

Education in the Netherlands, recent developments and the debate on integration and inclusion

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Introduction

I initially wrote this article for a Comenius project (INSPIRE) we started in 2003 with partners in Belgium (Flanders) and the UK. The project focused on innovations in special educational needs provision in Europe. It aimed at bringing together participants from all over Europe to discuss issues of segregation and inclusion, share ideas and examples of good practice and develop ways of moving forward towards a more inclusive education system. With regard to the international audience we intended to reach it seemed important to provide an overview of current developments in the three countries regarding their efforts to include more students with disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. The issues and debates in the UK on this topic were well presented in international educational journals. However, for professionals who wanted to know what is actually happening in the Netherlands and how this was connected to international developments, it seemed more difficult to access relevant information in the English language. Hence we decided to write the original article.

In October 2011 I am invited to do a presentation for an international audience in Azerbeidzjan on the topic of inclusion. I thought it might be useful for them to have the original article, serving as a case study of how we in the Netherlands struggle to include students with disabilities and/or SEN in the mainstream education system. However, reading the article again I was not very pleased with it anymore. I decided therefore to re-write it and add a section on the latest developments.

The education of students with a disability and/or SEN

Until the late 1970s it seemed self-evident that in the Netherlands children and young people with disabilities received their education in special schools. The first special schools in Europe were founded around 1800 and focused on the education of visually and hearing impaired students (Vos, 2008). In the first half of the twentieth century the number of special schools in the Netherlands increased, serving a more diverse group of students with disabilities (Doornbos & Stevens, 1987a; 1987b). The Special Education Interim Act of 1985 (OC&W, 1985) distinguished the following types of special schools in the Netherlands:

Schools for mentally handicapped children	Group 1 schools
Schools for children with learning and behavioural problems	
Special settings for infants with developmental difficulties	
Schools for deaf children	Group 2 schools
Schools for children with impaired hearing	
Schools for children with severe speech disorders, who do not fall into the groups mentioned above	
Schools for blind children	
Schools for partially sighted children	
Schools for physically handicapped children	
Schools for children in hospitals	
Schools for chronically sick children	
Schools attached to paedological institutes	Group 3 schools
Schools for severely mentally handicapped children	
Schools for severely maladjusted children	
Schools for children with multiple handicaps	

Table 1: Special schools in the Netherlands (The Dutch Special Education Interim Act, ISOVSO, 1985)

The overview shows a refined and differentiated network of educational provision for students with disabilities and/or SEN. It gives the impression that for every student with SEN who was unable to meet the demands of mainstream education, a purposefully designed and highly specialised alternative was available.

The Dutch Special Education Interim Act was due to expire in 1995. In the meantime inclusive educational practices from countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Canada spread out to educational communities all over the world resulting in a serious discussion concerning the integration of people with disabilities in society and in mainstream schools, resulting, for example, in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Now, the prevailing view of a considerable number of researchers, politicians and citizens, seems to be that students with SEN should be educated together with their peers in mainstream schools whenever possible. The practical implication of the changes that took place over the past decades can be traced in new legislation and education policies in several countries (e.g. the Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Dutch educational agreement Together To School Again (WSNS), 1991; the British Code of Practice, 1994). A major outcome of these developments was the emphasis on parental involvement and participation. It became clear that parents should have a real choice: if they want their child at the neighbourhood school everything should be done to make this possible (for example Department for Education, 1996; 2001; OC&W, 1996a; 1996b). Knowledge, facilities, resources and expertise were still regarded as key factors in the education of these students with SEN, but these should be applied, from the student's and parents' perspectives, in the least restrictive environment.

The main aim became the development of schools where a larger diversity of students with SEN would get their education among their peers in a way which was designed and tailored to their individual abilities and needs (OC&W, 1996a).

The Dutch government responded to these (international) trends through stimulation of new practices and new research into the anticipated effects of integrating more students with SEN in regular schools. Through promulgation of new legislation they tried to secure and support these developments.

The special primary schools from group 1 (see Table 1) were compelled to join regular primary schools and to form consortia of schools which would co-operate, support and learn from each other and take joint responsibility for students with SEN in their region. Group 2 and group 3 schools were given time to develop into centres of expertise and to merge with similar special schools to obtain a certain size of scale. They would have a regional function focusing on providing special education for students who would not attend mainstream schools, supporting mainstream schools with the integration of students with SEN, and developing and disseminating regarding the education of students with SEN.

In effect three legislative pathways (see Table 2) were developed by the Dutch government to cut back the number of special schools and to stimulate more co-operation between regular schools and special schools (regional consortia of schools, both at primary and secondary level) with the aim to integrate more students with Special Educational Needs into mainstream education:

Legislation	Organisational Outcomes	Aims	Group of schools See Table 1
Together to school again (OC&W, 1990) The Primary Education Act (OC&W, 1998b)	The formation of regional consortia of primary schools and special primary schools.	To admit and to integrate more students with SEN in regular primary schools.	Primary schools from group 1
The Secondary Education Act (OC&W, 1998c)	The merge of pre-vocational secondary education and secondary special education for students with learning and behavioural difficulties. The formation of regional consortia of schools for pre-vocational secondary education and schools for employment oriented education.	To admit and to integrate more students with SEN in regular secondary schools.	Secondary schools from group 1

The Expertise Centres Act (OC&W, 1998a)	The transition of special schools to Regional Expertise Centres (RECs): RECs for students with a visual impairment (cluster 1) RECs for students with a hearing or communication impairment (cluster 2) RECs for students with a physical disability, a (severe) learning difficulties and/or multiple disabilities (cluster 3) RECs for students with severe developmental disorders (cluster 4) The provision of a personal budget (the rucksack) for these students with which their parents can buy the support they think of as necessary for the successful education of their child in a mainstream school	To admit and to integrate more students with these specific impairments in regular primary, secondary and senior secondary vocational schools. To support regular schools to successfully educate these students through the deployment of peripatetic teachers, special in-service courses and specialist research and advice. To stimulate parental choice for mainstream or special educational provision by giving these students a personal budget when they go to a mainstream school (OC&W, 1996b).	Primary and secondary schools from groups 2 and 3
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Table 2 New Dutch legislation aiming at the integration of more students with SEN in mainstream education

The Dutch government started this whole process of *Together to school again* with the Group 1 schools for primary special education because these schools in particular contributed to the explosive growth of students in the special schools (Rijswijk & Sikkema, 2001). The students of these schools were also thought of as relatively easy to integrate in mainstream settings. Then the group 1 schools for secondary special education followed and the development of the RECs completed the operation.

