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### Inclusive education in the Netherlands

*Characteristics and effects*

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## **Chapter 6**

### **Summary and general discussion**

## Summary and general discussion

Inclusive education is internationally one of the central concerns in education. In recent decades, policy on inclusive education has changed considerably (Grimes, Kumar, & Stevens, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). Attention has shifted from the diagnosis and treatment of special educational needs by experts, and the supply of additional resources for individual students (i.e. compensatory measures) to a more social view of ‘inclusion’ aimed at keeping all students in regular education, including students with special educational needs (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006).

The actual implementation of inclusive education is obviously and significantly influenced by political, socio-economic and cultural-historical factors (Armstrong, et al., 2011; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011). That is why, *‘in practice, most countries have hybrid policies and are improving their inclusionary practices incrementally’* (UNESCO, 2015, p.102).

Many schools still teach students with special educational needs in separate groups, either with or without specialized guidance (Grimes, et al., 2015). But more and more schools are taking up the challenge of teaching students with special educational needs as much as possible in regular classes. This requires the capacity for education personnel to work with differentiation (Deunk, Doolaard, Smale-Jacobse, & Bosker, 2015; Meijer, 2004; Spratt & Florian, 2015). But practice has been found to remain intractable in primary and particularly secondary education where subject-bound programmes still stand central (Deunk et al., 2015; Dyson, 2001; Florian & Rouse, 2001). Schools lack examples of good inclusive practice (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Teachers also report a lack of confidence in their competences to offer inclusive education (Nind & Thomas, 2005). Leadership which encourages the sharing of effective practices is thus needed along with educators who are willing to familiarize themselves with inclusive education and the best practices for such (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Robinson, et al., 2008).

The current state of affairs in scientific research is also hampering the implementation of inclusive education. A better understanding of the central characteristics of inclusive education is needed to make today’s education more inclusive and thus suited for all students, including those with special educational needs. Research into inclusive education shows very different theoretical perspectives (Ainscow & César, 2006; Armstrong, et al., 2011; Hansen, 2012; Jahnukainen, 2015), a lack of models for the evaluation of the effectiveness of inclusive education (Erten & Savage, 2012; Watkins & Ebersold, 2016) and conflicting opinions on what constitutes the most suitable approach for research into inclusive education (Nind, et al., 2004).

The research presented in this dissertation addresses the inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular education. In particular, it addresses the

promise of school self-evaluation for the development of inclusive education, the characteristics of education needed to make it inclusive, the impact of inclusive education on the school careers of students and the recognition of the characteristics of inclusive education by parents and students. The central research question was:

*What are the characteristics of inclusive secondary education and how do these characteristics affect the school careers of students?*

Four studies were conducted to answer this question and thereby contribute to the effectiveness of education for all students, including those with special needs.

The main findings from the four studies are summarized below. The general conclusions to be drawn are then discussed together with their implications for theory, practice and further research. And to conclude, the central research question is answered.

### **Summary of the main findings and conclusions**

Four studies were conducted of inclusive secondary education in the Netherlands. The studies drew upon the self-evaluation data of 79 schools for secondary education. The first two studies addressed school self-evaluation and the modelling of inclusive education. The next two studies examined parental and student perceptions of the characteristics of inclusion and the effects of inclusive education on the school careers of students in secondary education.

In **Chapter 2**, the promise of school self-evaluation as an instrument to improve student care and promote inclusive education was examined. In countries with a governance structure in which responsibility for the quality of education is shared between government and local school boards, school self-evaluation has been stimulated over the past few decades as a way to encourage continuous quality development.

