

Fighting segregation in special needs education in the Netherlands: the effects of different funding models

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Fighting segregation in special needs education in the Netherlands: the effects of different funding models

In the past few decades the number of students attending a segregated special school in the Netherlands has risen considerably. In 1975, 2.2% of all students between four and 11 years old attended a special school and this percentage almost doubled to 4.3% over the next 20 years. In order to stop further growth, two new education policies came into force in 1995 and 2003: *Together to School Again* and the so-called *Backpack*. These policies differed in the way that special needs funding was allocated. *Together to School Again* was based on lump sum funding to schools, while *Backpack* was linked to the individual and based on individual needs. Neither of these policy initiatives has been particularly successful in reducing the number of students with special needs in segregated settings. In theory, lump sum funding seemed a promising option, but the combination of two different ways of funding special needs education proved to be problematic. The Dutch experience illustrates the difficulties of effecting fundamental structural changes in this field.

Keywords: special needs education; education policy; funding; inclusive education

Introduction

From 1900 onwards, special schools for specific groups of children were gradually established in the Netherlands. Special education was regulated for the first time by relevant sections in the 1920 Primary Education Act. Since then, Dutch special education has developed into a wide-ranging segregated system for students with special education needs. The education system still basically consists of regular schools and segregated special schools. Students with special educational needs can attend a regular school, but many are referred, sooner or later, to a segregated special school. Compared with many other countries like Norway, the UK and Denmark, where about 1% of children attend a special school, the special education system in the Netherlands is extensive, differentiated and segregated (Meijer, 1998, 2003). In the recent past it had

no fewer than 15 types of special schools (Doornbos & Stevens, 1987). It has been said that a separate school existed for every possible disability. As the number of school types increased, so too did the number of students attending them (Dekker, 1999). In 1975, 2.2% of all students between four and 11 years old attended a special school. This proportion almost doubled to 4.3% over the next 20 years (Pijl, 1997; Smeets, 2007). From 1995, the percentage of students in special schools more or less stabilised (4.7% in 2010).

The increase of 2.1% between 1975 and 1995 was primarily caused by the growth of two major special school types: so called LOM schools catering for students with mild learning disabilities, and MLK schools catering for students with mild mental retardation. These two terms were in use in the Netherlands until about 1995, and the distinction between them is somewhat unclear. Table 1 shows that other special schools (for example, for children with physical or sensory impairments) contributed substantially to the growth as well.

Table 1: Percentage of school population in special schools, 1975–1995

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
LOM schools	.75	1.05	1.50	1.85	1.80
MLK schools	.84	.91	.92	1.23	1.31
Other special schools	.65	.70	.77	1.05	1.19
Total	2.25	2.66	3.20	4.13	4.29

Sources: Pijl, 1997; Smeets, 2004.

The practice of referring students with special needs to segregated special schools became increasingly criticised. A first modest step towards inclusion was the Primary School Act of 1985, which stated that regular schools should offer appropriate instruction to all students aged four to 11. Ideally, each student should receive instruction that met his or her unique educational needs. However, in the years after 1985 the growth of placements in segregated special schools continued apace. New policies came into force in 1995 and 2003, first *Together to School Again*, which

focused on LOM and MLK schools, and eight years later *Backpack*, which catered for the remaining special school types. Both policies introduced new systems for funding special education. This paper considers what impact different types of special needs funding have had on making regular primary schools more inclusive.

The inclusion debate

For a long time, the highly differentiated and extensive special education system in the Netherlands was seen as an expression of concern for students with special learning needs: it was what was expected of any civilised country. Nowadays this viewpoint is the subject of much debate (ECPO, 2013; Pijl, 2010b). A growing group of policymakers, educators and parents hold the view that segregation in Dutch education has gone too far. Parents want their child with special needs to attend a regular school together with their other children. They prefer a neighbourhood school and want their child to be taught alongside typically developing students.

Compared to parents in other countries, Dutch parents have never really been very prominent partners in the inclusion debate (Daalen & Peetsma, 2007). There is no tradition of parent pressure groups in the Netherlands actively advocating for the inclusion of students with special needs. The one exception is the association of parents of children with Down's syndrome (Scheepstra, Pijl, & Nakken, 1996), which has succeeded in influencing many regular primary schools to include such children. In spite of this, a substantial number of parents prefer their child with special needs to attend a special school (Smeets & Rispens, 2008). They point to the additional training of teachers, the support by specialists and the small class size in such schools and seriously doubt if regular schools would be able to cater for their child (Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010; Vergeer, Felix, & Veen, 2007).

