ministerie van Onderwijs & Wetenschappen, 1985). Ideally each student would receive the instruction that meets his or her unique educational needs. However, in the years after 1985 the growth of placements in segregated special schools

continued. New policies came into force in 1995 and in 2003. The 1995 “Together to school again” policy focused on the LOM and MLK schools and the 2003 “Back-pack” policy addressed the remaining special school types. Unfortunately, none of these policy initiatives has been particularly successful in reducing the number of students with special needs in segregated settings.

This study addresses the question which factors have been (partly) responsible for not being able to show progress in making elementary schools more inclusive.

Debating inclusion

For a long time the highly differentiated and extensive special education system in the Netherlands was seen as expressing concern for students with special learning needs: it was what could be expected of a civilised country. Nowadays this point of view is the subject of much debate (Pijl, 2010; ECPO, 2013). A growing group of policy makers, educators and parents hold the view that segregation in Dutch education has gone too far. A gradually increasing number of parents want their child with special needs to attend a regular school. They want to attend their child to the same school as their other children, to a neighbourhood school and to educate their child together with children without special needs. 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.

Still, many parents prefer their child with special needs to attend a special school. They point at the additional training of teachers, at the support by specialists and at the small class sizes in special schools. Some parents seem to expect almost too much from special school placement. Special school attendance does not imply that after some years all problems and difficulties are gone. This, by the way, also holds for regular schools.

From a systems’ point of view, it has been pointed out that special education placement often functions as a safety-valve: i.e. as an additional means of relieving regular education of difficult-to-handle and time-consuming students (Pijl, 1989). That together with the high costs

of the special system and the negative side-effects of a segregated system (labelling, commuting and difficulties in finding a job) leads to seriously questioning special school placement. The special schools defend their role by pointing at a school system with a lot of expertise and support for the students faced with serious difficulties in the regular schools. They further argue that economy of scale effects make support in special settings financially more attractive (Pijl, Skaalvik & Skaalvik; 2010).

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.

However, drawing a halt to the growing numbers of special education placements is not easy. Substantial numbers of both regular and special education teachers as well as parents of students now in special education question inclusion. They seem not principally to 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.

It is obviously far from easy to start making education in the Netherlands more inclusive in such a highly contested field. The Dutch government tried to make a start and developed new policy papers and new legislation. The question is did it work out and what were the main problems.

Method

This study attempts describe some of the factors maintaining the Dutch system with both regular and special schools. The study is based on analyses of Laws and policy papers, on analyses of Dutch and International scientific articles on inclusive education and on interviews with a small group of experts. This group comprises 7 respondents in daily life working at the National Dutch school inspectorate, at one of the regional clusters of regular schools, at the universities (2), at the research department of a group of special schools, at the management section of a group of special schools, and at the regional regular school support organisation.

The interview consisted of largely open questions on –policy discourses and direction of travel, -policy formation and policy process, -categorisation systems, -statistics, -intersectionality and disproportionality, -international comparisons of academic achievement, -accountability regimes, -marketisation and choice, -curriculum change and development, -funding regimes, -economic crises and –horizon scanning. The interview was developed by Riddel & Weedon (2013), but had to be translated in to Dutch and on minor points adjusted to the Dutch education system.

The following sections address the outcomes of the analyses of the developments in the Netherlands.

Results: Segregation maintaining factors until 1995

There are several factors driving towards maintaining segregation in education in the Netherlands. The separation between regular and special education is maintained through legislation, regulations and funding. Regular and special education partly have their own laws and regulations. Special support has long been only available after being admitted to school for special education. That mechanism has proved to be a tremendous incentive to refer students to special schools. The consequence is that the student with special needs had to be taken to the facilities instead of vice versa. This way, the responsibility for the student was then passed on to another part of the educational system.

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.

Referral to special schools and thus not participating in the local society was not regarded as a

big problem by many parents. It is quite normal that children from a certain neighbourhood attend different schools (public, protestant, catholic) and travel to school. Due to a high population density regular and special schools are normally on commuting distance.

These system effects, the importance of academic output, the focus on the average student in education, and having several schools within reach, have supported the maintenance of special schools and hindered the development of a more inclusive system. From 1995 on new policy initiatives were taken in order to at least stop the ongoing growth of the special system, and preferably seriously reduce the number of students in special settings.