The most important outcomes were:

- Instead of one Act regulating the education of all students with SEN, we now have three Acts of which each focus on a more or less specific group of students with SEN.
- Under the Interim Act an assessment board connected to the special school decided about the admission of students. In the new situation three different types of admission, each with their own procedures and criteria are taking care of the admission of students in the special schools. The extent to which the Dutch government is imposing procedures and criteria to each of the three forms of admission, is closely related to the finance system which has been developed to provide for students with SEN in the different school clusters of primary and secondary education and in the schools of the regional expertise centres.

For consortia of primary schools the government finance the special primary schools in a particular consortium on the basis of 2% of the total number of students of that particular consortium. When more students of that consortium of schools need reception in the special primary school of that consortium, the regular primary schools are obliged to pay for the costs involved collaboratively from their special needs budgets. Because the Dutch government has a very good insight into the financial consequences of this type of funding it could easily leave the development of regulations, procedures and criteria to the interplay of forces in the school clusters.

For consortia of secondary mainstream and secondary special schools the government called into existence regional referral committees to decide whether a student with SEN is entitled to get additional learning support (in Dutch: *LWOO*) in pre-vocational secondary education (in Dutch: *VMBO*) or is entitled to get employment oriented education (in Dutch: *Praktijkonderwijs*). Secondary schools are funded according to the number of students these referral committees decided upon, based on nationally defined criteria. The procedures and criteria were rather strict because of this open-ended financing. In the future the Dutch government is planning to develop a similar budget system in pre-vocational education as is under operation in primary education for students with SEN. The aim is to get more hold of the budget spent for students with SEN and to partly end open-ended financing.

For Regional Expertise Centres (the RECs) the Dutch government, after some experimentation with independent committees, decided that a Committee of Indication and Admission, attached to each of approximately 40 Regional Expertise Centres, would decide about the admission of students, either to a

special school of one of the four clusters (see Table 2), or to a mainstream regular school with the support of a personal budget, their Rucksack (OC&W, 1996b). However, because of the open-ended financing of this provision and the sometimes very complex special educational needs of these students, the government was very prescriptive of the constitution of such a committee, gave detailed instruction about procedures and defined meticulously elaborated criteria to determine whether a student is entitled to this provision and the corresponding budgets.

- An un-anticipated effect of the new financing system was that it became financially more attractive to have students with SEN in Regional Expertise Centres instead of in special schools belonging to one of the regional consortia, both for the regular schools and for the parents /students. Especially because the distinction between students with SEN is much more complicated than the current organisation of provision for students with SEN suggests. This may partly explain the growth of students in the schools of RECs, in particular the schools in cluster 4 for students with emotional and behavioural disorders (LCTI, 2006).
- For some parents it proved difficult to choose between the best setting and the best facilities for their child.
- For the professionals working in the schools (e.g. class teachers, SENCOs and head teachers) it often proved difficult to advise parents on the most appropriate and beneficial educational services for their child with SEN, because of the complexities involved (admission committees, referral committees, Committees of Indication and Admission, the various procedures and criteria which are part of the process and the budgets that are available to counterbalance the costs of additional educational services and devices) (Rijswijk & Sikkema, 2001).

From the developments discussed above it seems justified to argue that the Dutch government was seriously aiming at integrating more students with SEN in regular schools. But it seems also evident that there are not enough (financial) incentives to effectively reach these aims.

Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty (1997, p 12) point to the role teachers may play in either stimulating or actually limiting the development of a more inclusive education system: “Even if society is in favour of integration, it does not necessarily imply that teachers should hold similar views. After all they have to realise integration in every-day school practice under certain conditions”.

Currently in the Dutch context ‘under certain conditions’, seems to imply that teachers have to realise more inclusion with less support, less financial means, little additional resources and less opportunities for in-service training (OC&W, 2011).

Realising a more inclusive practice in Dutch schools

International comparative research indicates that three factors are potentially relevant to implement more inclusive practices in the education system (Pijl et al, 1997, p.6):

- **The role of the teacher in the classroom.** Hargreaves and Fullan stress the important role of teachers when they argue that “In a changing world, a healthy school is one where teachers constantly revisit and renew their purposes; always looking for evidence and feedback about how well they are doing, and honestly examining whether they need to do things differently or better” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p.31). And they take this point one step further when they suggest that “many reformers still have to learn that teachers will not commit to a change if they cannot see the point of it” (ibid., pp.30/31). Pring argues that: “...the complexities of an educational practice can only be fully understood by those whose values, beliefs and understandings make it a practice of a certain sort” (Pring, 2000, p. 159), thus claiming a central role for engaging teachers at all levels of the change process and taking into account what they actually think, do and value.
- **The ways schools organise their curricula.** Regarding curriculum development and school organisation Bruner suggests that “Any system of education, any theory of pedagogy, any grand national policy that diminishes the schools role in nurturing its students self-esteem fails at one of its primary functions” (Bruner, 1996, p.38), thus placing values and educating the whole person at the core of educational provision.
- **Factors outside schools, like legislation, regulations and funding.** Elliott is making a point which seems important when discussing exclusion and inclusion, special educational needs and the continuous growth of special provision and special schools. He raises the issue of how we “can seriously address the aspiration of secondary education for all, irrespective of age, ability and aptitude, where we are deeply rooted in a tradition of liberal education which seems accessible only to an academic few”

(Elliott, 1998, p.104). Again, like Pring and Bruner, Elliott seems to connect the aims of education to the needs of a democratic society which does not view diversity as a problem which needs solving, but as enriching for all involved.