It has also been pointed out, however, that special education placement often functions as a 'safety-valve': that is, as an additional means of relieving regular education of difficult-to-handle and time-consuming students (Florian, 2007; Pijl, 1989). That, together with the high cost and negative effects of a special and segregated system, (labelling, commuting, and difficulties in later finding a job) leads to seriously questioning special school placement. Special schools defend their role by pointing to a school system with much expertise and support for those students faced with serious challenges in the regular schools. They further argue that economy of scale effects make support in special settings financially more attractive (Pijl & Frissen, 2009; Pijl, Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2010).

The argument for inclusive teaching also refers to the wider societal context. Segregation of such students is considered to be in conflict with widely accepted human rights, socially undesirable and even perhaps a convenient but unnecessary way of providing special services. Inclusion is also primarily a civil rights issue: segregation should be avoided and teachers should learn to accommodate special needs students.

Curbing the increase in the numbers of pupils referred to special schools, however, is not easy due to the substantial numbers of both regular and special education teachers as well as parents of students now in special education who question inclusion. In principle they do not reject the push for more inclusion, but believe students with special needs are better off segregated in special settings as a result of their need for differentiated and individualised teaching and counselling which is perceived to be more effective (Pijl, 2010a).

Against this highly contested background, the Dutch government tried to make a start and new policies and legislation were drawn up. Alternative ways of funding special needs education were an integral part of new regulations. The question here is if

these new funding regulations were effective and contributed to making the Dutch system more inclusive.

Method

This study examines the factors that support the Dutch education system for children with special educational needs, characterised by the co-existence of both regular and segregated special schools. It is based on analyses of legislation and policy papers, Dutch international scientific papers on inclusive education and on individual interviews with seven experts. The latter comprised representatives from the National Schools Inspectorate; a regional group of regular schools; two universities; the research department of a group of special schools; the management team of a group of special schools and a regional regular school support organisation.

The experts were interviewed independently from one another by a researcher and/or the author. All data gathering was completed in two months. The interview consisted of largely open-ended questions on issues such as policy direction, categorisation, collection of statistics, academic achievement, accountability, curriculum and funding. The interview was developed by Riddell and Weedon (2013), but had to be translated into Dutch and on minor points adjusted to the Dutch education system. Depending on the respondent's area of expertise, some interview sections were deleted or were extended. For example, one of the two university experts had considerable knowledge about special education statistics and therefore that section of the interview was extended. Again, the interviewee from the regular school support organisation was not very knowledgeable about funding systems, so major parts of that topic were deleted during the interview. The following sections address the outcomes of the analysis of developments in the Netherlands, drawing on official statistics and key informant accounts.

Results

Factors promoting school segregation until 1995

There were several factors influencing segregated education in the Netherlands. Separation between regular and special education was maintained through quite different legislation, regulations and funding for each. Special support was normally only available after a child was admitted to a special school. This proved to be a tremendous incentive to refer students to special schools (Meijer, Peschar, & Scheerens, 1995). The consequence was that the student with special needs had to be taken to the facilities instead of vice versa. In this way, responsibility for the individual student was then passed on to another part of the education system.

Developments in society were also important factors. Pressure on output in terms of performance increased and parents became much more active in demanding high quality education for their children. The differences between students seemed to increase and regular schools were not able to deal with these. As a result more and more children became at risk of referral to a special school.

Key informants believed that despite all the educational innovation of the past decades, education was still mainly focused on the average student. If there were too many students with special needs in the classroom, referral to special schools was an attractive proposition in simplifying the task of the teacher.

Referral to a special school, which reduced opportunities for participation in the local community, was not regarded as a big problem by many parents. It was (and still is) quite normal in the Netherlands for children to attend schools outside their local area (for example, council, Protestant, Catholic etc.). Also, due to high population density, regular and special schools are normally within commuting distance (Meijer & Jager, 2001).

Interviewees believed that all of the factors mentioned above supported the maintenance of special schools and hindered the development of a more inclusive system. From 1995 onwards, however, new policy initiatives were taken in order to at least stop the ongoing growth of the special system, and preferably start reducing the number of students in special settings.

New policymaking on inclusion

The Dutch education system is administered at national level by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. Although the Dutch have quite a history of segregated special education, there is no separate department for this. Since 1990, the government has launched two policy programmes in primary education referred to above, both of which aimed at encouraging the inclusion of students with special needs. However, interviewees believed, promoting inclusive education has never been a clearly formulated goal. The policies were primarily intended to curb the ongoing growth of students with special school referrals and if possible reducing the number in segregated settings.

