

Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice –  
2009 – Volume 18, Issue 4, pp. 83–93  
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-100153

ISSN: 1876-8830

URL: <http://www.journalsi.org>

Publisher: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving  
Services in cooperation with Utrecht University of  
Applied Sciences, Faculty of Society and Law

Copyright: this work has been published under a  
Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 Netherlands License

A.L.T. (Ton) Notten is Professor of Andragology  
(specializing in adult education, intercultural  
issues and urban studies) at the Vrije Universiteit  
Brussel. He combines this appointment with a  
professorship in urban education and youth policy  
issues at Rotterdam University. Correspondence to:  
[a.notten@tip.nl](mailto:a.notten@tip.nl); Hogeschool Rotterdam, KOS, P.O.  
Box 25035, 3001 HA Rotterdam.

Received: 11 June 2009

Accepted: 17 August 2009

Review Category: Opinion

## DESEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS – HOW CAN IT BE ACHIEVED?

A.L.T. NOTTEN

### ABSTRACT

#### Desegregation in schools – How can it be achieved?

Desegregation in schools is becoming an important policy issue in the Netherlands. It is a problem that the United States has been grappling with for over 50 years. But how can it be achieved? There appear to be two options: the broad, horizontal community school and the quality-oriented and challenge-oriented magnet school. This paper draws a comparison between the two.

### Keywords

Desegregation policy, urban education, community school, magnet school

## **SAMENVATTING**

### **Desegregatie in het onderwijs – Hoe krijgen we dat voor elkaar?**

Het tegengaan van etnische segregatie in het onderwijs krijgt in Nederland steeds meer aandacht. In de VS is dat al vijftig jaar het geval. De vraag is hoe desegregatie te organiseren. In dit artikel wordt een vergelijking gemaakt tussen de brede school en de magneetschool.

## **Trefwoorden**

Desegregatiebeleid, grootstedelijk onderwijs, brede school, magneetschool

“Integration” is a blanket term for societal processes that will hopefully lead to fruitful cohesion and cooperation between different and even opposite groups in society. This terminological obscurity can be cleared up and the real social problems can be addressed by highlighting a distinction that has been drawn time and again – all the way from Immanuel Kant to Jürgen Habermas – between (1) cultural-expressive integration, which relates to religious and cultural issues and mutual respect and tolerance, (2) social-participative integration, which relates to the rights of all groups in society (the established and the newcomers) to participate in political and legal processes, and (3) functional integration, which is organized via education, employment and housing policies.

In our society the key integration issue is functional integration. It starts with *schooling*, and hence, concerns *teaching* and *teacher training*. Good schooling enhances career and housing opportunities and equips children and young adults for the modern global competitive economy. A challenging statement to that effect was issued in 2006 by the Lisbon Council Report *The Economics of Knowledge: Why Education is Key for Europe's Success*, written by Andreas Schleicher (2006, p. 2):

The time when Europe competed mostly with countries that offered low-skilled work at low wages is long gone. Today, countries like China and India are starting to deliver high skills at low costs – and at an ever-increasing pace. This is profoundly changing the rules of the game. There is no way for Europe to stop these rapidly developing countries from producing wave after wave of highly skilled graduates. What economists call ‘barriers to entry’ are falling. Individuals and companies based anywhere in the world can now easily collaborate and compete globally. And we cannot switch off these forces except at great cost to our own economic well-being.

The challenge for Europe is clear. But so is the solution: evidence shows – consistently, and over time – that countries and continents that invest heavily in education and skills benefit economically and socially from that choice. For every euro invested in attaining high-skilled qualifications, tax payers get even more money back through economic growth. Moreover, this investment provides tangible benefits to all of society – and not just to the individuals who benefit from the greater educational opportunities. Faced with a rapidly changing world, Europe's school systems will have to make considerable headway if they are to meet the demands of modern societies.