The discussion so far may illustrate that issues of segregation and inclusion are not straightforward and easy to solve. They suggest that the very fundamentals of our education system, the values which underpin it and the relationship between education and society, need to be critically scrutinised. Hargreaves and Fullan for example, argue that we have lost one of the fundamentals of education when we disconnected the education system from the surrounding community: “The structures that have separated schools from the surrounding community have made the work (of teachers) more difficult. In fact, they have made it impossible” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p.28).

Without underestimating the role of the government, the inclusion or exclusion of students in mainstream schools seems the result of what is happening in classrooms and in schools. What teachers do or what they fail to do will have important implications for all students involved. Therefore Elliot argues that:

“teachers’ practice won’t change without corresponding changes taking place in their implicit theories. They will resist change that does not appear to be consistent with their beliefs. Therefore, the starting point for change is with classroom teachers and their understandings of teaching and learning, rather than with the organisation as such” (Elliott, 1998, p.95)

Policy makers, both at national and local level, have the duty to initiate, but above all, to facilitate and stimulate educational changes in the schools and in the classrooms because teachers need all the support that is available. Hargreaves and Fullan also call upon the wider community and ask parents to support teachers, acknowledging that:

“the schooling that will be best for their children in the twenty first century, has to be very different from the schooling they experienced themselves , and, they must certainly expect a lot of their children’s’ teachers, but should base this on understanding, courtesy and partnership” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p.28).

After this introduction I will now go into more detail about the latest developments in Dutch mainstream and special education. See for an overview of the Dutch Education System Table 3.

Together to school again (WSNS)

The Dutch Ministry of Education produced in 1990 a memorandum, called ‘*Together to school again*’ (in Dutch: *Weer samen naar school* or *WSNS*) which probingly challenged the view that only special schools are able to provide appropriate education for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Preceding this memorandum the government took measures to strengthen mainstream education and restrict referral of students with SEN to special schools. These measures were the integration of pre-school education and primary education, extending special needs provision in regular schools, differentiation of subject matter and the development of implementation programmes.

The ideas behind Together to school again originated from:

- Parents of children with disabilities, who wanted their child in a regular school, and self advocacy groups of disabled people who fought for their rights to be educated among their peers.
- International organisations which presented their views at international conferences and adopted statements which member states are expected to follow and to put into action (e.g. the Salamanca Statement of 1994 by UNESCO).
- Researchers and authors on disability issues who presented their research results and experiences to national and international panels and audiences and who gave evidence that segregation in the education system does harm to a lot of children.
- Governments, inspired by the idea of cutting back the expenditure on special schools.
- Governments, influenced by international examples of inclusive forms of education (the Scandinavian model).

Still the notion in the Netherlands is very much alive that for some children (for example children with a hearing impairment), during some part of their lives educational provision in a special school will best fit their needs. The Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Sciences estimates that in the future 2% of all students will get their education at a special school (OC&W, 1995). It is also evident that some children experience, alongside the positive effects of inclusion, negative aspects as being bullied and standing aside. Physical integration in itself does not necessarily mean having playmates, being accepted and developing feelings of self esteem.

Soder and Pijl (1996) refers to research which indicates that, as a consequence of their integration in mainstream schools, disabled students became isolated because they missed the relationships with and the support from other disabled students. These practices of integrating them into mainstream settings without properly meeting not only their educational needs but also their social and emotional needs, were referred to as 'social dumping'.

To implement Together to school again two measures seemed absolutely necessary:

- The development of co-operative networks of mainstream primary schools with one or more special primary schools, developing consortia of school (see Table 2 and Table 3) which take the responsibility for all students with SEN in their region (see Figure 1).
- A gradual re-allocation of financial resources from special primary schools to the mainstream primary schools within the consortia (Pijl et al, 1997; Rijswijk & Sikkema, 2001).

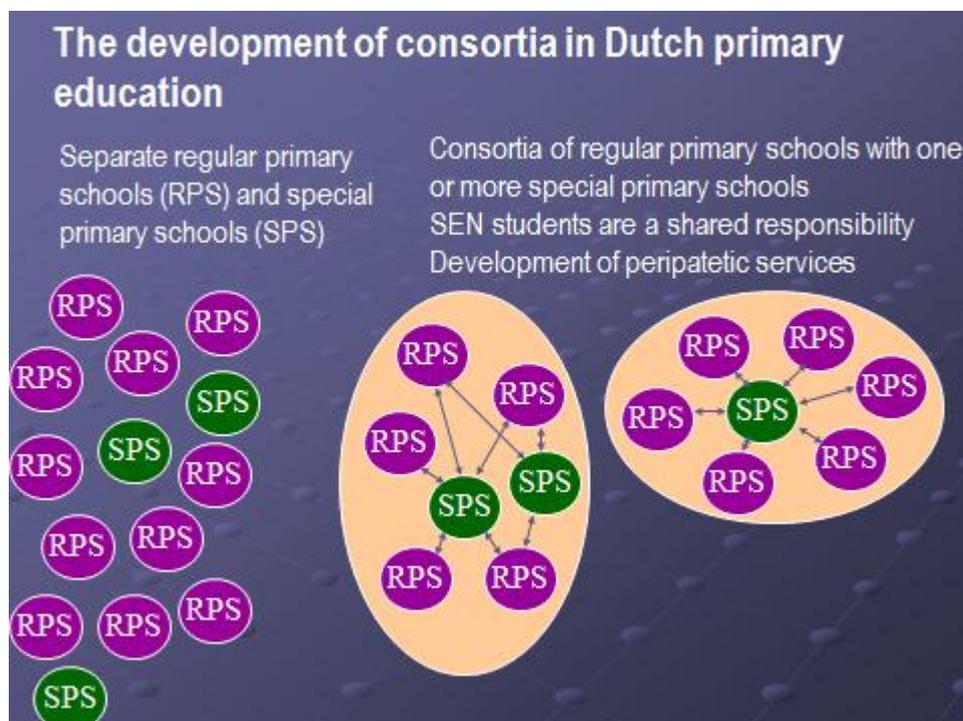


Figure 1 The development of consortia in Dutch primary education

In 1995 the Dutch parliament ratified an agreement about the re-allocation of financial resources. Special primary schools which are part of a consortium of schools would get money for 2% of all the students of that particular consortium. The number of students in Dutch special primary schools nationally was 3,8%. So the budget for the 1,8% of the students will now go to the primary schools of a consortium. Together these schools could decide whether they want to use this budget to create extra facilities in the mainstream primary schools to better take care of students with special educational needs or that they want the special school to use the budget to accommodate these students. In the future these consortia of schools will get a fixed budget, based upon the total number of students in their region. This new principle of financial settlement was gradually implemented starting in 1998 with an extension to four years.

