PLURALISM AND SEGREGATION: THE DUTCH EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In this article the authors describe the plural nature of the Dutch education system and discuss how the many options combine with constitutional rights to facilitate and maintain a highly segregated school system. They express caution about expecting segregation to wane when choice and parental freedom remain carefully guarded values.

The Dutch Constitution prescribes that public *(openbare)* schools must be secular: they cannot have a denominational or a general Christian character, though they can address philosophical, religious, and social values. Public schools are all expected to follow the same curriculum, while more freedom is allowed to non-public schools to pursue a distinctive approach. Genuinely denominational education, or education based on other philosophical principles, can only be provided in privately-run schools. Privately run schools are given a great deal of latitude in deciding upon their own didactic approaches, deciding how attainment targets will be reached, cultivating a distinctive school climate, deciding which pupils to admit on the basis of religious adherence, or hiring personnel likely to uphold the particular mission of the school. But the public-private distinction is misleading because the state accepts the responsibility to maintain a diverse system of schools, which is expressed in *broad recognition and equal funding of private initiatives.* This has made it possible for Hindu and Islamic schools to receive state support on the same grounds as those which apply to Catholic, Protestant and Jewish schools. The same government responsibility extends to secular private schools, which are based on specific educational philosophies such as Montessori, Steiner, Dalton, and Jenaplan. All schools that receive state money must follow attainment targets; meet enrolment regulations, teacher qualifications, and salary requirements; use Dutch as the language of instruction; publicise academic performance; and finally, submit to periodic inspections. Failure to meet acceptable standards can result in school closure (as recently happened with a secondary Islamic school).

The Netherlands can be characterised as a facilitative state (James, 1989; Van der Ploeg et al., 2000), one in which a plurality of educational choices are on offer. In principle, any number of different school options is free and available to all; indeed, freedom of education (including free parental choice) is seen as a sacred right in the Netherlands. At least since the Constitution of 1848 there has formally been considerable liberty to establish non-public schools, though

it was not until 1920 that this became an affordable option for most. By this time, a historic compromise (1917) had been reached between the different religious and political communities in the Netherlands, resulting in full state funding for privately-run schools (Ritzen, Van Dommelen, & De Vijlder, 1997). In the subsequent decades, a unique system known as 'pillarization' *(verzuiling)* governed the choices available to most people, with Catholics attending Catholic schools, reading Catholic newspapers, using Catholic hospitals, listening to Catholic media, and so on. The same was true of Reformed, Socialist, and other groups.

After 1970, a variety of social developments led to changes in the pattern of Dutch pillarization (Karsten & Teelken, 1996). The most prominent developments in the period were increased secularization on the one hand, and the influx of migrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds on the other. These two developments have yielded seemingly contradictory tendencies in Dutch education policy. For example, increased secularization has not resulted in the de-pillarization of educational organizations. Despite the fact that a majority of the Dutch population claims to not belong to a religious denomination, private education's market share has remained almost constant. Indeed, while *verzuiling* is a relic of the past, its legacy remains hugely influential and its impact is still felt (Dijkstra, Dronkers & Hofman, 1997; Dronkers, 1995).

Nevertheless, secularization *has* led to a redefinition of the identity and vested interests of religious schools. At the school level, the redefinition has led to the further liberalization of the schools' religious character. In fact, some studies (Vreeburg, 1993; Karsten, Meijer & Peetsma, 1996) have shown that already by the 90s, the religious identity of most Protestant and Catholic schools had worn very thin. Nowadays, in mainstream Catholic and Protestant schools, there remain few traces of specifically religious elements either in entry requirements for pupils or in the selection of personnel.[1]

But the 1970s also witnessed a sea change in religious diversity. This came about with the growing presence of migrant workers with non-Western backgrounds, especially Hinduism and Islam, but also through the increasing popularity of the New Age movement. With this increasingly diverse religious representation came new demands from parents to organize schools on the basis of educational liberty as defined in the Dutch constitution. Since the late 1980s, several dozen Islamic and Hindu schools have been established, joining other minority groups, including Jews and Evangelicals.

