CHAPTER 7

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF PUPILS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN REGULAR DUTCH PRIMARY EDUCATION
Abstract

Consistently with the international tendency towards inclusive education, inclusion of pupils with special needs is increasingly promoted in the Netherlands. This study addresses the state of affairs with regard to the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular Dutch primary classrooms. More specifically, the focus lies on four key themes within social participation: pupils with special needs’ friendships/relationships, contacts/interactions, social self-perception, and acceptance by classmates.

The outcomes of the study revealed that on average, pupils with special needs have a significantly lower number of friends and are less often members of a cohesive subgroup compared to their typical peers. In addition, pupils with special needs have less interactions with classmates, have more interactions with the teacher and are less accepted than pupils without special needs. The social self-perception of both groups of pupils does not differ. A comparison between pupils with different categories of disabilities revealed no significant differences.
7.1 Introduction

Educating pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms is an important objective of many countries. In the Netherlands too, attempts are being made to include children with special needs in regular schools. In 1990, a new government policy document, *Weer Samen Naar School* (WSNS, Together to School Again), was intended to stimulate inclusion of pupils with special needs in regular education (Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001). Under this policy, all primary schools and special schools for children who had been diagnosed as having learning and educational problems or as having mild intellectual disabilities were grouped into regional clusters. As a result, regular and special schools in the clusters started to collaborate (Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001). The WSNS policy aims at pupils with relatively mild special needs. With the introduction of the *Wet op de Expertise Centra* (Centres of Expertise Act) in August 2003, the inclusion of pupils with more complex special needs was stimulated as since then, parents of children with special needs have the right to choose between regular and special education for their child. Pupils with auditory, speech-language, motor, intellectual or multiple disabilities as well as severe behavioural, emotional and/or psychiatric problems can attend a regular school. This is funded with a pupil-bound budget (financial ‘backpack’). Pupils who receive such a budget have been officially labelled as having special needs on the basis of formal comprehensive assessment procedures. When such pupils attend a regular school they receive the budget, which caters for additional educational staff and teaching aids.

Recent data show that a growing number of parents have opted for regular education for their child with special needs, as the number of pupils with a pupil-bound budget attending regular education is increasing rapidly (De Greef & Van Rijswijk, 2006). The main motive of parents for sending their child with special needs to a regular school are their child’s increased social opportunities (Scheepstra, 1998, in Nakken & Pijl, 2002; Sloper & Tyler, 1992; Strayhorn & Strain, 1986). They hope their child can build positive relationships with typically developing peers.

However, international studies have repeatedly shown that including pupils with special needs does not automatically lead to an increase of friendships between pupils with special needs and their typical counterparts (Buysse, Davis Goldman
& Skinner, 2002). A study by Frostad and Pijl (2007) of Norwegian inclusive classrooms suggests that nearly one quarter of pupils with special needs have serious difficulties forming relationships in their peer group, while for their typical peers this is only 8 percent. It is known from several studies that within the group of pupils with special needs, pupils diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders and pupils diagnosed as having serious behavioural disorders find it particularly difficult to build relationships with typical peers and are at risk of becoming isolated in the classroom (Chamberlain, Kasari & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; De Monchy, Pijl & Zandberg, 2004; Garrison-Harrell, Kamps & Kravits, 1997). Pupils diagnosed as having intellectual disabilities are also at risk of isolation in the classroom (Nowicki, 2006).

This is worrisome, all the more because being isolated in the class might negatively influence the functioning of a pupil in different areas. Several studies have shown that pupils with (mild) disabilities, compared to their typical counterparts, report a higher degree of social dissatisfaction with their peer relationships (Taylor, Asher & Williams, 1987, in Gresham & McMillan, 1997) and show significantly higher loneliness scores (Heiman & Margalit, 1998; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Luftig, 1988; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Williams & Asher, 1992). In addition, the self-concept of pupils with special needs is found to be significantly lower (Bender & Wall, 1994; Cambra & Silvestre, 2003; Pijl, Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2008), which might lead to externalising problems (e.g. aggression) and internalising problems (e.g. anxiety) (Durrant, Cunningham & Voelker, 1990).