In 1990, a government white paper *Together to School Again* proposed steps to group all primary schools and special schools for students with mild learning disability and for those with mild mental retardation into regional clusters (Ministerie van Onderwijs and Wetenschappen, 1990). It resulted in mainstream and special schools working together, special needs coordinators being appointed in every regular school, the initiation of training programmes, new legislation and funding regulations for both mainstream and special education. All these measures were supposed to act as a push towards inclusion (Meijer, 2004).

The inclusion policy also had a financial goal: not to realise any budget cuts, but to stop the expected growth of the number of students in special education, thus

resulting in a more or less fixed expenditure (Meijer, Meijnen, & Scheerens, 1993). However, many educational practitioners were somewhat sceptical of this. Interviewees noted that the average cost of teaching students with special needs in special education is at least twice as high as those for regular education, so any reduction in costs would of course be welcomed by the Education Ministry.

Under the new legislation special schools for students with mild learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities became part of the regular school system and renamed as special schools for primary education (in Dutch: Speciale scholen voor basisonderwijs or SBAOs). This change of name should not be regarded as merely window-dressing. It was intended to communicate that both school types (LOM and MLK) had become regular schools but with a somewhat different history and pupil population. In 1995, Parliament decided to change the regulations for special needs funding drastically. The amount of funding was no longer based on the number of students with special needs referrals, but on the total enrolment of students in primary education. Half of the funding would go to the two former special school types within the new clusters and the remainder for meeting special needs in regular schools in the same clusters (Meijer, 2004). The *Together to School Again* policy allowed regular schools flexibility in realising various special needs provision. For instance, the clusters could decide to transfer parts of this provision to regular schools in one form or another. It was also possible to maintain special provision in the two types of special schools. By 2002 these new funding regulations were fully operational.

For students with other types of special needs (sensory, physical, mental impairments or behavioural disorders) a separate line of policy was introduced. Until 2003, most of these students could only receive the support they needed after being admitted to a segregated 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 the financing of special services to the student involved, regardless of the type of schooling. The system changed from supply-oriented to demand-oriented financing, whereby the funds are attached to the child requiring the service. Known as the *Backpack* policy, students take the funding with them to the school of their choice (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur and Wetenschappen, 1996; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2002). If a child meets the criteria for this so-called 'student-bound budget', parents and student can choose a school, special or mainstream, and take part in the decision-making process on the best way to use the funds to meet the student's special needs. Interviewees believed that the eligibility criteria for a 'backpack' are largely based on existing practice. Criteria for the visually impaired child are visual acuity: $\leq 0,3$ or visual field: $\leq 30^\circ$ and having limited participation in education as a result of the impairment. For hearing impaired students a hearing loss > 80 dB (or for hard of hearing students a hearing loss from 35 up to 80 dB) and limited participation in education are required. The decision to provide extra funding for students with intellectual disabilities is largely based on IQ (< 60). For physically impaired and chronically ill students, medical data showing diagnosed disability / illness are needed. Students with behavioural difficulties, manifested in problems at school, home and in the community, qualify for backpack funding if their diagnosis fits within one of the categories set out in the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association) (Veneman, 2004).

Directly linked to the new funding system was a reorganisation of all special education. The different school types were reorganised into 'expertise centres' catering

for children in one of the following four impairment groups: visual impairment; communication disorders; physical and mental impairment; and behaviour problems.

The regulations did not oblige regular schools to accept a student with special needs if such a placement was requested by the parents or the student. However, the interviewees commented, a school could only deny a student a place where it was able to demonstrate clearly to the school inspectorate and parents that it was incapable of providing suitable education for a special needs student.

Students in regular and special education

The *Together to School Again* policy was initiated in 1995 but it took many years before the new regulations were accepted in Parliament and came into force. The effects of the new legislation therefore were not evident before 2000. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the percentage of students in different regular and special school types in the period 2000 to 2012.

Table 2: Percentages of primary aged pupils in regular and special education, 2000–2012, (% of total pupil population aged 4–11)

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012
SBAO¹	3.17	3.18	3.04	2.80	2.66	2.62	2.51
Reg ed: SEN²	-	-	.67	1.12	1.33	1.29	1.28
Special schools	1.86	2.02	2.07	2.17	2.09	2.09	2.03
Total	5.03	5.20	5.78	6.09	6.08	6.00	5.82

¹ In 1998 LOM and MLK merged into special schools for primary education (SBAOs)

