5 The Netherlands

Parental involvement in the Netherlands

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1 Introduction

The Dutch education system can be characterised by two significant features: its freedom to establish government-funded schools and the presence of early tracking after primary school. Both features are relevant to the debate regarding the involvement of parents in education. As is the case elsewhere, parental involvement is promoted in education policies as a means to support the school careers of children. Numerous interventions have been implemented to support parental involvement, especially aimed at the prevention of literacy gaps at entry to primary schools. More recently, parental involvement in a broader sense has been promoted to support children's learning. In addition, teacher education programmes have been developed to support teachers in their competencies to communicate with parents and to support parental involvement. In current educational debates, a controversy regarding parental involvement can be seen: on the one hand, parental involvement enhances the school outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; however, on the other hand, parental involvement is considered to increase educational inequalities, because highly effective involvement of highly educated parents leads to increased levels of inequality.

This chapter begins by presenting an overview of the education system of the Netherlands and will proceed with a discussion of the history of policy and research regarding parental involvement in the country. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the value of research evidence, which seeks to promote effective parental involvement practices, and on the divergent effects of involvement of parents with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

2 Overview of the education system in the Netherlands

2a Freedom of education

The year 1917 was a landmark in the history of Dutch education. The so-called 'school struggle' ended and freedom of education was realised and formally included in the Dutch constitution. The freedom of education implies that, apart from public government-established schools, religious groups have

the right to establish schools and have them funded by the Dutch government. This freedom of education resulted in two prominent features of the Dutch school system, setting it apart from school systems in other countries.

Firstly, the number of expensive private schools is small, at approximately 3 percent. Because the Dutch government finances all schools, including those with a religious affiliation (denominational schools), it limits the need for private parties to establish schools for which parents have to pay. Whereas the distribution of public versus religious schools before 1917 was 70:30 percent, this distribution changed to 30:70 percent after the 1917 constitution. This 30:70 percent division of cost-free, public schools and cost-free, government-funded denominational schools has remained relatively stable.

Secondly, the freedom of education resulted in free school choice for all parents. Unlike most other countries, Dutch parents are not allocated a local school when their child reaches school age. All parents are expected to choose a school for their child. This means that school choice in the Netherlands is a system of forced choice – that is, parents have to choose. This freedom of choice also implies that parents possess the required cultural and social capital to make an informed choice. Especially in densely populated areas, the system of school choice leads to school segregation because white middle-class parents tend to choose schools with lower numbers of minority and at-risk children. Also, cultural-ethnic-minority parents, in particular those with a Muslim background, may choose Islamic schools and contribute to school segregation by choice (Denessen, Driessen & Sleegers, 2005). This process of self-segregation is visible in schools that attract students from orthodox religious groups.

For Dutch children, school is formally compulsory from age 5 to 16. However, almost every child starts primary school (*Groep 1*) at age 4 and finishes around age 12 (*Groep 8*). The first two years are comparable with kindergarten and formal instruction usually starts at age 6 (*Groep 3*). For children with special needs there are schools for special education. National education policy, however, is aimed at decreasing the number of referrals to special education and promoting inclusive regular education (*passend onderwijs*).

2b A system of early tracking

Another typical feature of the Dutch education system is its early tracking. After eight years of primary education, children move to secondary schools when they are about 12 years old. They enrol in secondary schools that provide education in seven tracks, ranging from lower vocational education (*vmbo*) to pre-university education (*vwo*), although approximately 40 percent of the first-year programmes in Dutch secondary education is provided in mixed tracks (*vmbo-havo* or *havo-vwo* tracks). Some schools provide more years of mixed tracks, although the number of schools providing mixed track-classes is decreasing (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016), which is partly because of the demand of highly educated parents to send their children to a single pre-university track. There is no national curriculum in the Netherlands, but the

standardisation of the education system is quite high, because of nationally standardised exams. The nation-wide exam requirements strongly steer the content of the curriculum in the distinct tracks of secondary school.

The transition from primary to secondary school is based on track recommendations provided by the primary schools. Secondary schools use this recommendation to place children in tracks. To validate the recommendation, students are required to take a standardised achievement test. When the outcomes of this test exceed the level of the recommended track, primary schools are obliged to reconsider the recommendation.