This re-allocation of financial resources seems to be vital because research indicates that the development of co-operative networks (the consortia) in itself have not brought the wanted and expected results of integrating more students with SEN in mainstream schools and limiting the referrals of these students to the special primary schools (Meijer, 1996; Rijswijk & Sikkema, 2001).

Meijer also concludes that the effectiveness of Together to school again should not be overestimated and that the most realistic approach seems to be that shifts in the numbers of students with SEN making use of special provision are not expected in the near future (Meijer, 1996).

Developing inclusive practices in other countries show that inclusive education does not happen as a consequence of adapting the education system to a new paradigm (integration and inclusion as the ultimate aim to strive for), but demands far reaching interventions and profound changes in values and beliefs of practitioners in favour of integration and inclusion. Delivering the standard curriculum, homogeneous grouping of students, very summative procedures of assessment, a very competitive atmosphere in the schools and in the classes, early and very rigid procedures to only measure the cognitive abilities of children and to select them accordingly and repeating the year, all prove to be non productive and conflicting with the wish to achieve an inclusive education system (Lloyd, 2000).

All of these aspects are very present in the current Dutch education system. New programmes like for example Basic Secondary Education were meant to postpone career decisions and to avoid streaming at an early age. But current practice shows that most of the schools already are splitting up students the moment they enter secondary education based on their perceived academic and cognitive abilities.

Research also indicates that if we want special educational needs provision to be successful in the mainstream school, these provisions need to be: given as close to the mainstream setting as possible, given as early as possible, limited in time, very flexible, and from the student's perspective considered the least restrictive (Pijl et al. 1997).

The development of Regional Expertise Centres (RECs)

As a consequence of 'Together to school again' it soon became clear that the Dutch Ministry of Education would also involve the schools of the groups 2 and 3 (see Table 1) in this process of trying to integrate more students with SEN in mainstream schools. Group 2 schools were special schools for children with sensory impairments and (severe) physical disabilities and for children with multiple disabilities. Group 3 schools were schools for children who will need support and care during their whole life.

The special schools for students with visual impairments in particular already had much experience of transferring students back to mainstream schools and to keeping students in regular classes with the assistance of peripatetic teachers. Most of the students with a visual impairment, who have no additional special educational needs, are in regular schools nowadays (about 65%).

In November 1996 the Dutch Ministry of Education published its memorandum 'The Rucksack' (OC&W, 1996b) in which it describes its intention with these two groups of schools. The measures they wanted implement were:

- The introduction of a personal budget (the Rucksack) for students with sensorial, physical or mental disabilities to pay for the additional support and resources when they attend a mainstream school.
- The realisation of an objective, verifiable and systematic way of assessing their special educational needs.
- The clustering of the existing schools of the groups 2 and 3 into four new groups of schools and the obligation for them to develop into Regional Expertise Centres (RECs), thus obtaining a certain scale which was supposed necessary to provide high quality educational provision (see Figure 2).
- The strengthening of the role of the parents in the whole process of decision making concerning their child and its education.

To be able to assess whether these measures had the effects the Dutch government anticipated, it seems important to address the following issues:

- Did these plans actually strengthen the position of the parents?
- Did these propositions actually stimulate and support the inclusion of students in mainstream education?
- Did the development of Regional Expertise Centres actually lead to new knowledge creation and the preservation of existing knowledge?
- Were the RECs successful in supporting teachers and students with disabilities in the mainstream school effectively?
- Did these measures stimulate a more inclusive towards people with disabilities both in the education system and in society at large?

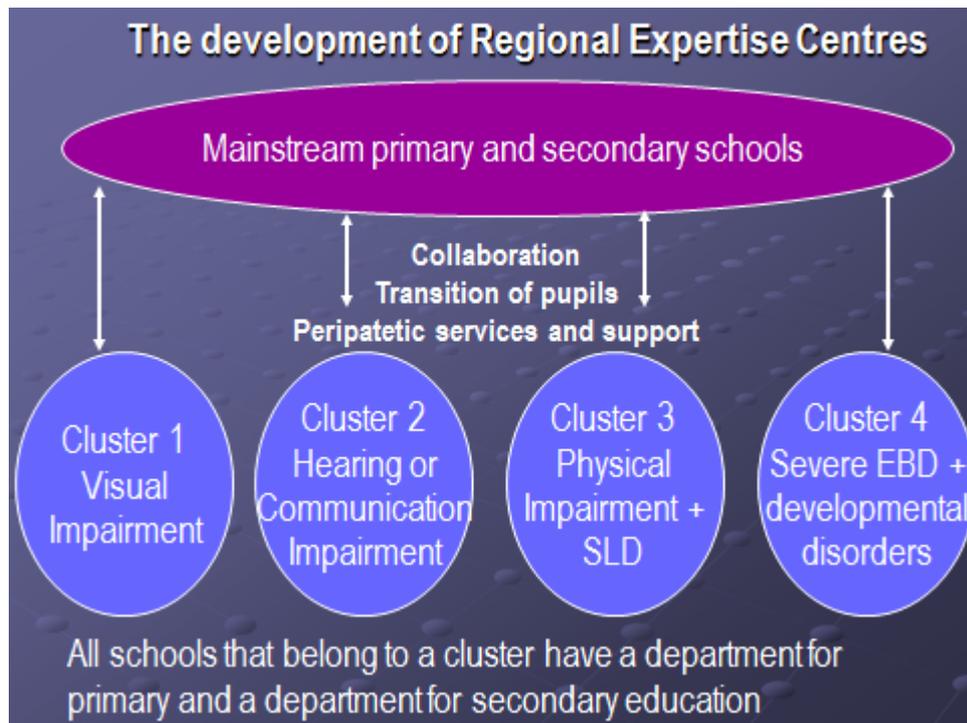


Figure 2 The development of Regional Expertise Centres

Research seems to indicate that in the Netherlands we have not succeeded yet in developing a school system which is able to respond positively to all the issues raised above (Herweijer, 2008; LCTI, 2006; OC&W, 2003; Onderwijsraad, 2003).

