

Case Study 1

Advising Municipalities on Schooling Newly Arrived Migrant Pupils

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The Case

In 2014, a board member of a primary school in a large city in the Netherlands approached the authors with a request for consultancy. The specific question concerned the evaluation of a primary school that welcomes newly arrived migrant pupils. This request was an interesting one as its intercultural aspects touched upon the very topical and highly political issue of inclusion of pupils and families with different languages and cultures into the Dutch school system. We immediately responded positively because we had just completed an international project on the inclusion of inheritance language pupils in Europe and we were eager to explore the same issues at a national level. According to our contact, the school board approached us because the municipality wished to evaluate the effects of the financial support provided to the education of these newly arrived pupils in the city. The situation was urgent since the subsidy scheme was coming to an end. In fact, municipalities are required to provide regular reports to the Dutch government evaluating locally managed projects and their efficiency when these projects are funded by the national government. We agreed to submit a research proposal to the municipality within two weeks.

At the primary school level, the organization of the education of newly arrived pupils in the Netherlands is taken care of by the local authorities. The organization of the system is thus characterized by decentralization. This implies that every municipality receives a certain amount of earmarked governmental funding, but can decide independently how this financial support will be spent to further the education of newly arrived students. Consequently, the organizational structure of the education can vary considerably between different cities. In our case, the city set up a separate school specialized in the reception of newly arrived primary and pre-primary school pupils. Accordingly, all newly arrived pupils are automatically registered for this separate school upon their arrival. After approximately one year at this

school, the pupils leave to join a mainstream primary school, usually in their own neighborhood. To illustrate the diversity in local policies in this regard: another major city in the Netherlands did not choose to establish a special school but instead offers reception classes in regular schools. Similar to our city, pupils generally attend these special classes for one year. Municipalities that use the latter system tend to select schools to develop expertise in this matter, which means that pupils may be directed towards a school that is not in their district.

Decentralization can be an asset for the educational system, especially when it comes to the reception of newly arrived students: as the influx is unpredictable, this system may provide the flexibility and adaptability that is needed to cope with changing circumstances and adapt optimally to a local situation. However, when it comes to their *inclusion*, decentralization may also have its downsides. For instance, in a decentralized system, schools have more autonomy regarding the content of instruction, thus to adjust the curriculum to the need of their pupils (Dumcius, Nicaise, Balcaite, Huttova, & Siarova, 2012); however, newly arrived migrant pupils are highly mobile even after their arrival. Moving to another city, the pupils will thus have to adjust to yet another study programme. This makes the continuity of educational trajectory of these pupils even more challenging. From this perspective, it is clear that the research we were commissioned to carry out would not only be relevant to the municipality in question. The issues we were asked to explore were also likely to be relevant to newly arrived families and their children, the school and its employees, and ultimately, the Dutch society and government. The municipality's motivation in commissioning our research was clear. Its main goal was to obtain reliable information about the situation to guide policymakers in finding solutions to existing problems and enable these pupils to enjoy the best possible education. Our report would provide an assessment of its current policy with recommendations for the future and provide insight into the concerns expressed by the school board. Our input would help the city to obtain continued government support, and perhaps, although this was not formulated explicitly, to reduce the costs.

Description of the Research Design

After a number of calls with a city council representative and discussions with the school board, we formulated the following questions:

1. How is the separate primary school for newly arrived pupils doing in terms of efficiency?
2. In what ways can the current educational system for newly arrived pupils be improved?

The next step consisted of the translation of these questions into research goals. We decided that the research should focus on the development of the pupils during their stay in the separate primary school.

As indicated previously, we were instructed that the research could not exceed one school year, and we were therefore obliged to omit several potentially relevant subjects. For instance, we decided not to study the effect of the transition(s) many newly arrived pupils undergo when moving from the special school to a mainstream school. We were also unable to compare the effects of this city's policy to those of organizational structures in other cities. This would have required the collection of data in other cities, which was beyond the scope and budget of this assignment. In addition, between cities there are important differences in the newly arrived populations. This extreme heterogeneity in terms of age upon arrival, country of provenance, and previous education makes even a tentative comparison precarious. A research protocol was written and sent to the client, as well as a budget and a contract. After some time, the client called and asked us to reconsider the protocol and expand the scope. To this purpose, we needed one more school year and we thus reworked the proposal, adding a year to the budget, and an extra research question on transitions to the protocol. This allowed us to expand the initial question to include the aspect of transition: How do the pupils adapt to the regular school system after having left the special school in terms of school achievement?

Results of European research on migrant pupils' school achievements underline the underachievement of this population (PISA, Dumcius et al., 2012) and a higher risk on early school dropout (Fan & Wolters, 2014). In addition, studies from Canada and the United States of America show that pupils need at least five years in the educational system before they are on a par with their monolingual peers. However, these studies do not reflect the high diversity of newly arrived students that European schools are confronted with. There is thus a lack of research on the school achievements of newly arrived migrant pupils in this particular context, resulting in a lack of insight into the ways in which their needs can be addressed more effectively.