Some of these changes will require additional investment, particularly in the early years of schooling. But the evidence also shows that money is not a guarantee for strong results. Put simply, European school systems must learn to be more flexible and effective in improving learning outcomes. And, they must scale back the inherent class bias and sometimes catastrophically regressive way of funding existing educational opportunities – taxing the poor to subsidize educational opportunity for the rich – in existing systems. In short, if Europe wants to retain its competitive edge at the top of the global value-added chain, the education system must be made more flexible, more effective and more easily accessible to a wider range of people.

The report cites Finland as a fine example of a successful school reform:

A key principle in the Finnish reforms was to link high expectations and strong support systems for schools in ways that encouraged and enabled teachers and school principals to assume responsibility for learning outcomes for each and every student. Extensive content-based prescriptions of what teachers should teach were replaced by a focused set of educational goals that communicated what students should be able to do, leaving it up to schools to craft a learning environment and establish the educational content that would serve their students best to reach these goals. Schools with integrated and individualised pathways replaced Finland's tracked school system. (Schleicher, 2006, p. 9)

According to the report, Europe's school systems will have to make considerable headway if they are to meet the challenges of modern societies. Additional investment will be needed to realize some of the necessary changes, particularly in the pre-school and early school. But money does not guarantee good results, Schleicher points out that "linking high expectations to strong support systems" – which was key to the success of the Finnish model – calls for a combination of daring ambitions which envisage integrated and individualized pathways replacing a fully tracked school

## DESEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS – HOW CAN IT BE ACHIEVED?

system. The school needs to function “within the community”. It will be “(more) challenging and even competitive in terms of quality”, and “parents will not maintain their free choice to a huge extent”.

We should never lose sight of the four ‘C’s: community-based, challenging, competitive and choice. Schleicher asks how these elements can be combined (another c) within strong support systems. I shall discuss this programme in the following pages by looking at two innovative school concepts: the “horizontal” community school and the “vertical” magnet school. I shall start, however, with some introductory remarks to clarify Schleicher’s somewhat abstract statements.

### **A LOT OF WORK NEEDED AT LOCAL LEVEL**

Before the turn of the millennium, when the doctrine of “warm” multiculturalism with the focus on social-participative and cultural-expressive integration was proving a fiasco at so many levels, not least in Dutch educational policy, I was given an opportunity to make connections between the teaching and research experience in “urban education” which I had gathered in the United States, the UK, Denmark, and a few former communist countries in Central Europe. I became increasingly interested in *urban problems and challenges* that were related to ethnicity and immigration, especially if they involved growing up and the training of social and educational workers in multicultural cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Brussels.<sup>1</sup> So, after a somewhat tedious, moralistic and over-pragmatic first phase that lasted about 25 years, the multiculturalism theme began to intrigue me as a social and innovative researcher and theorist.

In 2002, I was appointed to a professorship at the Faculties of Teacher Training and Social Work at Rotterdam University. My working domain is “Urban Education”, or even broader “Growing up in the City” – which also forms the subject matter for a research centre and a Master’s programme in education. The appointment could not have been more opportune as it slotted in with my academic work in Brussels, which I had started four years earlier.

My working domain has an interesting background. For over ten years, Dutch governmental advisory boards have maintained that public institutions for youth welfare and education, especially in urban areas, will deliver better results if they are part of a “linked chain approach” or what is sometimes called “joined-up services”. Institutions need to work together and offer a clear range of shared facilities to young people, parents, carers and education professionals (Schuyt, 1995). A lot of work needs to be done at local level with a whole array of partners: policymakers, school managers, teachers, social workers, educational professionals, urban regeneration managers, undergraduates and innovative researchers.