The position of parents of students with a disability remains difficult (Evaluatie- en Adviescommissie Passend Onderwijs, 2009). Even when parents have the right to choose between a special school and a regular school for their child, it seems vital for parents to have insight in the educational policies, the pedagogy, the educational content and the teaching and learning practices of a particular school. The issue at stake is how and from whom parents will get the information, necessary to make the right decisions in the interest of their child. It seems that they will rely on the information and support of professionals. But bearing in mind what Oliver (1996) said about the same professionals producing a different range of services, it will not be easy for parents to advocate in the best interest of their child. Even more so because parents often feel that they have little access to teachers and that schools are often experienced as secretive systems (Walraven & Andriessen, 2004). Turnbull and Ruef reported from their interviews with parents that:

Families believed that many teachers lacked training in providing appropriate instruction and behavioural supports (Turnbull & Ruef, 1997, p 219), and they sum up the characteristics of teachers that frustrate parents' most: Unwilling to change, giving in to students as a way of dealing with problem behaviour, becoming defensive when suggestions are made, requiring that parents make an appointment before they come to see the teacher or observe the class, never giving concrete answers, giving up completely on the students, and being intimidated by students with problem behaviour (Ibid., p 219).

Again it seems clear that, apart from the necessity for teachers to acquire new competences (Claasen, De Bruïne, Schuman, Siemons & Van Velthooven, 2009), the only, truly meaningful change that will bring inclusive education closer to everyday practice, will be an emerging commitment among teachers to work with all children and to adapt the curriculum to the individual abilities of their students, to closely co-operate with parents and to re-establish links with the local community (Lloyd, 2000; Searle, 2001).

The Dutch Secretary of State put it this way:

Research from home and abroad shows over and over again that successful integration largely depends on the motivation of the classroom teacher to include the student with special educational needs in his class, to consult the parents, to undertake further training and to co-operate with colleagues and with experts from outside the school. (OC&W, 1996a, p 28).

When a student with a disability is educated in a mainstream school, or is transferred from a special school to a regular school, it is not enough that his teacher is committed to strive for his inclusion. This process demands a whole school policy, in favour of inclusion and celebrating diversity (Claasen et al., 2009). The whole staff of a school, including ancillary staff, should commit itself to inclusive thinking and inclusive practices. Such a commitment calls for active and inspiring actions and support from the school management. However, important questions spring forward:

- How many mainstream schools are ready to respond the challenge?
- How many teachers are able to practice adaptive and inclusive education?
- What stimulating measures does the Secretary of State plan?
- Does the government supply schools with enough financial means to train their personnel? Are facilities in regular schools up to date? Are these schools really accessible (also physically) to all students with SEN?
- Do we need an obligatory programme of further training and in-service training for all professionals working with students with SEN, for example at master's level??

The development of Regional Expertise Centres may prove to be a solid foundation to stimulate integration on the one hand and to take care of those students who may not, hopefully temporarily, be able to be in the mainstream school fulltime. Ultimately these RECs will be judged by:

- The quality of their educational provision for students with disabilities.
- The quality and the content of their peripatetic services to mainstream schools.
- The quality of their assessment of the strengths and challenges of the individual student.
- The transparency, quality and usability of individual education plans (IEPs).
- The quality of their inter-professional, interdisciplinary and inter-agency-collaboration..
- The quality of their research and their professional development programmes.

It seems important that these RECs are decentralised to enable children to have their special educational needs met in a way that is the least intrusive to their daily lives. In some regions in the Netherlands for example there is a relative large number of children with a visual impairment. Maybe the Danish model of a centre class, attached to a mainstream school is a realistic option under such conditions.

Responding to student diversity in Basic Secondary Education

Secondary education in the Netherlands has changed during the last two decades and will change in the years to come.

Basic to the whole of secondary education in the Netherlands are three main characteristics:

- A broad education which focuses on the cognitive, social-emotional, creative and physical abilities of students.
- An education which stimulates students to become actively involved in their own learning process and to take responsibility for their own education.
- The education system is compelled to recognise, to meet and to value the differences between the students in order to contribute to the maximal development of each student's abilities (Procesmanagement Voortgezet Onderwijs, 1996).

This means that education is geared to the development of skills and abilities and that students should get a more active and more responsible role during their educational career. This presupposes that teachers gradually adopt the role of a coach and a facilitator. The education process moves from a teacher-centred process towards a student-centred process.

This also implies that all students have the right to master the curriculum at their own pace and according to their own level (differentiated learning), that subjects are presented in such a way that the student is able to discover the connection which exists between subjects, and that the curriculum offers all students authentic learning opportunities (Ibid.).

These basic characteristics of Dutch secondary education seem to hold promising conditions to accommodate more students with SEN in mainstream secondary education. However the evaluation by Lagerweij (Marreveld 1996) of the implementation of Basic Secondary Education, seems to indicate that although at the level of school organisation much work has been done, the three main characteristics of basic secondary education have not been realised in the classrooms yet. He observed that "individual teachers seem to be

immune to school policies” and that “behind his classroom door the teacher is isolated, but very powerful” (Ibid., 1996, p7).

Lagerweij concluded that one reason for this lack of implementing new educational attitudes among teachers in the schools he evaluated, was that the schools had no teacher training policy. Another reason brought forward for this lack of implementation was that the government did not give schools time to put these new ideas into practice properly. Instead they launched already more educational reforms (the development of networks within junior secondary schools, the implementation of the study house in upper secondary education and the development of new educational routes in junior secondary and pre-vocational education for example) (Dijsselbloem, 2008).