In the Netherlands there are approximately 6,350 primary schools that provide education for 1.5 million pupils. The number of secondary schools is much smaller, at around 640. In 2016, 46.9 percent of the third-year secondary school students (around 15 years old; 168,700 students in total) were enrolled in lower vocational education tracks (*vmbo*), 26.6 percent were enrolled in the lower general secondary education track (*havo*) and 26.4 percent in the pre-university track (*vwo*).

3 Parental involvement in the Netherlands

3a Terminology

In the Netherlands, parental involvement refers to the involvement of parents who are the primary caretakers of their children. In exceptional cases where parents are not present or capable of taking care of their children, the parental responsibilities are taken over by so-called 'caregivers'. Letters that schools send to children's homes are usually addressed to the parents/caregivers of the child. The use of 'father and mother' has become complicated, because of the increasing numbers of non-traditional families, especially one-parent households, reconstituted families, and same-sex parents.

Parental involvement is translated in Dutch as *ouderbetrokkenheid*. This concept relates to parental dispositions and behaviours that directly or indirectly influence children's cognitive development and school achievement (Fantuzzo, Davis & Ginsberg, 1995). However, the Dutch vocabulary regarding parental involvement has developed in congruence with the international literature, where the concepts of 'school–family partnerships' and 'school–family–community partnerships' are used to focus less exclusively on parents' involvement, but on a shared responsibility for children by family, school and the community. In Dutch, the equivalent term *educatief partnerschap* was introduced by Cees de Wit (2005).

3b National legislative and policy context

Parental involvement in the Netherlands is typically linked to the freedom of education within the Dutch education system. Two natural forms of involvement were the result of the constitutional right that religious groups gained to establish non-public-government-funded schools. First, it gave

way to many groups of parents to establish their own schools that were governed by foundations or associations led by parents or in which parents were represented. Second, because of the obligation for parents to choose a primary school for their children, parents are involved in their child's school as active choosers.

Besides these two types of involvement that are direct consequences of the history of the Dutch education system, several developments led to increased parental involvement in schools. These developments were mostly related to educational policies aimed to counter inequalities of educational opportunities. Since the 1970s, parental involvement as a means to promote equal educational opportunities gained increasing attention in education policy and research. First, it became widely acknowledged that children's experience with language in their early years were strongly predictive of their literacy development at school (Heath, 1983). To overcome language deficits of children from less advantaged socioeconomic families and children from language minority immigrant families, interventions to support early literacy development in the home were developed and implemented. These programmes were aimed at promoting parental early socialisation practices, such as dialogic reading (de la Rie et al., 2016).

Second, parental involvement has been promoted to build bridges between families and schools and to connect school and family cultures to create stronger 'overlapping spheres of influence' (Epstein, 1995). Strongly based on Epstein's theory, policies to promote equality of educational opportunities were aimed at diverse types of parental involvement, ranging from parenting to collaboration with the community. Although legislation is restricted to formal parent participation (schools are required to provide seats for parents on school councils), schools are offered support from school advisers to strengthen all types of parental involvement (see for example de Vries, 2010).

In 2008, the Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2008) published a report on parents as partners in educational outcomes. In this report, parents are addressed as important agents for school improvement. The council pointed to the opportunities that parents have to increase the quality of the school (in terms of student achievement). It was suggested that parents should be more proactive in holding the school accountable for the academic achievement of their children by making more effort to be informed about school outcomes. This advice seems to root in an educational effectiveness paradigm, triggered by neoliberalism and consumerism (Tienken, 2013).

Two years later, in 2010, the Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2010) published a new report on parents as partners. In this report, the Education Council advised that school quality frameworks should be developed in which parents are included: a good quality agenda focuses on parental involvement and on schools and teachers that are able to work together with parents, with a focus on stimulating academic achievement and social skills of pupils and to reduce dropout and truancy. In addition, it advised that the scope of parental involvement should be broadened to parents of secondary and higher

education students and that teachers should be educated to promote their competences for working with parents.

As the research on parental involvement progressed and evidence for the positive effects of parental involvement on children's learning grew, parents were increasingly advised to provide optimal support for learning, as a means to improve high school outcomes. Based on a large body of empirical studies showing that parent involvement adds to the academic achievements of children (e.g., Bakker et al., 2013; Carter, 2002; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), education policies have been designed to contribute to parental involvement both at school and at home. School programmes focused on promoting parent participation at school, as well as supporting home involvement with children's learning (e.g., helping with homework, reading with the child).

