CHAPTER 8

GENERAL DISCUSSION
8.1 Introduction

During the last decades, the inclusion of pupils with special needs has been increasingly promoted. In the Netherlands, the government supported inclusion by amending legislation and regulations on special needs education. Since the pupil-bound budget was introduced into the Dutch educational system in August 2003, the number of pupils with special needs in regular education has increased (De Greef & Van Rijswijk, 2006). Many parents have socially motivated arguments in choosing regular education for their child. They hope and expect their child mixing with pupils without special needs will lead to social participation, thus implying their child will build friendships with typical peers and becomes a full member of the regular class. Furthermore, some parents assume that as a result of sending their child with special needs to a regular school, a change of attitude will arise among other children, possibly leading to positive long-term effects on attitudes towards disability in wider society. This focus on the social outcomes of including pupils with special needs fits with the reasoning behind inclusion. As described by Farrell (2000), inclusion implies that all pupils take a full and active part in school-life, are valued members of the school community and are seen as an integral member. Since this social dimension can be regarded as the core of inclusion, and because it is known from numerous studies (e.g. Asher & Coie, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987; Terry & Coie, 1991) that difficulties in this area (like being rejected or feeling lonely) can have negative consequences on pupils’ development, it is important to verify if this aspect of inclusion is achieved in practice.

This study looks at the social dimension of inclusion and consists of three phases. In the first phase (8.2.1), the initial experiences with the pupil-bound budget in regular Dutch primary education are central. The second phase (8.2.2) focuses on helping teachers accurately assess pupils’ social participation. To this end, the construction of a model of social participation, the development of a teacher questionnaire to assess the social participation of pupils with special needs and the subsequent assessment of the psychometric qualities of this questionnaire were addressed. The third phase (8.2.3) focuses on the consequences of inclusion on the social development of pupils with special needs by describing their current situation in this respect in regular Dutch primary schools.
8.2 Main findings

8.2.1 First experiences with the pupil-bound budget

The preparatory study described in Chapter 2, about the first experiences with the pupil-bound budget in regular Dutch primary education, revealed that the social position of pupils with special needs did not significantly differ from the social position of typical classmates. This outcome deviated from other studies (e.g. De Monchy, Pijl & Zandberg, 2004; Larrivee & Horne, 1991; Sale & Carey, 1995), in which it was revealed that pupils with special needs occupy a lower social position in class on average than their typically developing peers. Despite the fact that this outcome seems unexpected at first glance, it might be explained by two factors. First, the young age of the children (average age 5;7) could be a factor that played a role. Whereas during preschool, friendships are largely based on proximity and formed through change encounters, in later age periods children of like minds increasingly seek each other out and become friends because of shared interests and similarity (Schaffer, 1996). As the pupils in our sample were quite young (mainly preschoolers), this explains why the pupils with special needs were accepted to the same degree as pupils without special needs. Secondly, the overrepresentation of pupils with Down Syndrome, who in literature have traditionally been described as cheerful, happy and sociable (Walz & Benson, 2002), might partly explain why the social position of the pupils with special needs was comparable to that of typical pupils. Next to the pro-social behaviours of pupils with Down Syndrome, the visibility of their disability seems to foster acceptance (Lewis, 1995, in Laws & Kelly, 2005).

Further examination of the outcomes of the preparatory study revealed a discrepancy between the teachers’ views on the social position of the pupil with special needs and the classmates’ views (as measured with a sociometric questionnaire). Teachers’ views turned out to be far more positive, which is in accordance with the results of comparable studies in which teachers were more positive about the social position of pupils with special needs compared to the results of sociometric questionnaires completed by pupils (De Monchy et al., 2004; Scheepstra, 1998). In addition to this discrepancy between teachers’ and pupils’ views on the social position of pupils with special needs, another one was revealed. Whereas the teachers, parents and to a lesser degree the peripatetic teachers of the pupils with special needs were generally satisfied with the pupils’
cognitive, social and social-emotional development, a panel of independent assessors had some concerns about the development of one third of the pupils with special needs. Teachers and parents were especially more positive compared to the panel concerning pupils’ social and social-emotional development.

In concluding, the preparatory study indicated that, although the social position of pupils with special needs did not differ from that of their typical counterparts, it is important to study the social outcomes of inclusion, as teachers seem to overestimate pupils’ social(-emotional) development.

8.2.2 Construction of a model of social participation and developing a teacher questionnaire

The discrepancy in views on the social and social-emotional development of pupils with special needs, as shown in the preparatory study, led to the next phase of the study. The tendency of teachers to be too optimistic about the social and social-emotional development of the pupils with special needs is worrying seeing that they are the obvious adults to monitor pupils’ social and emotional development in school. It is only when teachers notice a pupil becoming isolated or teased that appropriate measures can be taken. This underlines the importance of developing an instrument for teachers which helps them assess the social participation of pupils with special needs. Thus, it was decided to construct a model of social participation and then develop an instrument for teachers aimed at helping them assess the social participation of pupils with special needs. This comprised the core of the second phase of the study. Based on an analysis of literature, a model of social participation, distinguishing four key themes ('friendships/relationships’, ‘contacts/interactions’, ‘social self-perception of the pupil’ and ‘acceptance by classmates’), was constructed. This formed the basis for the teacher questionnaire, named Social Participation Questionnaire. Examination of the psychometric qualities of the Questionnaire revealed that both the reliability and the construct validity (enclosing discriminant and convergent validity) were satisfactory.
8.2.3 Current situation regarding social participation of pupils with special needs