Because of the rather harmful long-term effects of negative social experiences at school (Bagwell, Newcomb & Bukowski, 1998; Nelson, Rubin & Fox, 2005; Parker & Asher, 1987; Terry & Coie, 1991), it is important to monitor the social participation of pupils. Social participation has been described as the presence of positive social contacts/interactions between pupils with special needs and their classmates; acceptance of them by their classmates; social relationships/friendships between them and their classmates; and the pupils’ own perception of having a positive relation with peers (Koster, Nakken, Pijl & Van Houten, in press).

Since it is known from other countries with a long tradition of inclusive education that pupils with special needs experience difficulties in their social participation, it is important to examine the state of affairs concerning the social participation of
pupils with special needs in the Netherlands. Resulting from the above, the following research questions are formulated:

1. *Does the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular Dutch primary schools differ from the social participation of pupils without special needs?*

2. *Does the social participation of pupils with various categories of disabilities differ?*

In answering the research questions, the focus will lie on the four key themes of social participation mentioned above: friendships/relationships, contacts/interactions, the pupil’s social self-perception and acceptance by classmates.

### 7.2 Method

#### 7.2.1 Introduction

This study addresses the state of affairs of the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular Dutch primary schools. The data were gathered by seven graduate students and the first author. As the method, including participants and instruments, is already described in detail in previous articles (Koster, Minnaert, Nakken, Pijl & Van Houten, 2008; Koster, Timmerman, Nakken, Pijl & Van Houten, 2008), this will only be addressed briefly in the current article. For more detailed information we refer to these previous articles.

#### 7.2.2 Respondents

The study took place in Grades 1 to 3 of regular Dutch primary schools with at least one pupil with special needs receiving a pupil-bound budget. Such a budget is allocated to pupils who, according to independent committees, meet the Dutch national criteria for a pupil-bound budget. Herewith, several categories of disabilities are distinguished, each with their own criteria. These involve, among other things, categories of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV) and intellectual ability, which are assessed by qualified psychiatrists or psychologists who operate independently from the committees.
Data collection took place in two periods. In each period, 300 regular primary schools were invited to participate in the study. In the first sub-sample, 75 classes of 53 schools were involved, comprising 244 pupils – 96 with special needs and 148 without. An overview of the categories of disabilities and their distribution in the first sub-sample is presented in the second and third columns of Table 1. Data collection focused on both the social self-perception of pupils and their acceptance by peers.

The second sub-sample, in which 105 classes of 66 schools took part, was applied to assess the friendships of pupils as well as their contacts and interactions in the classroom. The respondents were 346 pupils, 141 with special needs and 205 without. An overview of the types of disabilities and their distribution in the second sub-sample is presented in the fourth and fifth columns of Table 1. More detailed information about the sub-samples can be found in Koster, Timmerman et al. (2008).

Table 1. Distribution of pupils with special needs into categories of disabilities and gender in both sub-samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of disabilities</th>
<th>First sub-sample</th>
<th>Second sub-sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># pupils (% total)</td>
<td># boys (% disabilities category)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural disorder</td>
<td>13 (13.5%)</td>
<td>11 (84.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autistic spectrum disorder</td>
<td>42 (43.8%)</td>
<td>38 (90.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor disability</td>
<td>10 (10.4%)</td>
<td>9 (90.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual disability</td>
<td>11 (11.5%)</td>
<td>5 (45.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech-language disabilities</td>
<td>20 (20.8%)</td>
<td>13 (65.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96 (100%)</td>
<td>76 (79.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two pupils with learning disabilities and one pupil with chronic illness were involved in the second sub-sample, but because of the small numbers, these pupils were excluded from the analyses in this article.
7.2.3 Instruments to assess key themes

The manner in which each key theme is assessed is described briefly below. An extensive description of the selection procedure for each instrument can be found in Koster, Minnaert et al. (2008).