3c Parental involvement and educational inequality: the 'dark side' of parental involvement

In 2016, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education announced that educational inequalities were increasing. The Inspectorate reported that children from highly educated families had more successful school careers than their counterparts from lower educated families, and that the divide between both groups was growing. Apart from explanations that can be found in the education system (for example tracking students or the effects of implicit teacher biases), parents are suggested to play a significant role in this development. Over the past decades it can be observed that highly educated parents put various forms of capital in play to maximise their children's educational opportunities. The highly educated parents, in particular, appear to demand that the school optimally prepares their children for future life – putting pressure on primary schools to obtain a recommendation for a higher secondary school track, and enrolling their children in selective programmes (for example bilingual programmes; see Sieben & van Ginderen, 2014). Moreover, highly educated parents can – and do – pay more than lower educated parents do for additional homework support and exam preparation for their children. The commercial out-of-school support industry is rapidly growing in the Netherlands, as national expenditure on after-school tutoring, exam preparation and homework support has increased substantially between 1995 and 2015. With their involvement practices, highly educated parents contribute to increasing divergent school careers of children and to increasing inequality of educational opportunities. These parents engage in what Lareau (2002) calls 'concerted cultivation' of their children's talents.

It is a major challenge for the Dutch education system to counter the trend of increasing inequalities. In a context of neoliberalism, with high pressure on parents and children to get the most out of their education and where competition, selection, and accountability characterise the system of education, it is not easy to contribute to equal educational opportunities. In the case of

parental involvement, with a division of powerful highly educated parents and less powerful lower educated and ethnic-minority parents, strong empowerment strategies that discriminate in favour of children from disadvantaged backgrounds are needed to counter the trend of divergence of school careers of advantaged and disadvantaged students.

4 Existing research on parental involvement in the Netherlands

As stated above, the theoretical framing of parental involvement in the Netherlands was largely connected with sociology of education. Cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1973) and social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) underpinned increased attention among academics with regard to parental involvement. During the 1990s and 2000s, a significant increase in research on parental involvement has been observed (Castelli & Pepe, 2008). Three main topics in research can be distinguished.

(1) *Parental involvement and academic achievement of students*

As research evidence grew on the effects of parental involvement on children's academic achievement (see for example Kloosterman et al., 2011), the topic gained a broader basis and was adopted by education psychologists and researchers of educational effectiveness. In the early 2000s, several reviews were published about the effects of parental involvement that provided input for school improvement programmes to promote effectiveness (Carter, 2002; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

In 2011, the Dutch Education Research Council sent out a call for a review study on the effects of parental involvement and the contribution of teachers to effective parental involvement practices. The purpose of this review was to make an inventory of effective practices and to provide input for teacher education and school improvement programmes with which effective practices could be enhanced. This review study was published in 2013 (Bakker et al., 2013). The authors first reviewed the empirical evidence on the effects of parents' involvement on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (e.g., motivation, well-being, self-concept) of children from 6 to 18 years old. Next, the empirical research regarding the contribution of teachers to parents' involvement was reviewed. The findings of the first part of the review study were consistent with previous findings. For three age groups – pre-school and kindergarten, primary school pupils and secondary school pupils – parents' involvement was effective. For the youngest children, the effects were great for the home literacy environment, stressing the importance of parental cultural capital for children's literacy development. For the older children, the effects of parental socio-emotional support were relatively strong, indicating that for the school careers of older children parental social capital was of increasing importance. In addition to these findings, it was found that the effects of parental participation at school and formal school involvement were weak or absent.

The second part of Bakker et al.'s review study (2013) found that teachers were indeed able to promote effective forms of involvement. In line with the theoretical model of parents' involvement developed by Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (see, for example, Green et al., 2007), teachers' competences to invite parents and to connect with parents' motivation to become involved were stressed as important predictors of parental involvement. Additionally, positive teacher attitudes towards parents and parental involvement were found to be relevant conditions for the development of teacher competences to build effective relationships with parents. That teacher attitudes are highly relevant for building positive relations with parents is supported by a large body of empirical research on teacher perceptions of parents and their involvement.