Results: New 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. Since 1990, the government launched two policy programmes in primary education. All aimed at stimulating the inclusion of students with special needs.

In 1990, a government policy document, 'Together to School Again' (the so-called WSNS policy) proposed steps to include students with special needs. Under this policy, all primary schools, the special schools for mild learning disabled and the schools for students with mild mental retardations were 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 mild learning disabled and mild mentally retarded students became part of the regular school system. They were renamed as special schools for elementary education (in Dutch: Speciale scholen voor basisonderwijs, abbreviated as: SBAO). In 1995, parliament decided further to change special needs funding drastically. The amount of funding was no longer based on the number of student with statemented special needs, but on based on the total enrolment of in primary education. Half of this funding would go to the two special school types in the cluster and the remainder would be available for meeting special needs by the regular schools in the cluster. The 'Together to School Again' policy allowed regular schools flexibility in realising various special needs provisions. The clusters could decide to transfer parts of that provision to mainstream schools in one form or another. It was also possible to maintain special provision in the two special schools. They can also decide to transfer parts of that provision to mainstream schools in one form or another. 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 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 needed 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. 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' were largely based on existing practice. Criteria for the visually impaired are a visual acuity: $\leq$ 0,3 or a visual field: $\leq$ 30° 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.

Results: Students in regular and special education

Already in 1990 the first policy papers on the 'Together to school again policy' were presented but it took many years before the new regulations were accepted in Parliament and became into force. The effects of the new legislation therefore could not be expected before 2000. Table 2 shows the number of students in different regular and special school types in the period 2000 to 2010. The table shows that the number of students in special schools for elementary education (SBAO) tends to go down: from 51119 to 42821 in 2010 (see third row). The number of students in the special schools has gone up (see last row). The fourth row shows one of the effects of the 'Back-pack' policy. Students with a special needs statement are free to decide for regular or special schools. Under the new regulations the number of students in regular schools without a special needs statement applying successfully for a statement has grown considerably: from 11000 up to 2110. Before 2004 these students were in regular schools and from 2004 on they still are in regular schools but now with additional special needs funding.

Table 2: Numbers of students in regular and special education

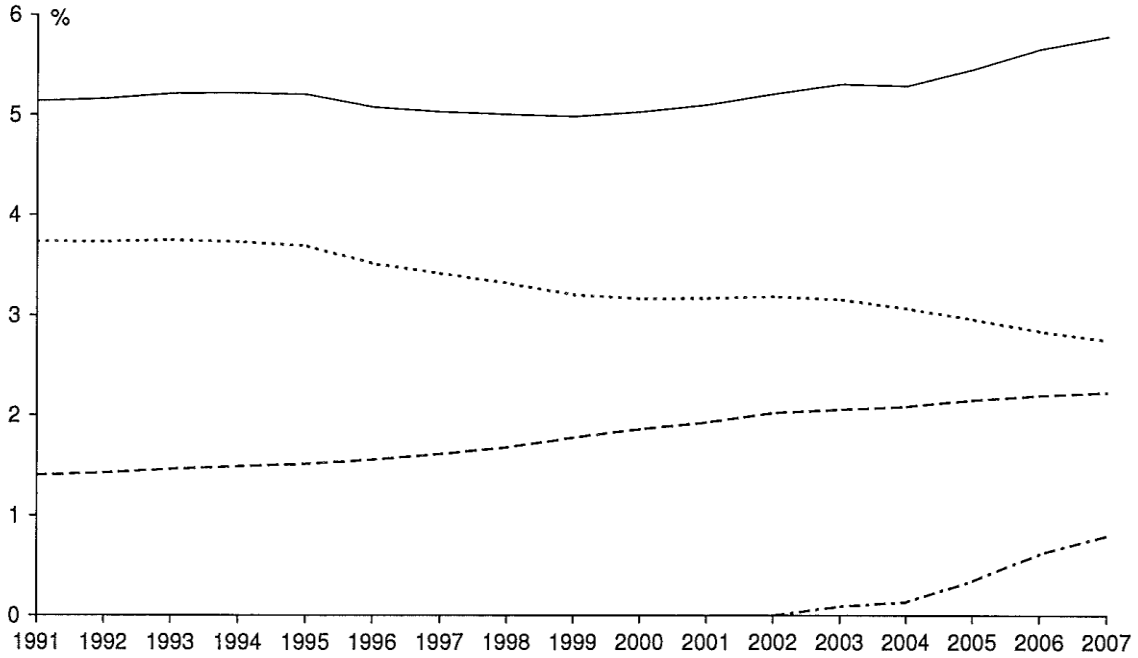
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Regular schools	1.546.548	1.549.968	1.549.139	1.548.969	1.553.332	1.534.362
SBAO[1]	51.558	52.077	50.088	46.310	44.055	42.821
Reg Ed: SEN[2]	-	-	11000	18500	22100	21100
Special schools	30325	33068	34092	35836	34540	34215