In January 2002 the Secretary of State gave individual schools more freedom to choose how long Basic Secondary Education will take for different student populations and which attainment targets they wish to put aside for students with SEN. In the years to come schools could individually decide how many subjects they will offer various groups of students. They may reduce the number of subjects from the current fifteen to eight.

For students with special educational needs this may mean that nothing really has improved. Schools try to group students in homogeneous settings almost the day they get into secondary education (Jager, 1996). Streaming nowadays is everyday practice in Dutch Basic Secondary Education, quite contrary to the starting point. At the age of twelve all Dutch are assessed and based on their results they are placed in different types of secondary education (see Table 3).

In effect, Lagerweij argues that:

Basically Basic Secondary Education is in deviance to the need for selection in our society. The ideology of equal opportunities for everybody is in theory highly valued in the Netherlands, but reality shows there is no tolerance, what so ever, for it in practice. In our Western societies we favour individual achievements, we are geared to competitiveness, egoism and personal gain. (Marreveld, 1996, p 7)

And he continues, and in the meantime his words have come true:

The proposal of the Kraakman-committee to assess Basic Secondary Education in the future on two different levels perfectly fits the ideals we all unconsciously nourish. It is completely inconsistent with Basic Secondary Education, but it links very well to the dichotomy of social inequality we like to continue (Marreveld, 1996, p 8).

This Kraakman proposal brings back into the education system the process of early streaming and selection, a process we were just trying to get rid of through the implementation of Basic Secondary Education. This will prevent successful integration of students with disabilities and/or SEN in Dutch mainstream secondary education (Walraven & Andriessen, 2004). The call for different levels of testing shows the inability of schools and teachers to deal with a whole range of different students in one class effectively. Emphasis again is on homogeneous grouping of students and homogeneous grouping is fundamentally conflicting to inclusive education.

The development of networks in Dutch junior secondary education

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science put through new legislation to reform junior secondary education and pre-vocational education. These schools provided education for students from 12 to 16. They now had to establish networks with special secondary schools for students with learning and behavioural difficulties and special schools for students with moderate learning difficulties (see Figure 3). These new networks are similar to the consortia in primary education discussed before. The aim was to give more students with disabilities and/or SEN the opportunity to be in mainstream schools. These schools now provide preparatory vocational secondary education (in Dutch *Voorbereidend Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* or *VMBO*) for a very diverse population of students. At the same time the former special schools for students with moderate learning difficulties aged 12-18 had to change into schools (in Dutch schools for *Praktijkonderwijs*) which offer their students an employment oriented programme and support their transition into paid work (OC&W, 1998c). These changes resulted in (Procesmanagement Voortgezet Onderwijs, 1996):

- The development of four vocational pathways focusing on sectors like the industry, trade, care and well-being and agriculture and horticulture.
- The implementation of four educational routes in each sector: a theoretical programme for students with a preference for academic learning; a combined theoretical and vocational programme for students with

- a preference for academic learning, but who wish to orient themselves in one vocational subject; and two vocational programmes for students who basically show preference for learning by doing with much emphasis on vocational subjects and less emphasis on academic subjects and academic content.
- The implementation of a support system designed for students who need additional support and provision, for example because of their disability, to master one of the four educational routes in a certain pathway.
 - Employment oriented education for a limited number of students, who are not capable, even if they get extra support, to finish their secondary education with a formal qualification. The primary focus of this educational programme is to prepare them for the labour market.

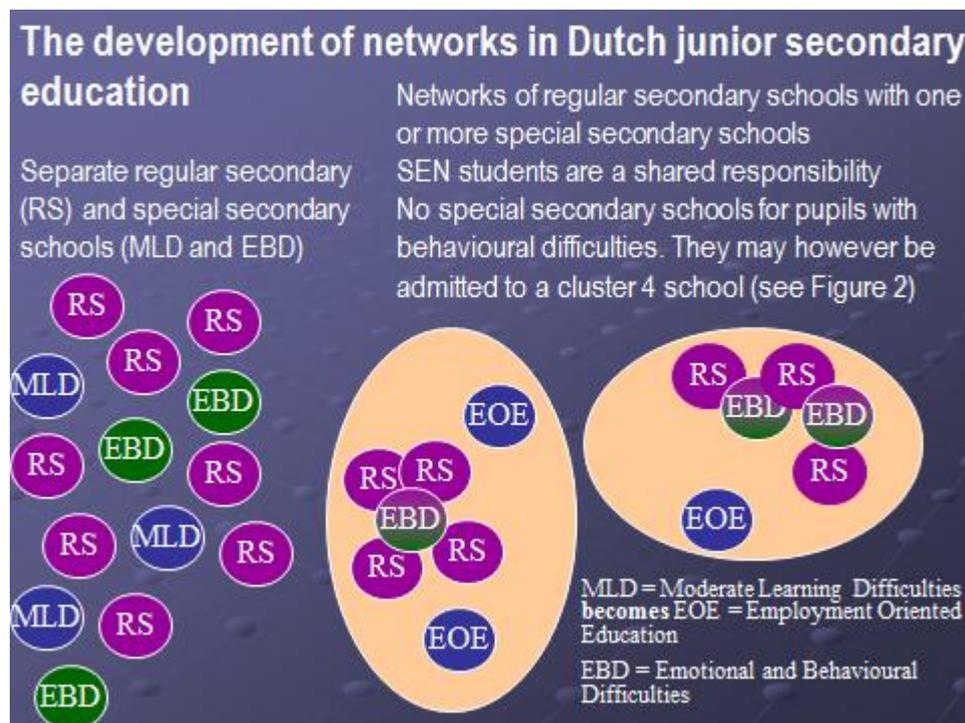


Figure 3 The development of networks in Dutch junior secondary education

The main objectives of this reform were:

- To get more clarity and coherence in junior secondary education.
- To acknowledge and value the differences between students.
- To realise a better alignment of junior secondary education with further education or the labour market.
- To integrate in particular students with learning and behavioural challenges in mainstream schools to ensure equal and full educational opportunities for all (Onderwijsraad, 1996).