Our Growing-up-in-the-City Centre and the Master's programme in Urban Education have taken education, research and innovation in schools and social services *and* the advanced training of teachers and social workers as *shared focal points*. The centre aims to promote good patterns of cooperation among the relevant disciplines at Rotterdam University, the municipality and the city districts of Rotterdam, and other participants.<sup>2</sup>

As partners, we can work together on research, teacher training, problem-solving and professionalization. Above all, we can help to strengthen the immigrant perspectives of functional integration ... instead of engaging in the multicultural pampering that was so typical of a quarter of a century ago.

### **COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ...**

Take the case of Rotterdam – a truly amorphous urban area, boasting the biggest harbour in the world. Afflicted by the second-city syndrome, Rotterdam is the poorest and worst educated city in the country. Nearly half of its population is ethnic, and it grew faster in the past decades than the indigenous population. The new generation will be multi-coloured, as more than half of the primary school pupils will be second or third generation immigrants. These pupils must not be at risk of exclusion, either as individuals or as (sub)groups, in an ageing – *and* a rejuvenating – population.

Rotterdam needs to focus explicitly on primary and secondary education and find strong support systems which are community-based, challenging, competitive and offer freedom of choice. An example of a relevant and broad innovative approach is the *community school*, an extended school-day programme (in three gradations, dependent on the extra opening hours of the school every week) which offers facilities to intensify pupil learning and creates benefits for the neighbourhood at the same time.

Community schools are usually built in areas of severe social deprivation. They are supported by pedagogic and socio-cultural institutions as well as social work organizations and basic healthcare services for parents and children. Various sports and leisure facilities may also work with the community school and share its philosophy. Community schools invest in “parental participation”, ranging from homework and learning support at home to library and ICT facilities, parallel teaching programmes for parents, and even parental input in school policy.

In Rotterdam, community schools are many and various, and most of them are socially and ethnically connected to the diverse and relatively independent parts of the city. Most of the primary schools in deprived districts are community schools. At district level, several schools are cooperating effectively and may even be housed under the same roof, in some cases together

## DESEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS – HOW CAN IT BE ACHIEVED?

with social work and health and cultural organizations in MFAs (multifunctional accommodation). The Youth, Education and Society Service in the city (JOS) is a great facilitator and financier of community schools.

### AN INTERMEZZO

*But there is a problem.* The Netherlands has subscribed to so-called “freedom of education” for over 90 years. This right was legislated in 1917 in Article 23 of the Constitution, which states that all persons/groups are free to provide education (subject to government supervision) and that private (usually denominational) schools that comply with the legal requirements shall be financed from public funds according to the same standards as public schools. This provision was initiated to equalize education for the religiously “pillarized” poor, who attended their own separate religious (protestant or catholic) schools. It is also the outcome of a nearly half a century of struggle for religious emancipation.

Under the Dutch system parents may send their children to any school they choose. The private schools, in turn, retain the right to admit and refuse children. More than 4,000 independent boards govern 8,000 primary and 2,000 secondary schools in the country. Nowadays, more than 65% of all schools in the Netherlands are state-funded private schools (which is quite the reverse in America, without – however – equal funding). Nowadays private schools seldom represent distinct religious orientations anymore. They are governed by boards of parents and community members, mostly within massive, powerful organizations. Public schools are governed by the municipal authorities.

Upon hearing about all these parental options, an American colleague of mine concluded that Dutch schools would *compete* on the basis of programme and performance indicators. No, I said, they do not. On the contrary, Article 23 does not result in differentiation on the basis of programme and performance. The demand for variety or radical change is too feeble. Most parents are happy with the schools and, despite arguments that *client accountability* will put more pressure on quality, families tend to apply other criteria; for example, or even in particular (40%), they want to know whether their children will have to cross a busy road on their way to school. Competitiveness between schools only arises when a “white” school tends to “deteriorate”. Almost a hundred years down the line, the religious affiliation of schools is a minor factor in parental preference. However, white parents who live in predominantly white areas of Rotterdam tend to opt for private schools to escape the risk of lower class and ethnic minorities that go hand in hand with public schools (in the south of the city for example). In urban areas Article 23 has facilitated a white exodus from public schools. The Dutch experience suggests that free choice

does not result in an *open*, competitive market in education. In effect, market forces are being hampered by professional standards and a range of political and public interests (cf. Pearce, 1993, p. 27–28).