1. SBao = Special schools for elementary education.
2. Students formally labelled as having special needs attending regular schools.

Table 2 makes clear that since the introduction of the back-pack funding system in 2003 the total number of students formally labelled as having special needs has gone up seriously: from 45092 (11000 + 34092) in 2004 to 55315 (21100 + 34215) in 2010. Figure 1 presents basically the same data but now in a graph with percentages.

The first line shows the total number of students in the age range 4 – 11 years. A first conclusion is that despite the attempts to reduce the number of students with SEN the total percentage of students with SEN has gone up. The second line shows that the percentage of students earlier in the LOM and MLK schools and now in the special schools for elementary education has gone down. However, the percentage of students in the special schools has gone up, which partly compensates the declining percentages in the special schools for elementary education. The 4th line shows the recent rise of students formally labelled as students with special needs. These students largely were in regular education, but the new 'Back-pack' regulations made it possible to opt for special needs funding without having to transfer in a special school.

Figure 1: Developments under new legislation[1, 2]



1. Based on percentages of students aged 4-11.
2. Top: Total % of students with SEN; 2nd line: % of students with SEN in special schools for elementary education; 3rd line: % of students with SEN in special schools; 4th line: % of students with SEN in regular schools.

Table 3 shows the developments in the special schools. Under the new 'Back-pack" policy the different special school types were rearranged in four clusters of special schools. The former LOM and MLK schools are not in this table as they fall under the 'Together to school again' policy. The table shows that especially the schools for Speech / language disabilities, the schools for students with behaviour problems and / or psychiatric disorders largely are responsible for the growth shown in the 3rd line in Figure 1.

Table 3: Number of students in elementary special schools

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

Source: Central bureau of statistics

Conclusion

The announcement of the 'Together to school again' policy in 1990 made it clear for both regular and special schools (the schools for LOM and MLK) that conditions were about to change. Until then, funding of special needs was based on an input system (Meijer, Peschar & Scheerens, 1995; Pijl, 2014). Under the input system the schools would receive special needs funding for every student eligible for special needs support. In practice this means that the regular schools would refer a student for assessment and once the student was formally assessed as having special needs, the students would attend the special school with additional funding. Input funding is based on formally assessed needs. The 'Together to school again' policy shifted from an input system to throughput funding. With throughput funding the formally assessed number of students with special needs is no longer important in deciding

about the amount of additional special needs funding, but throughput funding is based on agreed delivery of services. Regular and special schools in a region could be held responsible for meeting the special needs of all students in the region and received a fixed sum as special needs funding. The total amount of funding is in principle fixed, but can be dependent on for example the total number of students in the region. Under the new policy special needs funding was split in half. Half of the throughput funding would go directly to the cluster of schools and half would go directly to the former special schools (LOM and MLK schools). Since formally labelling students as having special needs did not yield any additional funding, the regular and special schools (LOM and MLK) slowly reduced the number of students with a formal label attending a special school in the cluster (LOM and MLK) (see 2nd line in Figure 1). That seemed a valuable first step in reducing the number of students in special schools. However, the number of students attending one of the other special schools (see Table 3) went up (see 3rd line in Figure 1). It is possible that with the new regulations a number of students were not referred and placed on one of the former LOM and MLK schools in the cluster, but now were referred to one of the special schools outside the cluster. After all, choosing for an eligibility statement in the cluster did not bring any extra funding anymore, while referral and placement on a special school outside the cluster did. Shifting from an input to a throughput system in funding was a clever idea, but leaving escape routes partly reduced the effects.