(2) *Teacher attitudes towards parents*

Research on teacher attitudes has shown that teachers overall have positive attitudes towards parents and their involvement (Bakker et al., 2013). However, not all is positive as some challenges have been observed. First, it appeared that teachers tend to be negative about too much involvement of parents (e.g., demanding, overprotective, or aggressive ways of involvement). These negative experiences with parents affect teachers' job satisfaction and induce stress (van der Wolf & Everaert, 2005). As stated by Hujala et al. (2009), teachers tend to value a relationship with parents that can be described as 'educational professionalism with a respectful distance'.

Second, teachers tend to underestimate parents' involvement in general, and the involvement of low socioeconomic status parents and ethnic minorities in particular. Dutch researchers have done some work in trying to identify different types of parents, with the aim of supporting teachers and schools in their understanding of parents and their approach to parents with different involvement profiles. Both van der Wolf and Everaert (2005) and Smit and Driessen (2009) developed typologies of parents based on ratings of typical parental involvement practice, which included overprotective parents, supportive parents, aggressive parents, and uninvolved parents. Although such typologies might be helpful for teachers to reflect on their relationship with parents, they give rise to stigmatisation and stereotyping. Research on teachers' perceptions of parents' involvement has shown that teachers tend to overestimate middle-class parents' involvement and to underestimate the involvement of lower-class parents and those of cultural-ethnic-minority backgrounds (Bakker, Denessen & Brus-Laeven, 2007). These misperceptions of parents' involvement can lead to self-fulfilling prophecy effects when teachers translate perceptions of parents into stereotypical expectations of their pupils (Bakker et al., 2013).

(3) *Teacher education and school reform*

Not only should positive teacher attitudes towards parents and unbiased perceptions of parents' involvement target teacher education programmes, but also their

competences to work with parents, such as communication skills and the skills to invite all parents to become involved in their child's education. A Dutch review on teacher competences has resulted in a short list of teacher competences for school–family partnerships (Kassenberg, Petri & Doornenbal, 2016). Kassenberg et al. distinguished four types of *knowledge* (about the benefits of collaboration with parents, about diverse ways of communicating, about the community and family backgrounds, and being knowledgeable to answer questions of parents), three *attitudes* (a positive attitude towards parents and parental involvement, valuing parents as partners, being sincerely committed to parents), and five *skills* (building an open relationship with parents, rhetoric skills, making tasks and activities visible for parents, being able to deal with diversity, and being able to invite parents to become involved in their child's learning).

Research on Dutch teacher education programmes has shown that teachers feel ill prepared when they finish their initial teacher training (de Bruïne et al., 2014), as it concentrates more on communication skills and very little time is allocated for theory and practice regarding parental involvement and school–family partnerships. Teacher education for school–family-partnerships is on the agenda of teacher education institutes, although innovations in teacher education programmes seem strongly dependent on committed individual teacher educators (de Bruïne et al., 2014).

Besides a focus of research and intervention on teachers and teacher education, there is also a focus on schools and school improvement. In Rotterdam, Lusse (2013) was very successful in supporting school–family partnerships in schools for secondary education. Based on research at fifteen schools for secondary education, she developed a framework with ten factors for success, broadly focusing on contact between schools and parents; cooperation between schools, parents and pupils; and supporting student learning. These factors can be taken as design principles for school improvement and in-service teacher education. In line with previous research, especially the promotion of the conversation between parents and their children at home seems beneficial for students' learning.

4a Reflection on research informed education policies

As research has shown that parents' home involvement is related to cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes and that teachers and schools indeed can contribute to effective forms of parental involvement, it seems quite logical that policy makers focus on strengthening those effective forms of parental involvement. However, from a critical theory perspective, this approach can be considered problematic (Green, 2017; Lareau, 2002; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2016). The problems with such a research evidence approach are as follows:

(a) Middle-class normativity of parental involvement

The main findings of parental involvement research show that typical middle-class types of involvement relate to positive school outcomes. These types of

involvement are practices by parents with high amounts of cultural and social capital. When these practices are taken as the norm for all parents, educational interventions are likely to focus on cultural homogenisation and to promote a one-size-fits-all approach to moulding parents in a singular frame of the effective parent.

(b) Neglect of alternative ways of involvement

In contrast to quantitative, large-scale survey studies on which most of the reviews studies are based, qualitative research has opened up the conceptualisation of parental involvement beyond the focus of the researchers. For example, López (2001) and Posey-Maddox and Haley-Lock (2016) identified types of involvement that are different from mainstream notions of parental involvement, such as the transmission of a work ethos or staying away from schools as a way to show large amounts of trust in teachers and schools.