In particular, school self-evaluation has been presumed in this study to promote the development of inclusive education and thus the care for *all* students but particularly those with special educational needs in regular schools. Working on the goals of quality assurance and school improvement is a challenge in general. To make a valuable contribution, the self-evaluation efforts of schools obviously have to be of sufficient quality. In the present study, the quality standards needed for productive self-evaluation by schools were therefore explored. The following research question was asked: *What characteristics are required for reliable school self-evaluation and to what extent do these characteristics apply to the developed self-evaluation instrument for student care?*

To start with, a framework for school self-evaluation was created with both content and process factors to enable the measure of the quality of school self-evaluations. A review of the relevant research literature revealed two types of criteria to be important for evaluation purposes: *content* and *process* criteria. Three additional types of criteria could be identified and concerned the *function* of the school self-evaluation: overall criteria, accountability criteria and school improvement criteria. The criteria identified for effective self-evaluation by schools were next entered into a matrix and the experiences of schools in a comprehensive self-evaluation project 'Quality of student care in preparatory vocational secondary education and practical education' were evaluated. The sample in this project included 79 Dutch secondary schools. Evaluation of the quality of the self-evaluations conducted as part of the aforementioned project showed the content and process criteria to be largely met. Strong elements revealed by the self-evaluation instrument for student care were found to be: alignment with the external content of the Inspectorate of Education; participation of several stakeholders (care professionals, parents and students); involvement and ownership by educational professionals (development in cooperation with team); availability of external support; and transparency of the implementation process and dialogue. Nevertheless, use of the self-evaluation results to promote growth towards a more professional, learning-oriented school culture occurred to a lesser extent. For a considerable number of the schools using the self-evaluation instrument, a cyclic approach and systematic follow-up activities were missing. This also appeared to stem from the absence of a professional learning culture in these particular schools as revealed by the follow-up activities.

The results of the present evaluation of the use of a self-evaluation instrument by schools showed the quality of the instrument and its contribution to school improvement to depend upon not only the perspective taken by the school self-evaluation but also various content and process factors along with the school organisation and implementation efforts. To make a valuable contribution to school improvement and particularly the promotion of inclusive education, greater attention is needed to the coordination of the internal and external supervision and the competences for change management on the part of school managers (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Robinson et al., 2008; Robinson, 2014).

In **Chapter 3**, the central characteristics of inclusive education in secondary schools were investigated. Although inclusive education is prominent on the international education agenda, research on the characteristics of inclusive education for students with special needs and schools providing this is scarce. At the same time, inclusive education is presumed to provide a better quality of education for all students and not just those with actual special educational needs. The aim in this study was therefore to further the building of theory regarding inclusive education. The research question was as follows: *What are the central characteristics of inclusive education and*

*thus education equipped to handle the needs of all students, in particular those with special needs, according to secondary educational professionals in the Netherlands?*

A literature review was performed to develop a conceptual framework which addressed three central characteristics of inclusive education: the learning environment, the guidance provided by teachers and the care structure. Data were obtained from educational professionals in 79 Dutch secondary schools. The data was gathered using the self-evaluation framework previously described (see Chapter 2). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses identified 12 characteristics to underlie the central characteristics in inclusive education. Considerable agreement was found between the educational professionals on the important aspects of inclusivity for schools and thus on how differences between schools can be explained.

Multilevel structural equation modelling on the self-evaluation judgments of the educational professionals at the level of the school further showed two main factors to underlie the 12 characteristics of inclusive education in secondary schools: the provision of 1) an inclusive learning environment and 2) inclusive guidance within an inclusive care structure. The factors 'guidance provided by teachers' and 'care structure' showed considerable overlap in the structural model. In the expert opinion of educational professionals, moreover, the work of the care coordinator – for instance, with respect to the cooperation with external partners and teachers – serving as mentors – was the clearest indicator of inclusive education within a school and thus most critical. This finding shows the required teaching practices and student guidance for adequate inclusive education to not have been integrated into teachers' thinking and acting at the time of this study (see also Onderwijsraad, 2016a).