The "Together to school again" policy was focussed on all elementary regular schools and the two largest types of special schools (LOM and MLK). The LOM and MLK schools were selected to take part in the new policy because these were in numbers large schools and they were seen as relatively close to the regular schools. These schools catered for the Mild Learning Disabilities (LOM) and the students with Mild Mental Retardations (MLK). The reasoning was that the differences between the 'typical' students and the students attending these special schools were limited.

After developing and implementing the "Together to school again" policy the attention shifted to the remaining special schools (see for the school types Table 3). These schools were still funded using an input system: every child with formally assessed needs was eligible for special needs funding. After many deliberations, Parliament decided not to shift to a throughput system for these special schools. The main reasons being the risk of regions with throughput funding to run out of funding and the risk of regions taking their own decisions

causing differences in the available funding of special needs. Parliament decided that the often large difficulties and problems of the students in these special schools (not LOM and MLK!) did not allow for throughput funding.

The Dutch policy makers were well aware of the risks of input funding. Input funding tends to result in ever growing numbers of students referred for assessment and Dutch experiences with input models clearly showed how easy this can go wrong (see Table 1). Policy makers therefore developed a system with strict criteria regulating who was and who was not eligible for additional special needs funding. However, many doubted if this would work and if it would be possible to develop such a system with strict criteria. A second point of discussion was if it would be wise to have two different systems for funding special needs education and if not all sorts of boundary problems would appear. Despite all these worries it was decided to develop an input system with strict eligibility criteria. An interesting feature of the new system was that the funding would follow the student. The student could choose between attending a regular or a special school and the additional funding would then follow. That feature has named the new policy initiative: 'Back-pack funding'.

The newly developed strict criteria were supposed to limit the growth of the number of students attending the special schools. Before the law (Min van OW, 2002) was accepted the number of students attending these special schools went up and after 2002 it stayed growing. The new criteria did not work at all and could not stop the growth. Even worse: the possibility to have special needs funding in regular schools became very popular and growing numbers of students without additional funding in regular schools now opted for special needs funding in their regular school. The overall result was disastrous. The expenditure kept going up and the government had to announce major policy changes.

Discussion

Looking back it is obvious that two different models for special needs funding was not a good idea and developing strict criteria to control the number of student eligible for special needs funding proved to very difficult, if not impossible. With hindsight, it would have been better to go for a throughput system from the start. That did not happen because it was decided to split the whole operation in two, first the LOM and MLK schools and then the remainder of the special schools. For the latter part of the innovations the decision was made to go for an improved input system. The argument behind this choice was that the government wanted to

secure that students were treated alike all over the Netherlands. Or stated otherwise: keep in control regarding the division of additional funding. Leaving all decision making to the school clusters was regarded too risky.

In the end the development towards more inclusive schools in the Netherlands is very meagre. The total number of students full– time in special schools has not gone down at all. Some point at the students with a back-pack in regular education (see 4th line in Figure 1) as one small step in the right direction, but these student were already in regular schools and acquired both a label and additional funding. That is hardly the right direction! Nor is there much reason to be proud of the declining number of students in the special schools for elementary education. The number of students has absolutely gone down (see 3th line in Figure 1), but part of these students were transferred to another part of the system (the special schools). It was hoped that the schools in the clusters (regular, LOM and MLK) would use the funding to develop special support in the regular schools and reduce the number of students in the two special school for elementary education. Figure 1 shows that that has happened to some extent, but 15 years after the start of the 'Together to school again' policy the effects are not impressive. The conclusion must be that attending special schools in the Netherlands is very attractive to parents and teachers.

Special schools in the Netherlands are for most students not far away. It is easy and reasonably accepted to attend a special school. This of course adds to the attractiveness of special schooling. Studies by Meijer and de Jager (2001) show that special school attendance and population density relate ($r = .60$) on country level. In highly populated countries the number of students in special schools is high and in low population countries the numbers attending special schools is low. That mechanism does not work out well while attempting to make Dutch education more inclusive. On the contrary, it adds to the attractiveness of special schools in the Netherlands. Population density is a given fact and cannot be changed. Funding systems however can change and governments can be alert on installing control systems that hinder developing inclusive education.

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