(c) Blaming, stigmatisation and exclusion of uninvolved parents

A risk of defining effective parental involvement practices is that parents who do not follow these practices are blamed for not being effective. Research has shown that teachers get frustrated, angry and disappointed when parents are uninvolved (Denessen & Raket, 2016). As a result, these parents are at risk of becoming marginalised by the school.

(d) Prescribing teacher practices with a one-size-fits-all approach

A focus on research evidence to improve education might lead to the development of context-free guidelines and scripts to promote parents' involvement, in which education is guided not by values but by standards (Biesta, 2010). The development of such practices enables the objectification of teachers and their deprofessionalisation. When teacher professionalism is taken seriously, and it is acknowledged that the specific context of a school has to be considered when designing local policies for school–family partnerships, standardisation of teachers' work is not the correct route to follow.

(e) Accountability pressures that create tensions between schools and parents

Evidenced effective parental involvement practices may be translated into standards for high-quality education. For example, parental home involvement can be considered an indicator of quality of education, because it adds to positive school outcomes. When parents do not show these evidenced practices, tensions may arise between parents and schools, especially when schools are held accountable for student outcomes. There is then a high risk that teachers hold parents responsible for the quality of the school (i.e. educational outcomes of their children).

5 New directions: what can research tell us about the way forward?

To overcome the above mentioned problems, a different approach is needed, following suggestions that have been provided by critical scholars (Green, 2017; Lareau, 2002; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2016). In particular, a localised approach of school improvement is needed to refrain from a one-size-fits-all approach of parental involvement. Local governments, schools and teachers should critically review the existing evidence and interpret these research findings in the light of their specific local context. In terms of Green (2017), we should move away from positivist assumptions that 'schools can function independent of their surrounding community, but realise the importance of collaboration between school, home, and community' and that there is 'one best model for school-community relations' (ibid., 374). We can move to interpretivist assumptions that 'schools and communities function independently', that there is 'no one best school-community model', and that 'school-community works best through dialogue, collaboration and understanding' (ibid., 377).

Taking a critical theory perspective, we should even move towards the assumptions that 'without a focus on justice and equity, schools operate as sites of social reproduction', that 'schools exist to interrupt inequity, oppression and inequality', and that 'schools can be critical sites for social change for traditionally underserved groups' (Freire, 1970; Green, 2017, 379). Recent developments in educational opportunities in the Netherlands indeed call for a more critical perspective on school–family partnerships.

In this light, new research should focus on existing parental involvement practices that add to diverging educational pathways for children. In the Dutch context, emerging research themes are the design, implementation, and evaluation of national and local policies that aim to support equal educational opportunities for all children. These policies in particular should include building resilience of schools and teachers towards the advantages that children from highly educated parents have because of the financial, social and cultural support that parents invest in their children's schooling. On the other hand, these policies should target teacher expectations and their responsiveness to the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as their competences and willingness to build enduring positive relations with families.

6 Conclusion

This chapter presents the case of parental involvement in the Netherlands. Parental involvement is rooted in the Dutch education system, because of the freedom of education. Parents' roles have shifted from the founders of education to advocates of their children's careers. Recently, consumerism has put pressure on parents to promote the academic achievements of their children and also to hold schools accountable for the academic careers of their children. In line with these shifts, policy and research in the Netherlands is strongly inspired by a positivist perspective

of providing effective education. In 2017, the Dutch government launched its government coalition agreement in which it proposed to strengthen relations between schools and parents in order to overcome educational inequalities, to improve schools, and to yield higher academic outcomes.

The Dutch government should be aware of disrupting parental involvement practices when highly educated parents persist in providing more and effective support to their children compared to their lower educated counterparts. This mechanism is very difficult to compensate for. Governments, schools and teachers will need to call for solidarity from highly educated parents, to put their capital to the best of the collective instead of placing only their own children at an advantage. Policy makers, schools and teachers should reflect on alternative ways to benefit from strong links between schools, families and communities if they really want to work towards a more equal and just education system. For educational researchers it is important to monitor the effects of parental involvement policies on the educational opportunities of children with different backgrounds and to provide empirical evidence for the effects of programmes that focus on inclusionary parent involvement policies and practices of schools and teachers.

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