Schools in the Netherlands are beset by severe problems which are the result of or, at least, are partly sustained by the Constitution. It cannot be denied that there is a *coloured* competition or even an ongoing struggle among the lower classes on the fore-mentioned issues of school, work and housing. Every urban agglomeration in the west of Europe has hazardous districts which are ridden with bad housing, poor living environments, high unemployment and juvenile crime. Failing schools will do absolutely nothing to improve the next generations in these districts.

Do we have to admit that serious urban social problems really are *ethnic* problems – not more or less ethnic, but *mainly* ethnic? Yes, we do. Problems that are rooted in massive educational backlashes are the foremost cause of functional disintegration. Why does the Netherlands almost automatically assign nearly 95% of the children of poorly educated immigrant parents, with or without *eleven-plus admission exams* (in Dutch: the *cito test*), to “preparatory secondary vocational education” (VMBO), provided in predominantly black schools? (Incidentally, 60% of *all* eleven-plus children in the country go to VMBO.) And why, five years later, is the school drop-out rate of these youngsters so alarmingly high? What barriers are blocking the way for young immigrants (first and second generation) at school today? Why do educational systems leave so many immigrant children “floundering”, as concluded by the OECD (2006)? Eight years before that fateful selection, these children had already started their school career with huge language arrears, with parents who were neither supportive nor challenging and who were totally disinterested in the school-life of their offspring. These youngsters even have a responsibility during adolescence to teach their parents to participate in the highly alien western society. In 2005, the former Amsterdam Social-Democratic Alderman of Work and Income, Education, Youth, Diversity and Urban Policy, and since January 2009, the brand-new Mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb (born in Morocco) said: “The Constitution makes educational segregation a fact in the Netherlands, and that is appalling”. The Rotterdam Christian-Democratic Alderman, Leonard Geluk, a staunch defender of Article 23, agreed that in his city, with 65 percent immigrant children, a desegregation policy which focuses on a fifty-fifty distribution will fail: “only quality policy can help” (cf. Cohen, 2005; Walters, 2008).

### ... AND MAGNET SCHOOLS

Two preliminary conclusions. First, there is not enough competition between schools in terms of quality and educational programmes (except along social and ethnic lines). Secondly, local and

## DESEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS – HOW CAN IT BE ACHIEVED?

municipal authorities do not have enough powers to intervene in failing schools and teaching standards. So, what can one say about the statement by Leonard Geluk “*Only quality policy can help*”? What might that mean? (For the record, Geluk resigned as Alderman for Schools in mid 2009.)

The *magnet school*, though not completely different from the community school, might constitute an intriguing example of school renewal in the Netherlands. Magnet schools are seldom found in Western European countries, even less so in private (i.e. denominational) schools in the Netherlands and Belgium.

In the United States there is a real *magnet school movement*, which is strongly supported by private and local initiatives and by school districts in particular.<sup>3</sup> In America, magnet schools are part of the national education system. Pupils are usually allocated a school on a boundary basis. In other words, they usually attend the nearest school. Magnet schools offer facilities outside these boundaries. Most of them have something extra to offer over and above the public schools, which makes them an attractive choice for many pupils. This – in theory – increases the diversity of the student population.

Magnet schools usually pursue alternative methods of teaching. They receive additional funding so that they can invest more in pupils, materials, teachers, curricula, et cetera.

Magnet schools are found mainly in urban areas. According to the US Department of Education, more than half of the large urban districts have magnet school programmes compared with only 10% of suburban districts.<sup>3</sup> There are magnet schools at elementary, middle, and high school level. Occasionally, grades are combined in certain classes.