The Education Council, an advisory committee on education and educational reforms for the Dutch government, acknowledged however that the mainstream schools for secondary education were not yet fit to meet the challenge to cater for students with complicated special educational needs. The council concluded that teachers in mainstream secondary education often lack the necessary pedagogical skills to deal with these students adequately (Ibid.).

Visiting schools in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Belgium and Denmark seems to indicate that students with behavioural difficulties are likely to experience any compassion in regular schools and classes. So it seems doubtful that it will be possible to integrate these students in regular classes without extra resources, more facilities for in-service training and fundamental changes in school climate. At the time of implementing the new policy (June 2002) the national Dutch newspapers quoted several head teachers of preparatory vocational secondary education schools who said that students with behavioural problems are already serious threatening a successful implementation of this new educational concept. They said that teachers at their schools are leaving the profession in rising numbers because of the enrolment of these

students. And these views were expressed before the first group of students had finished their first year in this newly developed type of education.

In subsequent memoranda of the Minister of Education there is no analysis available whether and under what conditions the integration of students with behavioural difficulties may be possible and successful. The consequences of the integration of these students for themselves, for their peers and for the staff involved remains in the dark. There seems a lack of serious analyses of whether the organisation of the education system and the educational programmes themselves may evoke challenging behaviour within certain groups of students. Schools already consider the development of a collective “relief class” (February 2002), where students with extreme behaviour can have a time out.

Regarding the role of the parents the government did not provide for active involvement of the parents in deciding which support their child needs and which help it will actually get. Research however indicates that a close co-operation between parents and school staff is a vital link in the whole process of integration (Pijl et al. 1997). With regard to the students with moderate learning difficulties it seems important to stress the notion that their employment oriented education is at the same time their final experience with formal education. There is a certain risk that this ‘training for the labour market’ focuses too much on the achievement of vocational skills and too little on broad and general skills, much needed to become active and involved citizens of a democratic society.

Conclusion

So far our discussion seems to indicate that:

- Inclusive education is difficult to realise in a society which does not fully support inclusion.
- The true basis for inclusive education is largely embedded in an inclusive society.
- Inclusive education and its development are part of the wider discussion on human rights issues and the position of marginalised people, for example people with disabilities.
- Segregation and exclusion are imposed on certain people and certain groups by the more dominant and powerful people in a society.
- Disabled people themselves will have to claim and fight for their rights in order to put the violation of their civil rights to an end.
- During this process the support of self-advocacy groups and parents will remain important.
- Sometimes professionals in the field of education are functioning as obstacles to the development of a more inclusive education system.
- Inclusive education will only be possible when we leave behind the ideas of a standard curriculum, standard assessment procedures, the year group system and the fixed number of teaching hours for every child.
- Inclusive forms of education should stress and support the development of the abilities and strengths of young people, instead of focusing on their supposed deficiencies or shortcomings.
- Governments should oblige schools to develop whole-school policies with regard to meeting the needs of all of their students. A ‘Code of Practice’ may stimulate the process.
- The implementation of ‘Together to school again’ in the Netherlands proves to be very difficult and the process management team is not satisfied with the results so far. It seems that when society is not prepared and ready for such a process, the chances of failing are very high.
- The government should clearly and explicitly communicate their policy to the public if they really want to develop an inclusive society in the long run. They should be more explicit of their ideas of how they think the education system can support this process of valuing and celebrating diversity.
- To prevent the recent developments in the Netherlands to collapse, the Dutch government must show that they are very serious about the realisation of a more inclusive society and a more inclusive education system. The government must promulgate new legislation, re-allocate the financial resources and invest in schools, school management, staff, in-service training, teacher training and advocate the interests of disabled people.

Dutch education in the twenty first century

In the previous sections we discussed several government initiatives aiming at reducing the number of students attending special schools and stimulating and supporting mainstream schools to become more adaptive to the needs of students with disabilities and/or SEN. Research indicates that these initiatives were not an unqualified success: the numbers of students in special provision, diagnosed as having emotional and behavioural disorders increased significantly (LCTI, 2006); the numbers of long term un-employed young people with disabilities are increasing rapidly and seem to be an indication of their marginalised position (Stoutjesdijk & Berendsen, 2007); employers still have a prejudice regarding hiring people with disabilities (Kooiker, 2006; Verveen & Petersen, 2007); and the numbers of primary students in segregated settings have remained stable during the whole process of Together to school again, which started in 1990.

Therefore the government launched a new initiative in 2005, aiming at retaining more students with disabilities in mainstream schools, both in primary and in secondary education (Van der Hoeven, 2005). The initiative focuses on both the potential and the duty of mainstream schools to adapt their teaching and support to the individual needs of students with a disability and/or SEN. It seems remarkable however that the Dutch government did not refer to the international concept of inclusive education in the documents that were produced to support the implementation of their initiative. Instead they used a concept which refers to adapting the educational environment and educational provision to the individual needs of students with a disability and/or SEN (in Dutch the new policy is called *Passend Onderwijs*, which is difficult to translate into English literally).

Passend Onderwijs focuses on the following measures:

- Improving the quality and organisation of the teaching and learning of students with a disability or SEN.
- Supporting parents with finding a (mainstream) school which could provide the teaching and learning their child needs.
- Obliging the mainstream school to find and secure an appropriate educational provision for every student who applies for a place at that particular school (the one-stop-shop principle).
- Developing new and bigger consortia in primary education (scaling up: from 234 consortia to 75), thus ensuring that these consortia will be able to finance the special provision which is needed for all students within their region. An average consortium will have 21.000 students.
- The re-distribution of resources from the special schools of the clusters 3 and 4 (see Figure 2) to the consortia in primary education and the networks in secondary education.
- Discontinuation of the Regional Expertise Centres (RECs). Their task of identifying and assessing disability and/or SEN will be transferred to the consortia and networks of mainstream schools.
- Mandating decision making about the placement of students in a special school of the clusters 3 and 4 to the consortia and networks.
- The development of a continuum of provision in each consortium or network.
- Focusing on what students are capable of achieving instead of focusing on their shortcomings.
- Developing a transparent system of budget financing to end open-ended financing. (OC&W, 2011).