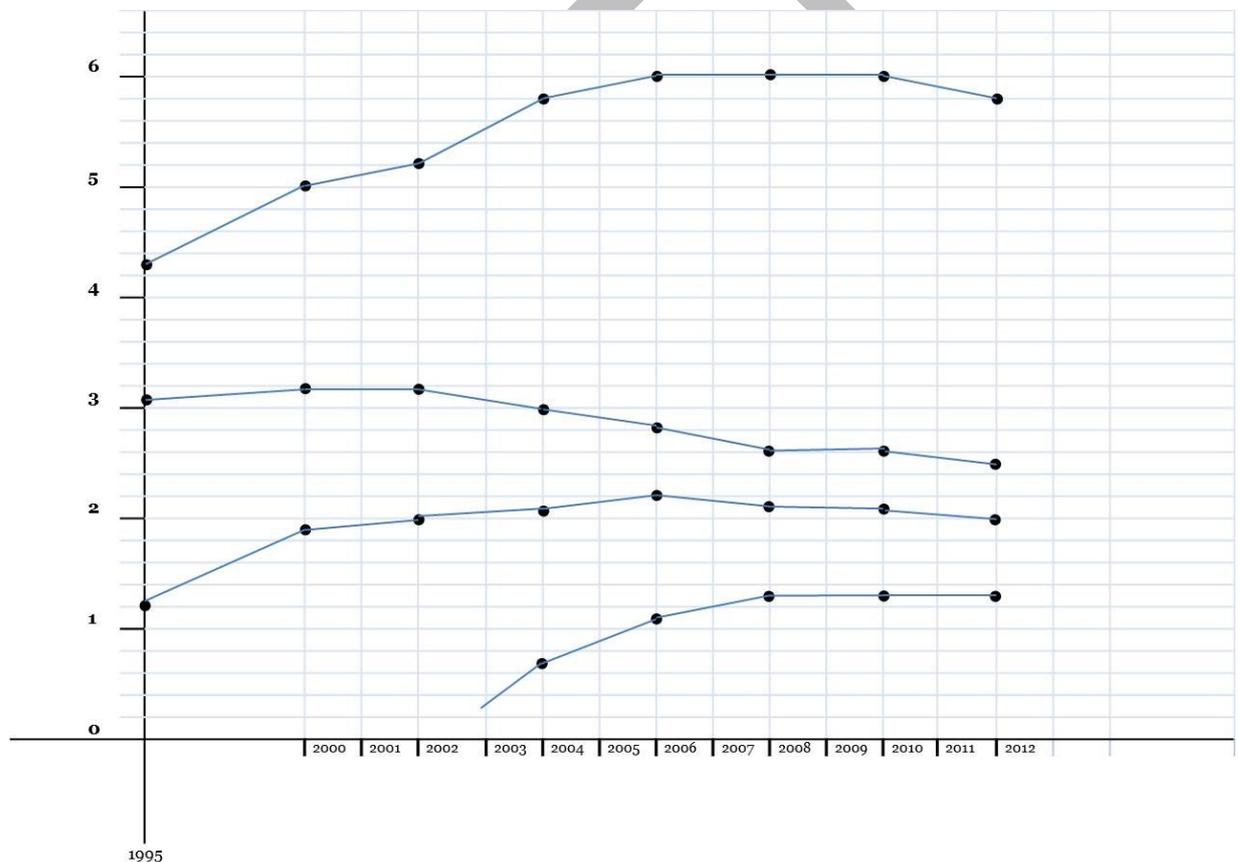
² Students formally labelled as having special needs attending regular schools.

Sources: Smeets, 2007; Koopman & Ledoux, 2013.

Table 2 makes clear that since the introduction of backpack funding in 2003, the percentage of students formally labelled as having special needs has increased steeply, from 2.74 (.67 + 2.07) % in 2004 to 3.31 (1.28 + 2.03) % in 2012. Figure 1 presents the same data in a more accessible form. This shows the percentage of students in special schools for primary education (SBAO) decreased from 3.17 to 2.51, while the

percentage of students in special schools increased. The percentage of students in regular schools identified with special needs, and therefore attracting backpack funding, has grown considerably, from 0 in 2002 up to 1.28% in 2012. According to the interviewees, before 2004 these students were in regular schools or in special schools for primary education (SBAO). Subsequently they were still in regular schools but with additional special needs funding.

Figure 1: Location of children with special educational needs, 1995–2012 (% of total pupil population aged 4–11)



Line 1: % of students with SEN;

Line 2: % of students with SEN in special schools for primary education;

Line 3: % of students with SEN in special schools;

Line 4: % of students with SEN in regular schools.

Sources: Smeets, 2007; Koopman & Ledoux, 2013.