Assessment of friendships/relationships. The reciprocal friendship-nomination method was used to assess friendships. All pupils in the 105 classes of the second sub-sample were asked which classmates they considered to be their best friends. Following Pijl, Frostad and Flem (2008), pupils were allowed to give a maximum of five nominations. Pupils’ number of friendships could be calculated on the basis of their answers: friends were defined as two pupils independently selecting each other as best friend. As next to dyadic friendships several researchers stress the importance of examining membership of peer networks when studying inclusion (Cullinan, Sabornie & Crossland, 1992; Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Kindermann, 1993), it was decided to include assessment of cohesive subgroups in the study. The reciprocal nomination method to identify dyadic friendships was also used for the identification of cohesive subgroups. Subgroups of pupils have been identified through statistical analyses (see Analysis).

Assessment of contacts/interactions. Observations during lessons and free time took place in order to assess pupils’ contacts and interactions. Mainly based on Gresham’s observation categories (Gresham, 1982), an observation schedule was constructed in which initiated and received interactions with both classmates and the teacher were coded. The observers were five graduate students and the first author, who initially received three hours’ training using videotaped recordings of a classroom situation. After training, the agreement between observers was determined by calculating Cohen’s kappa for three major aspects: ‘interaction/no interaction between pupil and classmates’, ‘initiated/received interaction of pupil with classmates’ and ‘interaction/no interaction between pupil and teacher’. For these aspects, Cohen’s kappas were respectively 0.84, 0.76 and 0.72, suggesting reasonable agreement.

For practical reasons, observations took place only in some of the classes of the second sub-sample. In 58 classes observations were carried out during lessons and during free time. In each class, both the pupil with special needs and a randomly selected pupil of the same sex without special needs were observed for 20 minutes, divided into 5-minute periods. Each period of five minutes was
divided into 30 ten-second intervals. If an interaction occurred during that period, a tick was noted in the correct category (initiated interaction with classmate; received interaction with classmate; interaction with teacher). When more than one interaction occurred in a period, only the first one was noted.

**Assessment of social self-perception.** As there is no Dutch self-perception scale which is suitable for pupils in Grades 1, 2 and 3 (Koster, Minnaert et al., 2008), different instruments were applied for different age groups in the first sub-sample. In Grade 3 the social subscale of the Dutch version of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPP-C, Harter, 1985, in Berndt & Burgy, 1996) was used. In Dutch this profile is abbreviated as CBSK (Veerman, Straathof, Treffers, Van den Bergh & Ten Brink, 1997). The social subscale of the Dutch version of the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA, Harter & Pike, 1984; Van Rossum & Vermeer, 1992) was selected for pupils in Grades 1 and 2. In this scale, verbal items are supplemented by pictures. The reliability (Alpha) of the social subscale of the CBSK is 0.74 (Veerman et al., 1997) and that of the Pictorial Scale is 0.78 (Van Rossum & Vermeer, 1992), which is sufficient for research purposes (Nunnally, 1967).

In Grade 3 the social subscale of the CBSK was administered as a group test, while the social subscale of the Pictorial Scale in Grades 1 and 2 was administered individually. On the basis of the scores on the social subscale of the CBSK/Pictorial Scale, a self-perception score was calculated for each pupil. The minimum score of the CBSK (consisting of six questions) was 6, the maximum score 24. The score on the Pictorial Scale (consisting of five questions) could vary between 5 and 20. For both scales it applies that the higher the score, the higher the social self-perception.

**Assessment of acceptance by classmates.** The sociometric peer rating method was selected as instrument to assess acceptance of pupils in the first sub-sample. All pupils in the 75 classes were asked to fill in a rating scale containing the names of all classmates. They were asked to indicate on a 3-point scale to what degree they would like to play with each classmate. They could choose between the following three answering categories, each visually supported by smileys: 1) yes, I would like to ☺, 2) I don’t care ☹, and 3) no, I would not like to ☹. In Grades 2 and 3 the rating scale was administered as a group test, in Grade 1 it was administered individually: the researcher read out
loud the names of all classmates and the pupil mentioned how much s/he liked
to play with each of them.

Table 2 shows the instruments used to assess the four key themes and the
numbers of responding pupils (with and without special needs).

