

# The parental need for pluralistic primary education in the Netherlands

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## **Introduction**

According to the Dutch Primary Education Act all primary schools in the Netherlands, both public and private, should take in consideration that children are growing up in a multicultural society. Within these boundaries private schools, that like public schools are completely financed by the State, are free to choose their educational goals. The goals that public schools should achieve, however, are also specified in the Primary Education Act. Public schools are supposed to pay active attention to the diversity of values in society. Furthermore public schools are accessible to all children of all social backgrounds and they are governed by public authorities or more specifically by the Dutch municipalities. In a society that in the last decades has become more pluralistic, especially because of the influx of migrants from the former Dutch colonies, labor migration and people trying to get asylum, one would expect that the public schools are the dominant part of the educational system. It is not. At the moment two out of three schools are private and based on religious principles.

## **Parental needs**

What do parents want? What is their need for schools that pay attention to the diversity of society? This, and many other questions, are subject of a research that is done in a big city in the south of the Netherlands. In this city about 1.200 parents with children in the age group from 0 through 12 years old have filled in a questionnaire. On the basis of this data we will try to answer the following questions:

- What is the parental need for attention with respect to the plurality of society?
- What is the actual attention that schools pay to this plurality?
- Are there in this respect differences between public and private-denominational schools?
- Can the parental need for plurality in primary education be explained by their pedagogical values (conformity versus self-reliance, and tolerance) and their social background (education, ethnicity, and religion)?

## **Answers**

The answers are summarized in five tables. Table 1 shows that the items, that are supposed to measure the parental need for attention with respect to the plurality of society, can be divided into three groups:

- Attention for social issues or social problems (factor 1);
- Attention for religious diversity (factor 2);
- Attention for ethnic diversity (factor 3).

Table 2 shows that parents especially want attention for ethnic and social issues. Religious matters are considered to be less important, which reflects the trend towards secularization, even in the predominantly Catholic southern part of the Netherlands. Table 2 also shows that the strong parental need for plurality is not completely fulfilled by the schools.

Table 3 shows that the public school system pays significantly more attention to ethnic diversity than the Catholic school system. According to parents social problems are also more discussed

in public schools than in the Catholic ones, while no differences can be found between the two systems with respect to attention for religious diversity.

Looking at the social composition of schools we must note that there are no differences with respect to ethnicity (table 4). However, there are religious differences. Non-religious parents appear to choose public schools and Catholic parents prefer Catholic schools. But the differences are not as big as they used to be in the past. Furthermore, it must be noted that public schools are acceptable for quite a lot of parents that consider themselves to be a member of a religious group. Finally, it must be mentioned that parents with children on public schools have higher levels of education than one would expect for a school that is accessible to all social groups. This can be explained by pointing to the minority position of public schools in the mainly Catholic south.

The last table we will comment is table 5, in which the parental need for attention paid to plurality is explained by social background and pedagogical values. The last concept is coined by sociologist Melvin Kohn. It is measured by way of a principal component analysis in which two factors were detected. One dimension represented the classic difference between conformity and self-reliance, the other one could be named in terms of the stress parents put on tolerance as

pedagogical value. The table shows that self-reliance as a pedagogical value is (as expected) positively related with not belong to a religion and having obtained a high educational level. Tolerance, however, is not related with these parental background variables. Non-indigenous groups appear to put less stress on tolerance as a pedagogical value than the dominant indigenous group.

Table 5 also makes clear that the parental need for attention with respect to social problems, religious diversity and ethnic diversity must be explained by different configurations of factors. The need to speak in a primary school about concrete social problems, for instance, is a matter that seems important for the dominant indigenous group and for parents with a lower educational level. On the other side is the need for attention with respect to ethnic diversity a matter that seems to be of relevance for non-religious, higher educated and non-indigenous parents. The attention for ethnic diversity is also positively related with both sets of pedagogical values. However, the explained variance for the attention paid to plurality in primary education remains rather low.

The analyses above raises the question to what extent schools must follow the demand of parents for a pluralistic education. It also raises the question if the stress should be on the transfer of knowledge about societal diversity or the transmission of values?

*Table 1 - Factor analysis of attention for plurality in primary education (extraction: generalized least squares; rotation: varimax; factor loadings > .30)*

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Alcohol and drugs	.757		
Criminality and violence in the Netherlands	.646		
Abortion, euthanasia and suicide	.581		
Sexuality	.484		
Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.		.809	
Differences between Western religions		.791	
Discrimination and racism			.697
Problems of the Third World			.560
Multicultural society in the Netherlands			.514
Cronbachs alpha	.72	.81	.66

*Table 2 - The attention for plurality in primary education: the need for attention and the actual attention in primary school as perceived by parents: mean scores (scale values: 0 - 10)*

	Need for attention (N = 1153)	Actual attention in schools (N = 699)
Social problems	7,7	5,4
Religious diversity	5,8	5,0
Ethnic diversity	7,9	6,1

*Table 3 - The actual attention for plurality in public and catholic schools: mean scores (scale values: 0-10)*

	Public schools (N = 126)	Catholic schools (N = 552)	Significance F-ratio
Social problems	5.6	5.3	.041
Religious diversity	5.1	5.0	.318
Ethnic diversity	6.6	6.0	.000

*Table 4 - The social background of parents that have actually chosen for public and catholic schools (percentages)*

	Public schools (N = 153)	Catholic schools (N = 518)	Significance Chi-square
Non-indigenous	11%	10%	.455
Non-religious	40%	19%	.000
Third level education	57%	43%	.009

*Table 5 - Regression analysis of social background of the family, parental values and the need for attention for plurality in primary education (beta coefficients;  $p < .05$ )*

	Parental value: Self-reliance	Parental value: Tolerance	Attention for social problems	Attention for religious diversity	Attention for ethnic diversity
Non-religious	<b>.162</b>	-.030	-.007	-.042	<b>.109</b>
Non-indigenous	.003	<b>-.102</b>	<b>-.073</b>	<b>.130</b>	<b>.063</b>
Education level	<b>.397</b>	-.029	<b>-.189</b>	<b>.091</b>	<b>.071</b>
Self-reliance			-.037	<b>.066</b>	<b>.096</b>
Tolerance			.020	.023	<b>.075</b>
R-squared	.21	.01	.05	.03	.05