In **Chapter 4**, the findings of the preceding study are further elaborated by examining the extent to which parents and students recognise the characteristics of inclusive education in their schools. Parents and pupils are the most important stakeholders in schools. For a school culture to be and become inclusive for all students, including those with special educational needs, it is imperative that parents and students be involved and that educational professionals know how parents and students experience the education being provided. The following research question was formulated to address the perspectives of parents and students on inclusive education in the school being attended: *To what extent does the characterization of a school as inclusive by educational professionals correspond to the characterisation of the school by parents and students?*

The sample for this study included 2216 educational professionals, 6720 parents and 16511 students from 102 Dutch secondary schools. The results revealed considerable correspondence in the opinions of educational professionals and parents with regard to the characteristics of inclusive education but less correspondence in the opinions of educational professionals with those of the students. Large differences were found for particularly the central characteristic of 'inclusive guidance provided by

teachers'. The underlying characteristics of 'guidance by a mentor or regularly assigned teacher' and 'individual guidance in lessons' appeared to be most critical in this regard.

The views of parents and students with regard to an inclusive learning environment were not significantly explained by the characteristics of school inclusiveness, a stimulating and safe learning environment and the possibilities of students to shape the learning process, possibly together with fellow students. These results suggest that educational professionals need to pay greater attention to the creation of an inclusive learning environment and especially the promotion of participation and ownership by *all* students. All in all, the results of this study of parental and student perceptions of inclusive education in secondary schools showed that parents and students recognize inclusive guidance as a clearly central characteristic of inclusive education.

In **Chapter 5**, the effects of inclusive education on the school careers of students are examined. While research on inclusive education has a considerable history, little research has been performed on its effectiveness. The absence of uniform policy for inclusive education in general and particularly in the Netherlands as well as marked diversity in the implementation of inclusive education within the school have impeded documentation of the effectiveness of inclusive education. In general and also in the present research, the focus has been on those characteristics of inclusive education which can be considered to indicate a better quality of education in general and not just in schools specifically for students with special educational needs. In the present study, the effectiveness of inclusive education at the level of the school was examined in terms of the school careers of students. The research question was: *To what extent do school characteristics of inclusive education ensure successful school careers for both students with and without special educational needs?*

For this research, an effectiveness model incorporating various input, process and output factors was developed. The self-evaluation data from 1792 educational professionals assessing the 12 underlying characteristics of inclusive education (see previous studies reported here) was aggregated at the level of the school (N=59), with the schools for Practical Education omitted for purposes of the present study. The inclusive education data was combined with data available on the school careers of students, namely dropout, repetition of one or more years and a shift to a higher or lower educational track (measured during the third year of secondary school) than recommended previously (i.e. at the end of primary school). Semi-partial correlations were calculated and the characteristics of inclusive education were found to indeed affect the school careers of the students significantly. The provision of inclusive guidance and existence of a clearly inclusive care structure exerted the most influence; the existence of an inclusive learning environment exerted the least influence. The more a school could be characterized as inclusive, the lesser the amount of dropout, repetition of a year and shift to a lower educational track. Unfortunately but nevertheless similar to the case for most other secondary schools in the Netherlands, the students in even

schools to be characterized as providing highly inclusive education did not show so much progression to a higher educational track; no effects proved significant for a positive difference in educational track. Also contrary to what might be expected, the social-economic context of the school did not influence the effects of the inclusive characteristics of the schools on school careers.

Overall, it could be concluded that schools providing clearly inclusive education positively influence the school careers of their students. In the schools with relatively more students with special educational needs, moreover, these results were found to be even more marked and positive. And a shared vision in the team on the importance and components of an inclusive learning environment, inclusive guidance and inclusive care structure appears to underlie this success.

### **Discussion of the main results and conclusions**

The results and conclusions of this dissertation have several implications for research in the field of inclusive education and the implementation of inclusive education. The theoretical and practical contributions of the present results are discussed below, followed by consideration of some possible limitations on the presented studies, directions for future research and the general conclusions to be drawn.