Yet several events in the past decade have led to dramatic changes in the attitudes of the public toward (some) religious schools. Most of these are related to incidents of religiously-inspired terrorism; the large percentage of unassimilated immigrant populations; the debate over Islamic schools; and the rise of populist movements such as *Lijst Pim Fortuyn.* Taken together, there is a growing number of persons who would have the state fund only the "common" secular state schools, which provide a 'neutral' curriculum and are equally accessible to all. The argument behind this plea is that in a society as culturally and ethnically divided as the Netherlands, it is necessary to use the school as an instrument for integration, which can (1) teach children of different ethnic, religious, social, and cultural backgrounds to live peacefully together and to respect each other; (2) instill in them the basic values of democracy and the rule of law; (3) and create equal opportunities for all. Those making this argument propose that the Dutch system move in the direction of the French system of the *école laïque* ("public school") or the American system of common (public) schooling.

Nowadays fewer parents select a school on the basis of religious conviction; in its place parents talk about a 'match' between the home and the school value, or criteria such as 'quality instruction' and a safe learning atmosphere. Even if other reasons factor in, such as the ethnic or socio-economic composition of a school, most are loath to express these motives openly. Whatever the case, a plurality of educational options – religious and non-religious – both facilitates and maintains high levels of segregation. The proportion of school segregation in the Netherlands, even in mixed neighbourhoods, is one of the highest in the industrialized world (Ladd & Fiske 2009; Musterd & Ostendorf 2009; Vedder 2006). Yet as we have shown, it would not be inaccurate to say that the Netherlands has *always* been "segregated," especially along religious and ideological lines, though united under a common political system. Yet until the arrival of non-white immigrants made some of these divisions clearly visible, this fact was seldom publicly acknowledged. Moreover, the extent to which segregation reflects real social inequities has never been more real. Many of the very same phenomena associated with urban segregation elsewhere also occur in Dutch cities: among particular ethnic minority groups one sees far lower educational attainment rates among parents; much higher rates of unemployment; higher incarceration rates for young men; higher poverty rates; lower rates of teacher retention in schools with higher concentrations of poor pupils; an absence of positive role models, etc.

While segregation patterns have been known for quite some time, concerted efforts to 'correct' neighborhood or school segregation and their effects began long after patterns were firmly established. In different cities throughout the Netherlands, a number of different strategies to curb segregation have been tried. Short-lived voluntary experiments on the local level include a bussing

scheme in Gouda, or a one-subscription moment for all parents in Zaandam. Both, however, have been abandoned as concerns about effectiveness were repeatedly cited. More recent attempts endeavor to achieve an ethnic or socio-economic 'balance' with respect to the student composition in a school (one usually strongly favoring the white majority).

However, other approaches attempt to offset the *effects* of segregation. In the Dutch context there traditionally have been two such responses. One is to use weighted student funding. This roughly describes increased per-pupil spending for students with greater educational needs. In the Netherlands, it has meant that school boards may be allocated funds on the basis of the number of families with social disadvantage; children from certain backgrounds in principle receive as much as twice the per-pupil funding as other children. There is wide discretion with how the money is actually spent; schools for instance may try to attract more specially trained staff to work with children who are more difficult to teach. This can make an important difference.

But weighted student funding is not a panacea. First, though it may mitigate some of the effects of segregation, weighted student funding does not *prevent* segregation from occurring. Second, it tells us very little about the actual amount spent on a child's learning. Schools use weighted student funding in various ways, and it remains difficult to determine precisely how and what the relevant effects are. Third, weighted student funding does little to address the problems associated with inequitable conditions of school choice in the first place, and as a policy instrument its effects in compensating for social disadvantage are ambiguous at best. The fact remains that schools on which more money is spent has done little to close the so-called 'achievement gap'.

The second, and more controversial, response has been to restrict parental choice. For example, the Dutch Labour Party has been calling for a restriction of parental choice in Amsterdam, and other initiatives were implemented in Nijmegen in 2009. Applied in its narrowest sense, restricting parental choice simply means that children must attend the school in their catchment area. But restricting parental choice also has not worked for several reasons. First, unless governments resort to the improbable task of assigning one's place of dwelling, nothing will prevent determined parents (of whatever financial means) from moving elsewhere. Poor parents may be less able to move than wealthy parents, but provided there is sufficient and reliable information available about school quality, determined poor parents also find ways to avail themselves of other options. Second, freedom of educational choice is a constitutional right in the Netherlands and again, those with information and the means will opt out for reasons they are not obligated to disclose. Districts also must take the concerns of parents seriously, especially their middle class parents, whom they are loath to alienate. Indeed, efforts to restrict parental choice, while perhaps well-intended and sometimes necessary, pose a number of legal as well as ethical problems, and those who seek to move policy in this direction risk exacerbating segregation rather than ameliorating it by provoking a reaction from more advantaged families who may be tempted to abandon the school system altogether.