Magnet schools were introduced in the United States in the 1970s as a democratic tool to promote academic desegregation. They subscribed to the principle of parental choice. The aim was to “attract” pupils across the entire spectrum, so they opened their enrolment geographically across traditional school zones and offered an environment or experience that would attract students and families from other areas (families would involuntarily desegregate their children to the magnet school). The goal was to reduce racial segregation in a natural manner.

Nearly forty years later, many magnet schools are still helping to increase diversity in the national education system by indirectly enabling desegregation. However, over the past twenty years, some schools have become more competitive and can only accommodate 10 to 20% of the students that apply. These magnet schools can therefore promote academic opportunity and excellence over their conventional counterparts. Magnet schools often attract “gifted” and “talented” pupils who score well in tests and attain good grades. About one third of all magnet schools use selection criteria to decide whom to invite to enrol for that year.

American magnet schools offer distinct curricular and didactic concepts and specializations, ranging from art, geometry, ICT, economy and health & medicine to science, maths, sports and nature. These specializations may vary from "limited" to "extensive". Magnet schools attract pupils from outside the attendance zone. Finally, they explicitly pursue diversity.

By school year 1991–1992 – when I was visiting the magnet schools headquarters in Houston, Texas, for the first time (the International Research Institute on Educational Choice, at the University of Houston campus) and attending huge magnet school conferences in Houston and Seattle, Washington – more than 1.2 million pupils were enrolled in magnet schools in 230 school districts. By school year 1999–2000, 1,372 magnet schools were operational in 17 states (out of the 33 states that reported this type of information to the federal government). The states with the most magnet schools were California (473), Illinois (350), North Carolina (153) and Missouri (95). By school year 2001–2002, more than 3,100 magnet schools were operational in America (National Center for Education Statistics, cf. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/overview/table9.asp>). Though more racially balanced than conventional schools, magnet schools are less balanced in other domains. Pupils who attend magnet schools are *less* likely to have the same SES (socio-economic status) mix than pupils who attend conventional schools. For instance, fewer students are eligible for free or cut-price lunches. Students in a magnet school are more likely to live in a household with two employed parents who have a college or university background. These findings apply to the students regardless of race. While pupils with low SES may be underrepresented in magnet schools, they achieve better academically than pupils at conventional schools. Low SES pupils in magnet schools are more likely to complete their education than their counterparts in non-magnet schools.

On the whole, the magnet school's original mission to increase diversity has gradually been marginalized in favour of academic achievement. Pupils at magnet schools perform better academically than students at conventional schools in the same school district. The districts finance the magnet schools in the same way that they finance other schools. However, magnet schools spend, on average, \$250 more per student than non-magnet schools. Some magnet schools receive state desegregation funding. Federal funding under the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) is also available. MSAP provides two-year grants to magnet programmes that promote desegregation.

So much for the United States. I am not sure whether these optimistic, downwardly readjusted and more or less realistic visions can be easily transposed to, for example, Rotterdam. It would require swathes of precise translation, adaptation, creativity and innovative research, that moreover take account of the forty-year history of the American magnet school programme and the opportunities in Rotterdam. The magnet school's core strengths, however, remain its attractiveness for pupils and

## DESEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS – HOW CAN IT BE ACHIEVED?

parents (not just well-to-do parents), its competitiveness and special admissions procedures (“to a certain extent”), and – sometimes – its links to the school district’s (small) economies or vocational education, and its “moderate” role in desegregation policy.

## CONCLUSION

“Moderate”, like some community-school practices. Charles Willie, the famous American researcher on school desegregation policy and emeritus professor of Harvard Graduate School of Education, wrote several times that neither a busing system nor a racially controlled assignment policy can solve school segregation; “only a coloured and income-based school choice controlled system” can do so ... to a certain extent.<sup>4</sup> Charles Willie’s inspiring examples of local (magnet) school innovation reflect some courageous school district policies. Can schools be encouraged collectively and, at the same time, be prepared for competition on the basis of engineered differences (for example: “in about two years all primary schools will be different magnet schools, and we will help you to achieve this”)?