#### ***Theoretical contributions***

With its focus on content and process criteria as well as the use of self-evaluation results for accountability and improvement purposes, the theoretical framework presented here adds to the more systematic study of school self-evaluation. In many Western countries since the 1980s, government policy has shifted towards decentralization and deregulation of governmental tasks (OECD, 2012) with schools and especially their governing bodies being allocated increased autonomy and hence greater responsibility for the monitoring of the quality of education being provided (Hooge, et al., 2012). As a consequence, school self-evaluation has gained importance (Ehren, et al., 2015) and acquired a prominent position in school development (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). Within this context, research into the quality of self-evaluation remains important and should place more focus on processes in addition to products in the future. The developed theoretical framework for assessing the quality of school self-evaluation should also therefore be piloted further in future research.

The model of the central characteristics of inclusive education presented here meets the need for an empirically motivated, reliable model of inclusive education. The reliability of the developed model at the level of the school makes it possible to compare schools with respect to the inclusiveness of their education. Such comparison can then

contribute to a better understanding of inclusive education in theory and in practice (see also Erten & Savage, 2012; Meijnen, 2013).

The characteristics of inclusivity identified as critical at the level of the school – an inclusive learning environment, inclusive guidance and an inclusive care structure – can be incorporated into effectiveness models for a more thorough evaluation of the success of today's inclusive education efforts. A unique contribution of the present research is incorporation of attention to the inclusive care structure into the effectiveness model. This aspect of inclusive education has not been sufficiently highlighted in previous effectiveness studies.

With the newly developed effectiveness model for inclusive education, this dissertation also facilitates research into the implementation and effects of educational policy and the development of inclusive education policy (see also Ledoux et al., 2007, Ledoux, 2016). In recent times, the Dutch government did not prioritise evaluation of the effects of its educational policy, unless her policy focussed on evidenced-based and results-oriented education. The outcomes of the effects study presented here provide a better understanding of the specific effects of the learning environment, the guidance provided by teachers and care structure in the school on the school careers of students. More specifically, stimulating and participatory learning arrangements, the guidance of a mentor and individual guidance in lessons but also internal and external collaboration were seen to limit dropout, repetition of a school year and movement to a lower track of education.

The model with characteristics of inclusive education presented here has an additional advantage for research after the establishment of inclusive education policy in schools and the regional cooperative centres for schools. Schools and the regional cooperative centres for schools in the Netherlands are relatively autonomous with regard to policy on inclusive education today. The implication of this is that the schools and regional cooperative centres for schools can differ in their elaboration of inclusive education policy. The characteristics of inclusive education and the research model presented here can facilitate the evaluation of the effects of inclusive education policy as implemented at different schools.

Finally, the results the research presented here show an inclusive learning environment as a central characteristic of inclusive education to be less recognized by parents and students than by school personnel and to not significantly contribute to the impact of inclusive education on the school careers of students. Looking back at the history of policy implementation as described in the general introduction, it can be concluded that particular attention was paid at the turn of the century to such organizational inclusive education characteristics as having regional cooperation between schools and a care structure (see also Ledoux et al., 2007), but less attention paid to the creation of an inclusive learning environment or, in other words, the creation of a stimulating, participatory learning environment for all students. In this connection, an interesting result of the present study is that the effectiveness of a school's inclusive

education was found to be larger when relatively more students with special needs were being educated in the school. When necessary, in other words, educational professionals appear to stretch their practices to reach the needs of students with special educational needs. The present research indeed shows *all* types of students to benefit from a higher degree of inclusive education in the school. This is in keeping with the background to international inclusive education policy as decided upon in the UNESCO agreements (1994, 2006).

### ***Practical contributions***

The theoretical model presented here with specific quality criteria for school self-evaluation has not only scientific relevance but also practical relevance. For schools, school boards and school managers in particular, it is important that adequate choices be made with regard to the type of self-evaluation they want to pursue, with more emphasis on accountability or school improvement. A balance of both appears to be preferably. School management can use self-evaluation to fully stretch a school for improvement but also identify for instance different types of guidance and external expertise needed. For governance and policy makers, it is important to understand how school self-evaluation can add to both external and internal demands of quality assessment. The model presented here facilitates school managers and schoolboards at the use of school self-evaluations. The theoretical framework can be used to make optimal choices with regard to the content and process factors and the additional measures to be taken.