Once we reached agreement on budget and protocol, we formed a working group around the researchers in which all stakeholders were represented: the municipality, the school board, the school principal and staff, the other school boards of the municipality, and the researchers. Meetings were scheduled approximately four times a year and were meant to inform the parties about the research in progress, to discuss ongoing issues, and to make sure that we would base our advice on existing resources. When formulating advice, it is essential to identify solutions that are available within the immediate context of the client to avoid solutions that are out of the client's reach (see for instance, Ruck, 2009). The importance of the meetings,

therefore, cannot be overestimated. For one, solutions and answers to the questions that came up during the meetings were very often provided by the actors themselves who, ultimately, have a better knowledge of the situation than we do. For instance, teachers knew the daily routine in the classroom and they were the ones who explained it to us. Without their knowledge and collaboration, researchers could not have made progress. Teachers also had solutions to their problems within the school, for instance, a staff member who spoke the language of some of the pupils and who could be hired to act as an intermediary for communication with the pupils' relatives. However, these potential solutions may have been underexploited and need an exterior evaluator to be identified. Second, these regular meetings helped maintain sufficient transparency in the research process. In fact, the future of the school and of its workers partly depended on the outcome of the research. Therefore, the research and the researchers could be perceived as a threat for the school and staff instead of as support. On the other hand, the success of the research also depended on the school's willingness to participate. Our expectation was that only if we somehow managed to maintain optimal communication between school and researchers would both parties benefit fully from the knowledge held by those involved. Third, researchers may come across issues that can already be addressed during the research period. This underlines the value of the consultancy not only as a means to generate an end product in the form of advice, but also as a productive process in itself. The following example may help to illustrate this point. During the first year of research, we consulted the website of the school. We came to the conclusion that it was unclear at what audience the website was targeted. For instance, all the information was in Dutch, a language that most newly arrived parents would not be able to read. Some information on the site was relevant to the parents and relatives, some to the city council, some to the pupils themselves. However, the information was difficult to find and not categorized according to potential readers, for example information about the school days, about the classroom life, about the administration around it, about the financial issues. Bringing this issue up in one of the regular meetings was enough to encourage the school to revise the website to better match it with the target readership.

Thus, two research questions remained that needed answering: How do the pupils develop (1) *during* and (2) *after* their stay in the separate primary school? By answering these questions, we expected to answer the initial questions of the municipality: How is the special school for newly arrived pupils doing in terms of efficiency? In what ways can the currently implemented schooling system for newly arrived pupils be improved?

Our research was based on both qualitative and quantitative methods. We recruited 50 pupils aged 5 to 11. We measured the development of second

language understanding and production and gathered information about personality and behavioural development. We also conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with school management and teachers, obtained information through questionnaires filled in by teachers, and collected data from the school database. In addition, we traced former pupils of the programme to analyse their school careers.

Consultancy and Acceptance

The results had to be converted into intervention management. Of course, this step usually requires interpretation of the research results and therefore is subject to discussion and negotiation. The most important result was positive: pupils developed well during their stay in the special classroom and were very soon on a par with classroom peers after their stay in that classroom even though there is a growing remaining achievement gap with age peers (Le Pichon-Vorstman, Baauw & Vorstman, 2016). The results could be summarized in the following way:

1. The trajectory of newly arrived pupils is very complex and does not end once a pupil has entered the Netherlands. Discontinuity is the main challenge in the education of these pupils.
2. Heterogeneous experiences of previous schooling and potential traumatizing experiences considerably complicate the child's ability to adjust to (any) situation, including a new school setting and should be addressed as soon as possible.

Results were discussed in detail in the working group as well as individually with the different stakeholders. Based on these discussions, we formulated several recommendations:

1. In order to prevent discontinuity of schooling and to assure faster comprehension and access to knowledge for all pupils, we recommended the implementation of a school language policy in the school, in particular one that would include the languages of the pupils;
2. In order to allow teachers to focus more on individual levels of pupils we recommended:
 - a. the introduction of one extra expert teacher per classroom; investment in continued professionalization of the teachers and school staff;
 - b. the implementation of a programme for the well-being of the pupils targeting pupils with possible traumas;
 - c. more hand-in-hand collaboration with specialized institutions.

The results had different consequences for different stakeholders: schools, school boards, city council, or even the Ministry of Education. For instance, questions that were raised during the discussions were:

- What does the school need from the municipality to better address the mental well-being of the pupils during their stay in the reception classroom?
- What do regular schools need from the reception school to facilitate the transition of the pupils?
- What does the school need to teach the teachers to foster the pupils' own languages in order to boost the cognitive and emotional development of the pupils?

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this consultancy touched upon the very topical and highly political issues of inclusion of pupils and families with different languages and cultures into the Dutch school system. Therefore, the process of negotiation also implied a confrontation between stakeholders' opinions and research outcomes. For instance, our recommendation of including the languages of the pupils in the classroom routine met with some reluctance given the financial consequences of such policy. This is understandable in light of the fact that financial support from the government for pupils' own languages as teaching medium in schools was abrogated in the Netherlands in 2004. It was important to discuss these issues in the working groups and to explain the value of the pupils' culture (with language being a core value) and its implications for the cognitive and emotional development of the children based on our findings and scholarly literature.

Interestingly, this case confirms the added value of academic research in comparison to independent consultancy agencies. In choosing academic research, clients know that there is an (often implicit) claim for independence, that research protocols will be subject to evaluation by an independent ethics committee, that the results will be further analysed, and that the answer to the initial request may not necessarily please the client. This tension between research outcome and political pressure for certain interpretations should be acknowledged and compels researchers to stay alert and be wary of any politically motivated interpretation of their results. To stimulate best practice in this regard, optimal intercultural communication (including interdisciplinary communication) should be one of the targets of the whole consultancy process from the very beginning. In this case, recommendations were presented as potential options to improve the situation. All recommendations were written with the consent of the three main stakeholders: the city council, the school boards, and the school staff. Successful intercultural management is a process that needs to be continuously negotiated and based on mutual trust between client, stakeholders, and researchers.

References

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