Despite the attempts to reduce the number of students with SEN, their total percentage has increased to about 6%. Children have shifted from one type of special school to another, but the proportion in segregated settings has not reduced. As noted above, there has been a recent increase in the proportion of children in mainstream schools identified as having special needs and therefore qualifying for backpack funding.

Table 3 shows changes in the number of pupils in different types of special school. The table shows that pupil numbers have increased markedly in schools for children with speech / language disabilities and behaviour problems and / or psychiatric disorders.

Table 3: Number of students in special primary schools

	2000/'01	2002/'03	2004/'05	2006/'07	2008/'09	2010/'11	2011/'12
Total no. students in special schools	30325	33068	34092	35836	34540	34215	34272
Cluster 1							
Visually disabled students	516	514	506	330	367	366	370
Complex disability				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 disability			327	275	213	214	209
Hard of hearing + cognitive disability			173	74	70	46	51
Speech /language disability	3747	4198	4841	5541	5643	5660	5656
Cluster 3							
Cognitive disability	9021	10122	9921	9506	7965	7091	6955
Physical health problems			1409	1235	1203	1132	1098
Motor disability	1333	1247	1333	1428	1415	1422	1402
Complex disability			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 problems			4471	5367	5384	5697	5626

Source: Central bureau of statistics, 2014

Summary and conclusion

The announcement of the *Together to School Again* policy in 1990 made it clear for both regular and special schools conditions were about to change. Until then, funding of special needs was based on an input system (Meijer, Peschar, & Scheerens, 1995; Pijl, 2014). Under this system, special schools received special needs funding for every student eligible for such support. In practice this meant that the regular schools would refer a student for assessment and once formally assessed as having special needs the child would attend a special school with the additional funding. The *Together to School Again* policy shifted from an input system to throughput funding. With this latter funding regime, the formally assessed number of students with special needs no longer affected the amount of additional special needs spending, as throughput funding is based on agreed delivery of services. Regular and special schools in a particular region became responsible for meeting the special needs of all students in the region and received a fixed sum for this.

While the total amount of funding is in principle fixed, it can be dependent, for example, on the total number of students in the region. Under the new policy, special needs funding was split, with half allocated to the cluster of schools and the other half allocated to the former special schools. Shifting from an input to a throughput system supported the development of inclusive schools, but leaving 'escape routes' to the special sector partly reduced its effects.

After implementing *Together to School Again*, attention shifted to the remaining special schools (see Table 3) still funded using an input system, so that 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 schools

because of fears that some schools might find themselves under-funded and therefore no longer viable.

Dutch policymakers were well aware of the risks of input funding, which tended to result in ever growing numbers of students referred for assessment. A criteria-based system was therefore devised, regulating who was and who was not eligible for additional special needs funding. However, interviewees noted that many within the policy community doubted that this system would be workable in practice and believed it was unwise to have two different systems of funding operating concurrently.

Strict criteria were intended to limit the growth of the number of students attending special schools. Before this became law (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 2002) the number of students attending these special schools increased and after 2002 continued to grow. It was observed by interviewees that the new criteria proved impossible to implement consistently and failed to limit growth. Furthermore, the possibility of receiving special needs funding in regular schools led to growing identification of special needs students in mainstream settings. The overall result was that expenditure continued to increase, leading to further calls for systemic change.

In retrospect, it is obvious that operating two different special needs funding models simultaneously was not a good idea and developing strict criteria to control the number of students eligible for funding proved difficult. The international consensus is that in order to stem the expansion of special needs education, input systems should be avoided (Meijer, 1999). These lessons were not heeded by the Dutch government, and it is interesting to note that the Belgium government recently decided to develop a new version of their input-system for special needs education.

Ultimately, the development of more inclusive schools in the Netherlands has been very limited, with no decrease in the proportion of pupils in special schools. There

has been an increase in the number of students with backpack funding in regular education and this is regarded by some as a small step towards inclusive education. However, these student were already in regular schools and under the new policy acquired both a label and additional funding emphasizing their difference.

Special schools in the Netherlands appear to have an enduring appeal. Meijer and Jager (2001) have shown that there is a strong association between special school attendance and population density. In highly populated areas the number of students in special schools is high and in low population areas the numbers attending special schools is low. This means that attempts to make Dutch education more inclusive is possibly more difficult than it is an areas with low population density, as ease of access adds to the attractiveness of special schools. Whilst population density is a given, funding regimes are susceptible to change. Drawing on the Dutch experience, governments should be aware of the dangers of putting in place systems that are intended to promote inclusive education, but in practice have the opposite effect.

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