Two alternatives presently pose a (slight) challenge to the existing educational system. The first is homeschooling. While the number of homeschoolers in the Netherlands is incredibly small (.001% of total school attending age children), demands are slowly growing[2], following trends occurring in Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The second and more formidable option is a private elite education. Traditionally there is, despite school choice and diversity of supply, no significant elite school sector. It is required that primary and secondary schools receiving public funds be not-for-profit. But the early and strong selection at age twelve made the growth of extremely selective secondary schools (e.g. gymnasia) and tracks possible, virtually precluding for-profit elite schools. That is now changing. While there are only a few for-profit schools (representing less than 1% of total enrolments) their popularity is growing, especially for wealthy students who failed in regular state subsidized schools.

As we have seen, not only do pluralism and segregation appear to go hand in hand, but the response to segregation appears inevitably to be one of unease. Integrating schools is believed by many to be a solution for a host of societal problems. Integration arguments typically focus on inequality and maintain that disadvantaged (and usually ethnic minority) children who remain behind in segregated urban schools (due to 'white flight' but also various urban planning policies and self selection) lose out on the benefits their middle class peers take with them. These include the opportunities to interact with, and learn from, children who have more social capital. This objection has two parts; first, there are important *peer-effects,* which mean that children can learn at least as much from each other as they do from their teachers, and that the presence of children from middle-class homes in the classroom boosts achievement of less advantaged children. Second, the presence of more middle class children in the school, the argument goes, translates into greater overall parental involvement, and these benefits accrue to all children.

What can be said about these claims? Well, given both institutional and self-selective grouping practices, but also individual preferences, we know of no evidence

that supports the claim that *classrooms* – beyond the age of eight or nine – are very heterogeneous with respect to social background or ability level, *no matter how integrated the school is*. In the Netherlands, for instance, children are 'tracked' for different types of secondary education as young as twelve, largely on the basis of a single test *(citotoets)* score and teacher recommendations. Even in comparatively more 'flexible' school systems, similar patterns occur. To the second point that the involvement of middle class parents translates into benefits to the school climate as a whole, we know of no evidence corroborating the claim that schools are generally responsive to parental input beyond that which concerns one's own child. Parents with more middle-class clout certainly know how effectively to navigate the system to benefit their own child, for instance by pressuring school principles to assign their own child to a different teacher, to challenge decisions made on the basis of a test, or to simply switch schools when things do not go their way.

Suppose, however, that there was compelling evidence for the benefits of integrated schools or classrooms. Even if this were the case, a number of difficulties remain. First, the best efforts to channel resources into disadvantaged schools as a way of combating inequality, e.g., using incentives to attract talented teachers to high-need schools. Without more systemic changes to the climate and core purposes of the school, we would not likely avert continuing inequalities. Second, at a minimum, it remains hugely controversial whether this social aim – integrating schools in order to improve the chances of the less advantaged – trumps constitutional rights Dutch parents have to select an education they deem best for their own child. Third, most efforts to curb segregation trends concentrate on the composition of the student body rather than the importance of a well organized school with high expectations, strong leadership and a caring ethos.

Many schools within the Dutch education system promise parents these very characteristics. Many of these are religious schools (e.g., Jewish, Hindu, Catholic, Islamic), but many others are schools with alternative learning approaches (e.g., Steiner, Dalton, Jenaplan, Montessori). Many of these schools have good reputations for academic quality, but what most parents who choose them find attractive is the fact that the school works to maintain a special ethos and a set of values that cohere nicely with what parents espouse in the home. The benefits of having a plural education system are clear: more options are on offer for all parents from which they may choose. But the challenges of a plural system are equally real, for in offering parents more options we should not expect segregation to dissipate.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Exceptions include more orthodox-leaning Protestant and evangelical schools.

[2] At the present time (February 2011), at least one hundred Orthodox Muslim parents are seeking permission to homeschool, even though their requests are not likely to be granted in the present political climate.