

Beacons for dispersal and integration

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Dual waiting lists to combat black schools

The local authorities of Rotterdam have proposed working with a dual waiting list for schools in mixed neighbourhoods: one list for prospective pupils with immigrant backgrounds and one for prospective pupils with native Dutch origins. The aim is to combat segregation in education. The *De Pijler* primary school in the *Kop van Zuid* area of Rotterdam has been using dual waiting lists for a number of years and it claims that the approach has been successful. The plan of the local authorities in Rotterdam is part of a broader plan of approach which includes matters such as the promotion of exchanges between schools.

A striking aspect is that the waiting list is explicitly based on a distinction between immigrant and native Dutch (parent's country of birth). The minister asked the Education Council to investigate whether such waiting lists are legal. In the event that such waiting lists are illegal, the minister wishes to know what is possible and what not.

Don't think black, don't think white, just think

The Council believes that a waiting list or dispersal on the basis of national origin or ethnicity is legally indefensible. The Netherlands is bound by international regulations that forbid making such distinctions. What is paradoxical is that the same regulations simultaneously impose the obligation to combat discrimination and segregation in education. This is one of the reasons why the Council is of the opinion that there is enough leeway to take (binding) measures to combat segregation as long as these measures are not based on ethnicity or nationality. The Council believes that, subject to certain conditions, it is for example possible to use a waiting list based on (language) delays. The obvious thing to do is to link up with the weighting system.

This advice does not provide an all-encompassing solution. That would be impossible. The issue of integration is too complex, too dynamic and too unmanageable for that. The values and interests involved are often completely at odds with each other. There is an infinite number of nuances between 'white' and 'black' or between 'too white' and 'too black'. Schools, local authorities and parents have very different ideas on how to tackle segregation in education. In an abstract sense, people often advocate pupil dispersal but when the issue gets more tangible, when their own child is involved and their own school, the same people soon change their tune.

To date, little (educational) research has been carried out that demonstrates that certain dispersal measures contribute to integration or the improvement of education performance by ethnic minorities and disadvantaged pupils. However, educational achievements are not the only element of this discussion. Quite apart from that, the Council believes that mutual contacts between the different population groups in Dutch society are necessary, precisely within and via education. Learning about 'others' is difficult in the absence of 'others'. The Council applauds the fact that institutions, local authorities and parents are looking for opportunities to encourage integration or combat further segregation. By trying and by learning from experience we will have to discover which arrangements are suitable to tackle a segregation problem in a particular neighbourhood or municipality.

The Council wants legal space to be created to facilitate local tailor-made solutions. The formal legislator (government and parliament) will have to give an opinion on the applicable legal boundaries. The legislator can indicate that social integration is a general requirement for all education and all schools, and that dispersal on the basis of language delay can be used as an instrument. The Minister can also provide financial incentives for local initiatives in the form of project subsidies via the existing Act governing other subsidies awarded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

Learning by combining locally

The Council has investigated a number of possible (core) measures, for example a (virtual) halt to the establishment of schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils, or financial control via the weighting system. However, these measures are difficult to implement in practice or are thwarted by

objections of principle. In the opinion of the Council, a standard for ensuring a maximum of 80% of disadvantaged pupils in any one school is only possible in the form of an ambition voluntarily chosen by the school.

Segregation can, therefore, only be tackled at the local level. The first step is to assess, within the framework of consultations between schools and local authorities, whether agreements relating to dispersal and integration can be made on the basis of a joint insight into whether there is actually a problem.

In some situations, however, an obligation to consult will not be sufficient. The law will then have to facilitate a controlling role for local councils – just as the Council previously proposed in its recommendations entitled *Onderwijs en burgerschap (Education and citizenship, 2003)*. The obvious thing to do is to use a consultation structure which runs parallel to the existing form of consultation for current local education policy, namely consultations aimed at agreement. Just as in the case of the plan for educationally disadvantaged pupils, it will eventually be the local council that can – following the consultations referred to – impose demands, for example on the admission policy of schools. Incidentally, the Council believes that the limited category of schools that pursue an admission policy based stringently on denomination must be allowed to continue to do so based on the freedom to determine the religious or ideological basis upon which a school is founded as laid down in the constitution. Moreover, the Education Council can advise whether the draft plan infringes the freedom to determine the religious or ideological basis, or the freedom to found schools.

Isolated measures for one particular school in a certain neighbourhood would not be effective. A local plan to tackle the problem of the (excessively) white and the (excessively) black schools can, in any case, contain three measures, namely:

- Support for schools that are open to possible initiatives by parents, such as group registrations with a local black or white school.
- Agreements relating to school accommodation. In the opinion of the Council, the legislator must first ensure that the encouragement of integration and dispersal can be criteria for the allocation of accommodation facilities.
- An agreement on how pupils with (language) delays can be distributed better across the various schools. In this respect, educationally disadvantaged pupils must be regarded as a single group. On the basis of the current weighting system, this means 1.25 and 1.9 pupils. A central registration system from a certain age may prevent popular schools from being automatically dominated by a (native Dutch) population group with an information head start. The drawing of lots can be ‘weighted’ in the sense referred to above. A dispersal plan must comply with conditions such as careful preparation and a guarantee of the quality of the instruments used.

There are obvious practical limitations. For example, for the system to work the pupil population will have to be such that dispersal is possible. If the measures are to be successful at all, parents will also have to be involved in the plan. People will have to realise that there is a joint problem, for which a joint solution offers added value. A proper communication and information strategy is also essential, vis-à-vis parents, school boards and school heads, who are familiar with daily practice.

“I never thought beforehand that I would make such a choice, but now that my child is involved I am thinking it would actually be quite nice to opt for the white school and all those well-educated parents.”

In the discussion on how to combat segregation and promote integration in education, important factors are images (what I can see in the playground), prejudices (black pupils = disadvantaged), plausible concerns on the part of the parents (this is actually about my child’s future) and the justifiable urge to act on the part of the board and the politicians (‘the gap is getting bigger, things are going wrong, we must do something’). All these factors have to be taken into account in the event that any action is taken. Moreover, there are a number of paradoxes and dilemmas such as views on what is good for someone else’s children as opposed to views on what is good for one’s own children, the reinforcement of parents’ freedom of choice as opposed to enforced dispersal, the autonomy of school boards as opposed to the position of the local authority plus more (de)centralised interpretation through objectives such as integration, plan obligations and supervision as opposed to a reduction in bureaucracy and the administrative burden.

Those involved in politics and policymaking will have to reflect on these dilemmas because they have caused considerable uncertainty among local authorities and school boards. How much room do they have and how much will they be given by central government? A degree of decisiveness is required, although the parties concerned should make sure they look before they leap. Well-intended measures can sometimes generate effects which are the opposite to those intended. This tragedy of the good intentions has occurred, for example, in the United States: large-scale dispersal measures with obligatory 'bussing' have reinforced the white exodus from the major cities and thereby increased segregation.

The problems will take time to solve, but something can at least be done about the situation. The formal legislator will lay down the integration objectives in law. However, in addition to this the legislator will have to make legal judgements as to where the legal boundaries are and what authorities the local councils will be given to lay down agreements made locally in a plan. At the local level, the parties concerned will weigh up the pros and cons and explore the practical limitations. A lot of schools, such as *De Pijler*, are already thinking about what their social integration task is. They are taking concrete steps, for example by organising exchanges between pupils. In the Council's opinion, steps can be taken right now towards creating a society in which population groups are free to find out about each other. Provided people are aware of the practical and legal limitations, the proposed plan of the local authorities in Rotterdam is a good example of a local, combined approach as advocated by the Council.