

# Have minority parents a say in Dutch educational opportunity policies?

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## **Netherlands' equal opportunity policies: the historical shift in target groups**

Over the last quarter of a century the target groups of equal opportunity policies in the Netherlands dramatically changed. Whereas initially the concept of working class children was generally accepted as the best identifier for pupils with low educational opportunities, today ethnic concepts determine who is targeted and receives extra budget.

In the social democrat tradition of educational equality policies during the seventies about 30 percent of the white population were then perceived having poor educational opportunities as compared to a national average. Parental social class was the only, generally accepted clue to identify these pupils, with parental educational level as an easy indicator of class. A practice not to mix up with policies for pupils at risk suffering from learning disabilities (who were far less in numbers and who were addressed by other educational policies). Regardless of actual performance and only based on figures about the correlation between class and opportunity, about 30 percent of the population were granted extra school facilities in these so called 'educational priority policies'. The formula to grant schools under this priority policy was convincing: given that a simple system of counting pupils normally is used to administer all school budgets, a revaluation of working class children in that counting up to 1.25 instead of 1 resulted in relatively larger budgets for working class schools. The relative upgrading of budgets for working class schools resulted automatically in a

more favorable pupil-teacher ratio at these schools as compared to normal.

As the proportion of non-white working class children rose throughout the seventies and eighties, those pupils were revalued in a parallel way: instead of 1 they were counted for 1.9, resulting in even smaller classes in what were called black schools. In just a few decades traditional working class areas in major cities changed in color, with Moroccan and Turkish pupils or South-American pupils dominating in former working class schools. The relative homogeneity of these ethnic minorities (outnumbering in certain city areas the 'indigenous' white population) in terms of social class resulted in a new perspective on social inequality with ethnicity pushing aside class as the perceived basic category behind social inequality. The serious accumulation of problems for non-white working class children resulted in an growing neglect of the disadvantages white working class were suffering under. Today first signs of a reconsideration about who is to be facilitated to what extent come up; even school inspectors appear to explicitly advocate a reshuffling of educational policy budget, somewhat more to the benefit of white working class categories.

Behind this background one can easily understand that traditional public advocates of working class' interests like social democrat parties and trade unions no longer automatically were perceived as the political representatives of the target groups in equal educational opportunity policies. As a matter of fact it became rare to find any

identifiable institution or organization advocating interests of white working class categories in the field of education for more than two decades, or even for any working class category at all. But what about the colored working class pupils: who became their advocates in a situation where enormous budgets (up to one billion a year) were spent in educational policies fighting for equal opportunities? That is the key question in this paper.

### **Netherlands' equal opportunity policies: major shifts in political administration**

The political administration in Netherlands' education is rather complex. Although all schools are financed equally on state budgets, only state schools fall under direct responsibility of local city boards. Catholic, protestant and other 'pillars in education' rule their own schools in relative autonomy apart from finances.

Ever since the start of Dutch priority policies in education, the national parliament had a direct line and responsibility in these policies as a consequence of the fact that the law underlying this policy implied a yearly report on the evaluation of effects to be presented to the members of parliament. In other words: the matter of equal opportunities in education was a direct concern of the national parliament where otherwise most schools are highly autonomous. For almost two decades this structure resulted in repetitive discussions about the apparent ineffectiveness of these policies: there was little to evaluate as positive. Two possibly opposing modernization formulas in public policies were than equally embraced: deregulation and decentralization on the one hand and public effect accountancy on the other. The result is now that the national parliament plays no longer a clear role with regard to educational priority policies, whereas local city boards are encouraged and even more to demand all school boards within their reach, to come to a local agreement about how to spend the priority budgets, how to evaluate ongoing programs and how to handle possible negative effects.

### **Minority parents and civic society**

As described above, today minority pupils constitute the major category in terms of budget and in terms of public interest when it comes to equal opportunity policies. Together with that, the administrative focus of such policies has descended from national level to that of city boards with a majority of regional autonomous school boards as their interlocutor in what is called 'accordance oriented consultation'.

Now a third factor completes the situation we are focussing on: exactly at city level where decisions should be made on how to actually design equal opportunity policies, most minority parents, mostly not in the possession of Netherlands nationality and so having to do without a right to vote, are allowed to vote for city councils!

A number of drastic changes might occur as a consequence of this crossing of different developments: minority pupils becoming the major target group in terms of budget, city boards getting key roles in educational administration and minority parents allowed right to vote. One of them, to vague yet to clearly comment on, is that in most local situations the equilibrium underlying the Netherlands pillar structure in education (between state schools versus a number of religiously defined autonomous school boarding unions) might be missing. What has been handled at national level with prudence and reservation, might become a clear object of opposite interests. Whose schools will serve the different target groups of equal opportunity policies, who will receive parts of the budget, who determines criteria for evaluation, what to do with critical reports? And next to that: who decides on the actual composition of school boards? Should they reflect the social and ethnic composition as enrolled in the schools under their administration?

But apart from the possible shifts in local balances of power amongst different school boards, the new decision structure around educational priority policies come finally together in the city councils in which most minorities are poorly represented so far.

**New rules of the game for minority parents?**

Throughout the existence of equal opportunity policies in the Netherlands an ongoing discussion unfolds about who is to blame for inequality? Is it a matter of unequal opportunities schools offer to pupils with different social and ethnic backgrounds? Or are parents from certain social and ethnic background to blame for not offering their children a rich and adequate developmental environment, as a necessary precondition for schools to assure success to the children?

Programs for intervention in families stimulating mothers to handle their children more adequate, reduction of allowances in case of parents not attending Dutch language courses, all these reflect the existing power relations between education and minority parents. In some cases contracts are made up in which parents should make promises about their effort to boost school performance of their children with schools threatening to stop their extra programs if otherwise.

Although the described new conditions still are to fresh to foretell definite new balances of power, it is clear that the political and juridical implications of a number of measures coming together in the new city governed variant of educational priority policies may arouse a number of crucial developments. So far minority parents are poorly organized in terms of taking political influence.

On the other hand they clearly overtake the Dutch working class parents in terms of motivation for their children's school success. Their expectations towards educational opportunities for their children is by far not as sceptical as that of traditional target categories for educational priority policies.

Up till now the civic servants who in fact rule at city level the newly conceived local priority programs have done so in a way one can hardly criticize in this respect: evening meetings have been organized around towns to let minority parents have a say. In most cases they were poorly frequented. Advisory school councils, partly representing parents, could allow minority parents to take influence and here and there they do.

But all this stands in sharp contrast to what seems logic. If city councils will handle educational priority policies seriously, they have to base those policies on a system of local monitoring: monitoring not just of learning effects and school careers but also in terms of social and ethnic segregation, budget allocation and so on. The way such decision procedures use to take will allow minority parents far more than up till now to oversee the implications of what happens to their children and to the national budgets allowed to further their children's education. Question is not, whether they could translate their opinions into political power and decisions, question is whether such information will reach them in a proper way and whether they will have opportunities to politically organize themselves.

One of the tasks at hand for researchers in the field is to develop strategies and formulas for information feedback that will reach the different target groups of educational opportunity policies and supply them with necessary information to conquer their authorized position as a direct interest group towards a school system holding up a false ideology of equal opportunities.

Full report on 'How to empower minority parents in educational priority policies' only available in Dutch language.