Table 2. Instruments to assess key themes related to number of pupils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th># pupils with special needs</th>
<th># pupils without special needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendships /relationships</td>
<td>Reciprocal nomination method</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacts /interactions</td>
<td>Observation schedule</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil’s social self-</td>
<td>Social subscale of CBSK</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perception</td>
<td>“ ” Pictorial Scale</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance by classmates</td>
<td>Sociometric Rating scale</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.2.4 Analysis

Friendships/relationships. The data resulting from the reciprocal friendship
nomination method were analysed using UCINET software (Borgatti, Everett &
Freeman, 1999) to identify friendships and NEGOPY 4.30 software (Richards,
1995) to identify subgroups and social roles in the classroom. Friendship was
defined as a reciprocal choice, implying that two pupils choose each other as
their best friend (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). A cohesive subgroup in the classroom
was defined as a set of at least three pupils who have more links with members
of the group than with non-members, are connected by some path to each of the
group members, and remain connected when up to 10% of the group is removed
(Richards, 1995). Aside from being a member of a cohesive subgroup, pupils
could occupy other roles in the classroom. These roles can be subclassified into
the following isolated roles (a-d) and participant roles (e-g) (Pearson & Michell,
2000; Richards, 1995):

a. isolate type 1: pupil with no reciprocated links;
b. isolate type 2: pupil with one reciprocated link, but not a dyad;
c. isolated dyad: a pair of pupils linked only to each other;
d. tree node: an isolate type 2 has only one link. If one or more of these
   isolates are attached to the first one, the first one is called a tree node;
e. liaison 1 (or direct liaison): a pupil who has more than 50% of his linkage with members of groups in general, but not with members of any single group. This pupil links groups directly;
f. liaison 2 (or indirect liaison): a pupil who has less than 50% of his linkage with members of groups. Most links will be with other liaisons. This pupil connects groups indirectly;
g. group member: a pupil who has more than 50% of his linkage with other members in the same group. The pupil must have at least two links with other members.

Roles a to d are called isolated, since pupils who occupy these roles are minimally connected to others in the group. The other roles (e-g) are categorised as participant roles, since pupils who occupy these roles have at least two links with other participants (Richards, 1995).

Contacts/interactions. The total number of (both initiated and received) interactions with fellow classmates and the total number of interactions with the teacher were calculated for each pupil.

Social self-perception. For each pupil a social self-perception score was calculated on the basis of the outcomes of the CBSK (Grade 3) /Pictorial scale (Grades 1 and 2). The raw scores of both scales were used for this purpose. For pupils in Grade 3 the score could range between 6 and 24, for pupils in Grades 1 and 2 the score could vary from 5 to 20.

Acceptance by classmates. Each pupil received scores from all classmates on a 3-point scale (see Instruments). Counting up all scores resulted in a raw score for each pupil. As the score a pupil could receive was strongly related to class size, Z-scores were calculated. This was done by subtracting the mean score of the class from the pupil’s raw score, then dividing the difference by the standard deviation of the class. As a result, scores of pupils could not only be compared with their classmates’ scores, but also with scores of pupils from other classes (comprising various numbers of pupils).

7.3 Results

Friendships/relationships. Based on the friendship nominations and allowing only reciprocal links, each pupil was categorised as a group member, tree node, dyad,
or one of the isolate or liaison types. The results for both the pupils with special needs and their typical classmates are presented in the top part of Table 3. The data show that pupils with special needs occupy more often an isolated (48.9%) and less often a participant role (51.1%) compared to their typical classmates (of whom 21.3% have an isolated and 78.7% a participant role). The difference between both groups of pupils is significant ($t(337) = -5.55, p<0.05$). Next to comparing the group of pupils with special needs with the group of typical pupils, a distinction was made between different categories of disabilities, since treating pupils with special needs as one homogenous group might reveal too negative a picture of the social participation of pupils with specific types of disabilities. We examined the differences in social roles between the five main categories of disabilities (see Respondents).