It seems to me that, in the Netherlands, this is a very virtual option. The community school and the magnet school are two neat examples of experimental situations, which are attractive for multidisciplinary urban research and innovation, for teaching and teacher training and for (mid-career) professionalization. In these contexts, the segmented knowledge, which professionals acquire during their initial training, does not provide a strong enough basis for the joined-up thinking and action that is required for cross-service working. What is needed are *new entrepreneurial professionals* in the classes themselves and in and around the school, professionals who want to act as intermediaries. There is a desperate need for this kind of strategy, all the more so, when the vast majority of the municipalities in the country that decides to implement this approach (80%) admit that they have little or no knowledge of the subject.

## NOTES

- 1 I offered a short evaluation in: Notten (1996).
- 2 More about this Rotterdam research-and-teaching-arrangement can be found in a comparison of British, Danish and Dutch courses in: Benington, Hartley, Ry Nielsen & Notten (2008).
- 3 More information about American magnet schools can be “googled”, for example: <http://www.publicschoolreview.com/articles/2>.
- 4 From 1987 on, for example: Alves & Willie (1987), cf. Notten (2004, p. 116–139).

## REFERENCES

- Alves, M., & Willie, C. (1987). Controlled Choice Assignments: a New and more Effective Approach to School Desegregation. *The Urban Review*, 19(2), 67–88.
- Benington, J., Hartley, J., Ry Nielsen, J. C., & Notten, A. L. T. (2008). Innovation, Design and Delivery of MPA Programmes for Public Leaders and Managers in Europe. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 21(4), 383–399.
- Cohen, R. (2005, October 17). A European Model for Immigration Falters; Dutch Facade of Tolerance under Strain. *International Herald Tribune*, 5.
- Notten, A. L. T. (1996). Urban Education and Youth Policy. Marginal Notes on a Debate about Professional Education for Social Change. In A. L. T. Notten (Ed.), *Cities, Youth Policy, Vocational Education, and Training the Professionals* (pp. 7–11). Amsterdam: UESP.
- Notten, A. L. T. (2004). *Overleven in de stad. Inleiding tot sociale kwaliteit en urban education* [Surviving in the City. An Introduction to Social Quality and Urban Education]. Antwerp, Apeldoorn: Garant.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2006). *Where Immigrant Students Succeed – A Comparative Review of Performance and Engagement in PISA 2003*. Paris: OECD. Retrieved 17 July, 2009, from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/2/38/36664934.pdf>. About "floundering": [http://www.oecd.org/document/17/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_201185\\_36701777\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/17/0,2340,en_2649_201185_36701777_1_1_1_1,00.html).)
- Pearce, D. (1993). Towards a Principle Policy for Choice: Concerning ublic Funding for Private Schools in Systems of Choice. In D. R. Waldrip, W. L. Marks & N. Estes (Eds.), *Magnet School Policy Studies and Evaluations* (pp. 2–54). Austin: Morgan.
- Schleicher, A. (2006). *The Economics of Knowledge: Why Education is Key for Europe's Success*. Brussels: Lisbon Council. Retrieved 17 July, 2009, from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/13\\_03\\_06\\_economics\\_of\\_knowledge.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/13_03_06_economics_of_knowledge.pdf).
- Schuyt, C. J. M. (1995). *Vulnerable Youth and their Future. A Policy Recommendation based on Literature Research*. Rijswijk: Ministry of WVC.
- Walters, D. (2008, July 19/20). Het gymnasium is wit. Segregatie in voortgezet onderwijs vrijwel onoplosbaar [Pre-university Education is White. Segregation in High Schools is Nearly Insoluble]. *NRC Handelsblad*, Zaterdag &cetera addendum, 10–11.