For the special schools of the clusters 3 and 4 the (anticipated) outcomes of *Passend Onderwijs* will be far reaching. The money they receive for providing peripatetic support to mainstream schools will be allocated directly to the consortia in primary education and the networks in secondary education. As a consequence the Rucksack will disappear, but the government is also aiming at a reduction of the current expenditure for the Rucksack of about 25%. On top of these cut-backs the special schools face a reduction of their current budgets which leads to an increase of student numbers per class (OC&W, 2011).

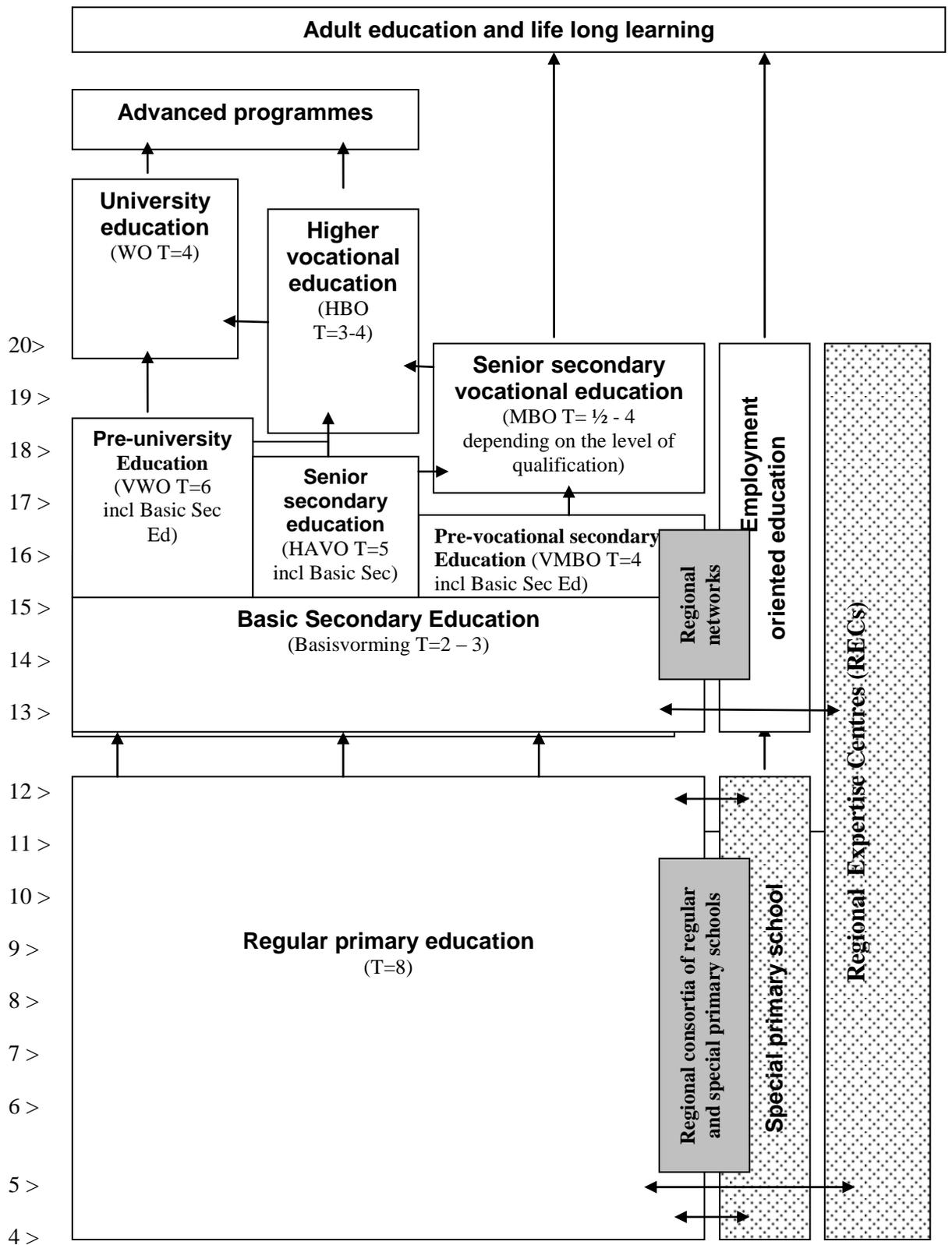
The ambitions and consequences are clear and the Dutch government seems genuinely committed to include more students with disabilities and/or SEN in the mainstream system. However, the Evaluation and Advisory Committee *Passend Onderwijs*, which was established by the government to monitor the advancement of *Passend Onderwijs*, indicated that during the process from 2005 onwards, the teachers were not involved or informed, that policy makers at all levels view “teachers as the problem” and that the involvement of parents was marginal (Evaluatie- en Adviescommissie *Passend Onderwijs*, 2009, pp. 17-18). Research, however, indicates the importance of involving the teaching profession actively at every stage of the process when trying to establish sustained and genuine change in the education system. At the same time policy makers at all levels seem to be distrustful of the people who are actually supposed to make it work in practice.

The challenges seem clear. We need to:

- bridge the gap between policy makers and their ambitions with the education system on the one hand, and involving the people who will actually face and experience the outcomes of measures in their daily lives, i.e. parents, children and young people with disabilities and/or SEN and the teaching staff in our schools, on the other hand
- rethink our parallel system of mainstream schools and special schools and ask ourselves whether this system is going to meet the demands of a democratic society in the twenty first century.
- position ourselves regarding the growing international commitment towards inclusive education, becoming manifest, for example, in the UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities of 2006 (UN, 2006) and the efforts of parents to have their child with a disability in the mainstream school, a school which is truly a school for all.

The measures the Dutch government currently proposes aim at realising a more inclusive education system in the Netherlands. The extent to which this process will be successful, ultimately depends on the willingness and competences of the teaching and support staff in our schools. Therefore it seems important to critically rethink their education and training, the facilities they may rely on and the support they should get from the general public.

Table 3 The present Dutch education system (2002)



T = the Time, i.e. the number of years it takes to complete the programme

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