Table 3. Social roles of pupils with and without special needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isolated roles</th>
<th>Participant roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils without special needs</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils with special needs</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Category of disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autistic spectrum disorder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speech/language disability

| 27 | 100% | 7.4% | 22.2% | 7.4% | 0 | 3.7% | 3.7% | 55.6% |

Motor disability

| 25 | 100% | 24.0% | 28.0% | 4.0% | 4.0% | 16.0% | 0% | 0% | 7 |

Behavioural disorder

| 16 | 100% | 25.0% | 25.0% | 0% | 0% | 6.3% | 12.5% | 31.3% |

Intellectual disability

| 15 | 100% | 33.3% | 13.3% | 6.7% | 6.7% | 6.7% | 6.7% | 26.7% |

As presented in the bottom part of Table 3, more than half (55.6%) of the pupils diagnosed as having speech/language disabilities and half of the pupils diagnosed as having an autistic spectrum disorder are a group member, whereas only
26.7% of the pupils with an intellectual disability belong to a group of friends. Of these latter pupils, one third are totally isolated, which means they have no friends. About a quarter of the pupils with motor disabilities and the pupils with behavioural disorders also have no friends at all. ANOVA reveals that the differences between categories of disabilities are not significant ($F(4, 132)=2.37$, $p=0.06$).

In 34 of the 105 participating classes there were two or more pupils with special needs in the classroom. Since research has shown that pupils tend to associate with similar peers (Farmer & Farmer, 1996; McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001), we assumed that pupils with special needs who were in the same classroom would often be connected to each other (for instance, being a member of the same cohesive subgroup or being a dyad). However, it turned out that pupils with special needs were connected to each other in only eight of the 34 classes. More specifically, in six classes the pupils with special needs belonged to the same cohesive subgroup. In one class, two out of three pupils with special needs were a dyad and in another class one of the pupils with special needs was an isolate type 2, who was connected to the other pupil with special needs who was a group member. There were no connections between the pupils with special needs in the other 26 groups. The low number of pupils with special needs who were connected to each other might be related to the fact that in almost two-thirds (22) of the 34 classes, the categories of disabilities of the pupils differed. Besides, gender might have played a role. In ten classes, a boy with special needs and a girl with special needs were involved. None of these pupils were connected to each other. In elementary education (especially in the higher grades), boys’ and girls’ networks are often strictly separated, as children prefer to associate with peers of their own gender (Gest, 2006; Sippola et al., 1997, in Nowicki, 2006). There appeared to be thus little similarity between many of the pupils with special needs.

Next to examining the social role of pupils, their number of friendships was calculated. Analyses revealed that the average number of friends of pupils with special needs ($M=1.9$, $SD=1.3$) is significantly lower compared to that of typical pupils ($M=2.9$, $SD=1.4$, $t(340)=6.48$, $p<0.05$) (see second column in Table 4). This difference represents a moderate effect size, $ES=0.71$ (Cohen, 1992). In order to take into account possible differences between categories of disabilities, a further analysis was done. As presented in the second column of Table 4, the
mean number of friends is highest for pupils diagnosed as having speech/language disabilities (2.2), while this number is lowest for pupils diagnosed as having an intellectual disability (1.5). However, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the differences between categories of disabilities are not significant, at \( F(4, 132)=1.2, p=0.32 \).

Contacts/interactions. A comparison was made between pupils with and without special needs with regard to their initiated and received interactions with classmates and their interactions with the teacher. It turned out that pupils with special needs initiated fewer interactions with classmates (\( M=10.7, SD=8.3 \)) than pupils without special needs (\( M=14.7, SD=9.6 \)). This difference is significant at \( t(114)=2.39, p<0.05 \), and represents a moderate effect size (ES=0.44). The number of received interactions also differed significantly. Pupils with special needs received fewer interactions (\( M=7.1, SD=5.2 \)) than their typical classmates (\( M=11.0, SD=6.4, t(107.7)=3.58, p<0.05 \)), representing a moderate effect size (ES=0.67). In addition, it turned out that pupils with special needs (\( M=8.8, SD=9.7 \)) had significantly more interactions with the teacher than pupils without special needs (\( M=3.1, SD=3.7, t(116)=-4.2, p<0.05 \)). The effect size is large (ES=-0.86).

As presented in the third and fourth columns of Table 4, pupils diagnosed as having intellectual disabilities had the most interactions with classmates, whereas pupils diagnosed as having behavioural disorders had the most interactions with the teacher. The latter received the least interactions from classmates. Pupils diagnosed as having motor disabilities initiated the least interactions with classmates and had the least interactions with the teacher. However, the differences between the various groups of pupils are not significant: ANOVA revealed no significant group differences between pupils with different categories of disabilities in terms of initiated interactions with classmates (\( F(4, 53)=0.84, p=0.50 \)), received interactions with classmates (\( F(4, 53)=0.43, p=0.79 \)) and interactions with the teacher (\( F(4, 53)=1.00, p=0.41 \)). For an overview of the outcomes on contacts/interactions, see third to fifth columns of Table 4.