Although the research reported on here is international in that it addresses what is needed for effective school self-evaluation and inclusive education, the *context* of the research is specific to the Netherlands. Therefore, the presented model for school self-evaluation can be useful for schools and regional cooperative centres for schools the implementation of the law Educational Fit. In accordance with the Dutch legal requirement of Educational Fit (Staatsblad, 2012), schools and regional cooperative centres for schools have been given a large degree of autonomy for the implementation of the Educational Fit policy (ECPO, 2009; Honingh, et al., 2017). As a result of this autonomy the visions on inclusive education are very different across schools and regional cooperative centres for schools, educational professionals, parents, students and other stakeholders. The use of school self-evaluation in conjunction with attention to the central characteristics of inclusive education can stimulate the implementation of inclusive education and thus insure 'Educational Fit' for all students. The framework for school self-evaluation presented here can provide a guideline for strategic action. It can help school leaders and schoolboards to invest in the necessary content and process conditions needed to provide quality education but also guide accountability and school improvement. Use of the framework for school self-evaluation in conjunction with attention to the central characteristics of inclusive education can help realize

Educational Fit and high quality, inclusive education which thus meets the needs of all students.

The present results highlight the importance of adopting an integrated approach to school development, an approach in which attention is devoted to the three central characteristics of inclusive education, namely: an inclusive learning environment, inclusive guidance and an inclusive care structure. The operationalization of the twelve characteristics underlying the central characteristics of inclusive education can be used by schools as quality indicators and thus to strengthen the education efforts of a school.

The present research showed educational professionals, parents and students to greatly value the customization of educational programmes and provision of – often individual – guidance by teachers during lessons. Different studies (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2014, 2015, 2016; OCW, 2004) nevertheless show an ever-recurring need for better guidance of students with special educational needs by educational professionals and customized programmes for students. Greater attention must thus be paid during initial teacher training and the continuing professional development of teachers to these two important topics (see also Onderwijsraad, 2016b).

### **Limitations of the research**

The strength of the present research, in general, is the variety of perspectives taken on inclusive education: research from the perspective of school self-evaluation, research from the perspective of an integrated vision on school development, research from the perspectives of educational professionals, parents and students and – also – research from the perspective of school effectiveness. These different perspectives give the present findings considerable validity.

The school self-evaluation instrument was developed for practical as opposed to scientific purposes. The use of school self-evaluation constitutes therefore both a strength and a possible limitation of the present research. The use of a substantial number of respondents including educational professionals, parents and students participating in the school self-evaluation project means powerful results at the level of the school. A potential limitation is that the database stems from 2006, which is prior to the enactment of the requirement of Educational Fit. More recent studies (Ainscow, et al., 2012; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2014, 2015, 2016; Messiou et al., 2016; Waslander, 2011) nevertheless show slow uptake for inclusive education, which is still perceived as only a formal, legal requirement by most school managers and educational professionals as opposed to a matter of the heart (Onderwijsraad, 2016b).

The schools participating in the school self-evaluation project all participated on a volunteer basis. The reasons for their participation varied from a declining student enrollment and/or a low evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education to a need for greater self-reflection and/or innovation in the school. The sample of schools used in

the self-evaluation project was representative of the geographic and size distribution of schools in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, generalization of the present results to other schools must be done with caution as schools freely undertaking self-evaluation have been shown to constitute a divergent and unique group of schools (Voncken & Schoonhoven, 2006).

A final possible limitation of the present research concerns the matching of educational professionals with parents and students. Matching was only possible at the level of the school, given that the school self-evaluation instrument was only developed to evaluate the quality of student care at the level of the school. Therefore, in the development of the school self-evaluation instrument there was paid no attention for a match between parents and students at the family level; nesting of data was not possible.

