

Special Education in the Netherlands: Current Developments and Future Trends

Traditionally, special education provision in the Netherlands has had a clear segregated basis. This article describes the attempts to bridge the gap that presently exists between the mainstream and special school systems.

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Current Developments

In the Netherlands there are two laws on elementary education for children from 4 to 12 years old. In 1985 a new law on elementary education was introduced, linking the former infant school (4 to 5 year old children) with the former elementary school (6 to 12 year olds). Those two schools now formed the so called "basisschool" (base-school). Also in 1985 a new interim-law on special education was introduced, called the ISOVSO (Interim law on special education and secondary special education). This ISOVSO law can be seen as the closing stage of a typical Dutch development in which the system of special education got its present structure.

The system of special education in the Netherlands is characterised by the following facts. In 1987 there were more than 100,000 pupils in about 1,000 separate special schools. They were taught by 10,000 teachers. This means that in 1987 3.23% of all children and youngsters from 3 to 18 years were in separate special schools. This percentage is about the same as other Western-European countries. What worries the policy-makers however is that the percentage is still increasing. If this trend continues and government policy is not changed the percentage of children in separate special schools will be 6% in the year 2000. This growth is predicted because the number of young children from 3 to 6 and the number of young people from 16 to 18 is increasing rapidly.

A second trait of Dutch special education is the enormous number of different types of schools. Nowhere other than in the Netherlands are fifteen different types of special schools to be found. This horizontal division is based on the character of the child's problems.

Special Schools in the Netherlands

Sensory-handicaps and physical handicaps

Deaf and hearing impaired,

Blind and partially sighted,

Physically handicapped,

Speech and language problems,

Delicate children,

Children in hospitals

Learning problems

Educational sub-normal, moderate
Educational sub-normal, severe.

Learning and emotional problems

L.O.M. school

Behavioural problems

Z.M.O.K. school

Multiple problems

Separate schools or departments for children with multiple problems,
for instance physically handicapped and mentally handicapped.

Apart from this horizontal division Dutch special education also has a vertical division according to age. A "kernschool" for 6 to 12 year olds may have a department for 3 to 6 year old infants "who are threatened in their development" or a department for secondary special education. Often these departments for secondary special education become independent schools eventually. Presently there are 14 different types of secondary special schools. Foreign visitors often comment after studying this system: "It is the best form of segregation but it still is segregation!"

Future Trends

In order to contain the growth of the special education system quite a number of initiatives are being undertaken at the moment. Four of those initiatives are discussed here:

1. *Co-operation of special education and regular education in the region.*: From a survey by the government inspectors for special education it became clear that in some regions there are waiting lists for special schools whereas in other regions no waiting lists existed. Also in some regions the percentage of children in special education was lower than the average percentage for the country as a whole. In the province of Friesland, in the North-East of the Netherlands, fewer children than the average percentage attend special schools. Partly this is caused by the rural character of the province with many small regular schools in the villages, where children with problems may receive a lot of individual attention. Also many parents do not want their child attending a special school in the nearest town, because often this means that the child has to travel in a special minibus for two hours or more a day.

But there is yet another possible explanation for this "lower than average" percentage - the co-operation between regular and special education. For example, in Leeuwarden, the capital of the province, two special schools are co-operating with sixteen regular schools.

During joint study-sessions teachers from regular schools learn to assess the problems of their pupils at an early stage and they consequently learn to undertake planned action to help their pupils themselves rather than referring them to special schools. These study-sessions are organised by a co-ordination group in which the teacher training college, the school support service and the special schools are represented.

The regular schools involved have signed a contract promising to attend the study-sessions, four afternoons a year. The two schools for special education have assigned one teacher to support their colleagues from the regular schools in coping with children with special needs.

It is envisaged that the number of pupils enrolled in the two special schools will decrease from 360 to 330 within the next three years as a result of this co-operation project. In 1988 the teachers of 80 children with special needs in regular education were supported by their colleagues from special education. If children from the regular schools involved were nevertheless referred to special schools, the referrals were more precisely formulated.

2. *Centralised referral procedure:* The city of Rotterdam, second city of the country and capital of the most densely populated province of South-Holland, is well known for the close co-operation between regular and special education. Here an expanded system has been set up with the aim of following children with learning problems continuously throughout regular education. The referral of children to special education is centralised. Before a child is referred to a special school she or he has to be examined first at the Rotterdam Pedagogical Institute. There the question is discussed if this child really has to be referred to a special school.

A city-wide network has been constructed here in which regular and special education are working closely together. The assessment procedure of special education is linked with the results of the screening-test in regular education. This development affects the autonomy of the independent assessment commission of each special school. Eventually this may become a problem because in the Netherlands parents have the right of free choice of school for their children. Also the autonomy of the boards of governors of schools is a right firmly established in law, as a result of a long historical process. Therefore it is doubtful if a government proposal for a centralised referral procedure would get a majority in parliament.

3. *Courses for designated teachers:* The teacher training colleges for special education organise two year part-time courses for designated teachers. The boards of governors of the schools commit themselves to enable the participants of the courses to support their colleagues for one half day per week. During that time the designated teacher assists his colleagues in writing and carrying out I.H.P.s (Individual Help Plans) for children with learning problems. The students in these courses are teachers of both regular and special education. An important module in this course concerns the issue of co-operation between regular and special education. Another important aim, laid down in several modules, is promoting the exchange of school-based experiences among the teachers.

4. *Peripatetic teachers:* In special schools for blind and partially-sighted children and deaf and hearing impaired children much experience has been gained in re-integrating children from special schools in regular education. As a spin-off of this re-integration process the coherence of the two educational systems in relation to each other is stimulated. Also the flexibility of both systems is increased during this process of adapting regular education to the needs of these children with special needs with the support of the peripatetic teachers from the special schools.

Can regular education learn something from special education?: This is not an easy question to be answered here and now. It seems possible however, in the Dutch situation, that a fruitful dialogue between the two systems will arise from the above mentioned projects - a dialogue in favour of children with special needs. The contribution of special education may be the notion that the emancipation of the child with special needs comes before the integration of the child in the regular school system. Offering chances for development to these children is more important to us than the

rapid integration of the two systems into one school system for all. Emancipation of children with special needs requires more than planned help for children with learning problems. Emancipation of children with special needs also requires that much attention to be given the emotional and social development of the child with special needs.