Social self-perception. In all grades, the social self-perception of pupils with and without special needs turned out to be comparable. In Grade 3, the mean score of pupils with special needs (\( M=17.5, SD=4.2 \)) did not differ significantly from the mean score of their typical counterparts (\( M=17.3, SD=4.0 \),
In Grades 1/2 the mean score of both groups of pupils did not differ significantly either (pupils with special needs, $M=14.2$, $SD=3.2$; pupils without special needs, $M=14.4$, $SD=2.3$; $t(164)=0.66$, $p=0.51$; $ES=0.08$).

As can be seen in the sixth column of Table 4, in Grades 1/2 pupils diagnosed as having an intellectually disability had the highest mean social self-perception score, whereas pupils diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders had the lowest. In Grade 3, pupils diagnosed as having behavioural disorders had the highest mean social self-perception score. Contrary to the outcomes of Grades 1/2, in Grade 3 pupils diagnosed as having intellectual disabilities had the lowest mean score.

ANOVA revealed that the group differences between pupils with various categories of disabilities are not significant: Grade 1/2: $F(4, 62)=1.72$, $p=0.16$; Grade 3: $F(4, 22)=0.85$, $p=0.51$. For an overview of the outcomes on pupils’ social self-perception, see sixth and seventh columns of Table 4.

**Acceptance by classmates.** A comparison between the acceptance score of pupils with and without special needs revealed that the former are significantly less accepted (pupils with special needs, $M=-0.71$, $SD=1.0$; pupils without special needs, $M=-0.06$, $SD=1.0$; $t(242)=4.9$, $p<0.05$). The effect size is moderate ($ES=0.64$).

As shown in the last column of Table 4, pupils diagnosed as having speech/language disabilities and pupils diagnosed as having motor disabilities are the most accepted by classmates, whereas pupils diagnosed as having intellectual disabilities are the least accepted. However, similarly to the assessment of the other key themes, ANOVA revealed no significant group differences between pupils with various categories of disabilities: $F(4, 91)=2.34$, $p=0.06$. 
7.4 Discussion

This study addressed the state of affairs concerning the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular Dutch primary schools. A comparison was made between the social participation of pupils with special needs and their classmates without special needs in Grades 1 to 3 and between pupils with different categories of disabilities. Social participation was subdivided into friendships/relationships, contacts/interactions, pupil’s social self-perception and acceptance by classmates.

It turned out that with regard to three key themes of social participation, the situation of pupils with special needs is less favourable compared to that of their typical counterparts. Concerning the key theme friendships/relationships, the outcomes revealed significant differences between these two groups of pupils. Pupils with special needs had on average fewer friends and belonged to a group of friends less often. Looking at the key theme contacts/interactions, pupils with special needs turned out to have fewer interactions with their classmates but more interactions with the teacher. Pupils with special needs are at a disadvantage too with regard to the key theme acceptance by classmates, as the degree to which they were accepted by their classmates turned out to be significantly lower than the degree of acceptance of typical pupils. The situation concerning the key theme pupil’s social self-perception is different: the social self-perception of pupils with special needs did not differ from that of pupils without special needs. It was expected that pupils with special needs would have a lower social self-perception than their typical peers, because of their lower number of friendships, their lower acceptance and their lower number of interactions with classmates. However, other studies also reveal that pupils with special needs tend to have a relatively high self-perception (Elias & Van Nieuwenhuijzen, 2001). According to Elias and Van Nieuwenhuijzen (2001) and Verhagen and Vermeer (1997), typically developing children do have a realistic picture of their social competence, while children with special needs might lack such a realistic picture. Research has revealed that some children, especially aggressive boys, tend to be positively biased in their self-perceptions (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 1990; Boivin & Begin, 1989; in Sletta, Valås & Skaalvik, 1996). Elias and Van Nieuwenhuijzen (2001) and Gresham and MacMillan (1997) state that the self-examination of competence of pupils with
special needs might be influenced by their need to protect themselves from negative evaluations. This flattering self-perception might also apply to (some of) the pupils with special needs in this study. Contrary to expectations, the analyses revealed no significant differences between pupils with different categories of disabilities on any of the four distinguished areas of social participation. The outcomes are fairly worrisome, as pupils with special needs perform significantly less well than pupils without special needs on three out of four important areas of social participation. However, the outcomes should be slightly nuanced. In the first place, taking into consideration the social participation of pupils with special needs on its own merits without making comparisons with typical pupils might provide some nuance. For instance, although pupils with special needs have fewer friends compared to their typical peers, the vast majority of the pupils with special needs do have one or more friends. This is a beneficial outcome, since having at least one friend in the classroom may be a source of companionship and emotional support (Ladd, 1990), and may protect against the negative effects of low acceptance (Asher et al., 1990; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Similarly, most pupils with special needs have a positive social self-perception, are accepted and have a reasonable number of interactions with peers.