### **Directions for further research**

This dissertation suggests several directions for further research. Firstly, more research is needed on the challenges of meeting the content and process conditions for effective school self-evaluation including the use of the instrumentation and in particular the fine tuning of the self-evaluation instrument to assess the quality of student care in the school following on from the Educational Fit Act. Future research should also gather greater insight into the circumstantial governance and supervision issue at the level of school managers and school boards (see also Hooge, et al., 2016) as well as the competence of leadership and change management. Greater insight into school self-evaluation is needed to not only develop and maintain a high quality of education but also equip schools as professional communities to change their educational practices and guidance of students as needed and learn from self-evaluation data.

The reliability and validity of other school self-evaluation instruments can be optimized on the basis of the results presented here. The school self-evaluation instrument presented here might also be extended to include new scales on topics of inclusion of importance to specific groups of schools or topics raised by new research on inclusive education. Extension of the effectiveness model as developed in Chapter 5 might also provide the basis for the addition of questions to the school self-evaluation instrument for student care.

How schools can use self-evaluation for external accounting purposes without damaging the strengths which self-evaluation brings – namely school ownership and individual school selection of topics judged to be important for evaluation – also needs to be studied in the future. In addition, the school self-evaluation instrument presented here might provide for a better nesting of data from several sources in the future in order to allow for more sophisticated analyses. This can be achieved, for example, by more involvement of experts/scientist in the preparation of the school self-evaluation.

And the correspondence between the inclusive education efforts of schools and educational outcomes for students may then be examined in greater depth. Trust in the relevance of scientifically reliable school comparisons is a necessity for schools to commit to self-evaluation. The research reported here can hopefully contribute to this trust.

Follow-up research drawing upon the developed model of the central characteristics of inclusive education is called for to not only validate this model more generally but also determine if the situations in schools have changed, now that the policy and practices for inclusive education have become more familiar. Schools have the opportunity to use the model to monitor their improvement with regard to inclusive education. The developed model further makes it possible to examine the extent of recognition and implementation by schools, educational professionals, parents, students, external care partners, inspectors and other stakeholders. The degree of convergence among opinions can then be examined. And the results of such comparison can provide clear starting points for a broad support base for inclusive education.

As part of the legal framework for Educational Fit, schools are now obliged to outline their inclusive education philosophy in a so-called 'support profile'. In research following up on the present research, just how these support profiles/philosophies relate – or do not relate – to the views of school professionals will be examined. In addition and in light of the relatively small number of schools participating in the present research, a broader – conceivably cohort – study on the effects of Educational Fit on the school careers of students is important to help refine the model of the central characteristics of inclusive education presented here.

### **General conclusion**

Taken together, the four empirical studies presented here collectively answer the central research question, namely: *What are the central characteristics of inclusive secondary education and how do these characteristics affect the school careers of students?* It can be concluded that an inclusive learning environment, inclusive guidance by teachers and an inclusive care structure are central characteristics of inclusive education. Guidance by a mentor and individual guidance during lessons are mostly recognized and appreciated by parents and students. Guidance by teachers and an inclusive care structure positively affected the school careers of students when examined at the level of the school. With these conclusions, it can be seen that *all* students and not just those with known special educational needs can benefit from the characteristics of inclusive education. This is all the more reason to continue with the implementation of inclusive education policy. It can further be concluded that greater attention is needed for inclusive education practice and, in particular, the manner in which educational professionals can shape the participation of students in the learning

environment. Inclusive education, according to the results the research presented here, is a step towards higher educational quality and should therefore be anchored broadly and deeply in educational practice. This means greater attention to inclusive education in the professional development of teachers and school practice.

To conclude, realizing an inclusive school culture goes beyond the implementation of a vision, the characteristics of inclusive education, the required organization and sufficient funding. Realizing an inclusive school culture involves promotion of broad acceptance of diversity and equity. This dissertation has hopefully contributed to the realization of an inclusive education culture by encouraging educational professionals and other stakeholders to apply school self-evaluation to examine central characteristics of inclusive education and thereby help sustain the pedagogical and social strength of education and society.