Second, it is unknown how the pupils with special needs involved in the study would have functioned in special-education settings. The social participation of pupils with specific categories of disabilities in special schools might have been disappointing too. For instance, Mand (2007) found that not only in regular classes but also in special-education settings, a large proportion of pupils with behavioural disorders have a negative social position in the classroom. These pupils are to a comparable degree rejected in both educational systems. Hence in special education too there is a real chance of pupils’ social participation not working out that favourably.

Third, instead of treating the group of pupils with special needs as one homogenous group, a distinction between categories of disabilities seems to provide nuances for pupils with specific disabilities. Beforehand, pupils diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders, serious behavioural disorders and/or intellectual disabilities were expected to experience the most social participation problems, as research has revealed that these pupils find it particularly difficult to build relationships with typical peers and are at risk of becoming isolated in
the classroom (Chamberlain et al., 2007; De Monchy et al., 2004; Garrison-Harrell et al., 1997; Nowicki, 2006). Pupils diagnosed as having motor disabilities were expected to perform best on each of the four key themes of social participation, as their type of disability is expected to have the least impact on social functioning in the classroom. In addition, motor disabilities are visible and understandable for classmates, which fosters acceptance (Lewis, 1995, in Laws & Kelly, 2005). Contrary to expectations, there were no significant differences between pupils with various categories of disabilities. In order to reveal significant differences, the number of pupils should be larger. Further research, including larger subgroups of pupils with specific categories of disabilities, is recommended. A second factor which might have played a role concerns the severity and complexity of the disabilities involved in the study. This might be an explanation especially for the relatively high scores of pupils diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders. Most of the pupils with an autistic spectrum disorder were categorised as having a Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Relatively few pupils were categorised with other, more severe types of autistic spectrum disorders.

A final remark concerns the societal meaning of the findings of this study. In accordance with several other studies, the current study revealed that, compared to their typical peers, the social participation of pupils with special needs is assessed as lower. It follows that, although social participation is considered one of the most important outcomes of inclusion, for a substantial part of the pupils with special needs optimal social participation is not fully realised in practice. This is a striking situation: inclusion is promoted because it is assumed to be positive for pupils with special needs, but on the other hand we know that inclusion of these pupils might result in negative outcomes (e.g. loneliness, rejection) for some of them. Ethically, it is inadmissible to just notice that pupils with special needs have a larger chance of being socially excluded than their typically developing peers, and do nothing about it. Therefore, schools should take measures. One possible solution might be to rearrange the composition of the classroom (Pijl et al., 2008): placing small groups of pupils with special needs in a regular classroom, rather than single pupils, to ensure social cohesion among the pupils with special needs. This would respect the tendency of pupils to associate with similar peers (Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Male, 2007; McPherson et al., 2001). In that manner, both the stimulating environment of the regular
classroom and the presence of peers with comparable special needs are combined. This might apply particularly to pupils with hearing disabilities, who because of limited communication possibilities seem to prefer to associate with other peers with hearing disabilities in integrated settings (Minnett, Clark & Wilson, 1995). Further research into rearranging the classroom and into other interventions to improve social participation of pupils with special needs is highly recommended.

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7.5 References