The outcomes with respect to the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular Dutch primary education are in line with those of many international studies, i.e. causes for concern. With regard to three key themes of social participation, the situation of pupils with special needs turned out to be less favourable compared to that of their typical counterparts. Concerning *friendships/relationships* the outcomes showed significant differences between these two groups of pupils. Pupils with special needs had less friends, on average, and were less often a member of a group of friends. Looking at *contacts/interactions*, pupils with special needs turned out to have less interaction with their classmates, whereas they had more with the teacher. Regarding *acceptance by classmates*, pupils with special needs were again at a disadvantage, as the degree to which they were accepted by their classmates was significantly lower compared to that of typical pupils. The situation deviated, however, for the key theme *pupil’s social self-perception* in that pupils with special needs did not differ from pupils without special needs in this respect. Both groups of pupils had on average a relatively positive social self-perception.

8.3 Reflections on the study

Some critical considerations need to be taken into account regarding this study. With regard to the *first phase*, in which the preparatory study took place, two points can be mentioned concerning the sample. The sample size was small (n=20) and pupils with Down Syndrome were overrepresented. However, it was not possible to involve a larger sample as the study was conducted at the behest of the Ministry of Education and had to be completed in a short time. The fact that more than one third of the pupils involved in the study were diagnosed as having Down Syndrome is related to the fact that at the time the study took place (the 2003-2004 school year), it was this group of pupils with special needs in particular who attended regular education. The increase in the number of pupils with other categories of disabilities attending regular education started later.

Another critical consideration is related to the *second phase* of the study and concerns the assessment of pupils’ friendships/relationships and
contacts/interactions. In order to validate the ‘Friendships/relationships’ subscale, pupils’ scores for this were compared with their number of friendships as derived from the reciprocal nomination method. This implies that the assessment of friendship was limited to quantitative data, namely their number of friendships. Also in assessing pupils’ interaction, only quantitative data were gathered, by counting the number of interactions. It might have been better when not only these data, but also qualitative data would have been gathered. These qualitative data could have led to a different weighting of the quantitative data, which would possibly have had a positive influence on the validation of the ‘Friendships/relationships’ and ‘Contacts/interactions’ subscales, as these include both the quality and the quantity of friendships and interactions.

Another reason why it could have been better to choose a more qualitative approach in the assessment of pupils’ friendships, is related to the fact that several researchers (e.g. Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Kutnick & Kington, 2005; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1993; Schneider, Wiener & Murphy, 1994) emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the quality of friendships in stead of merely focusing on quantity, since having one close friend might be more important for a child than having a larger number of less close friends. Although this might have been valuable for the study, it would also have been complex. Among other things, the quality of friendship presumably should have been assessed in different ways for the different age groups, as the characteristics of peer relationships vary for different age periods (Schaffer, 1996). In addition, compared to quantitative friendships measures, relating qualitative friendship measures to pupils’ scores on the Social Participation Questionnaire would have been far more difficult. This would probably have negatively influenced the validation process and as our aim was to validate the Social Participation Questionnaire, the quantitative approach was justifiable.

Regarding the reciprocal nomination method to assess friendships, a second critical consideration can be made. The answers of pupils to the question who they consider their best friends in the group, are subject to the issues of the day. This might especially apply to the youngest children. For instance, it might be possible a pupil nominated a classmate as friend because (s)he did something nice that day. At another moment, the pupil might not have chosen this classmate as a friend. Teachers’ ratings of the Social Participation Questionnaire statements are less dependent on such issues. The fact that the scores on the
Social Participation Questionnaire, which provide a balanced picture of pupils’ social participation, are compared with data that are dependent on the issues of the day, causes friction and might have negatively influenced the Questionnaire’s validation.

Another critical consideration, referring to both the second and the third phase, is the distribution of categories of disabilities. Although attempts were made to obtain a proportional distribution of categories of disabilities, some subgroups were overrepresented. In the studies described in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, pupils diagnosed as having an autistic spectrum disorder comprised over 40 percent of the total sample. The overrepresentation of these pupils might have had a negative influence on the score of the group of pupils with special needs as a whole, since such pupils in particular, together with pupils diagnosed as having severe behavioural disorders, have difficulty in building relationships with peers and are at risk of becoming neglected and rejected (Chamberlain, Kasari & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; De Monchy et al., 2004; Garrison-Harrell, Kamps & Kravits, 1997). However, this negative influence might be enervated a little, as most of the pupils with an autistic spectrum disorder were categorized as having a Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Relatively few pupils were categorized with other, more severe, types of autistic spectrum disorders. Nonetheless, it would have been better if there had been a proportional distribution of disabilities. Among other things, this would have enabled comparisons between pupils with different categories of disabilities and to discover significant differences between them.

Irrespective of these critical considerations with regard to the development and examination of the Social Participation Questionnaire, one might conclude that the Questionnaire is an instrument of good quality, which has the potential to become a valuable tool for teachers.

Regarding the third phase of the study, in which the current situation concerning the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular primary schools was central, several critical considerations can be made. Firstly with regard to the instruments used to assess pupils’ social participation (described in Chapter 7). This study was largely aimed at developing an instrument to help teachers assess the social participation of pupils with special needs. In addition, the study aimed to describe the current state of social participation of pupils with special needs in regular Dutch primary schools. Whereas in Chapters 4 to 6, the
development of the instrument for teachers (the Social Participation Questionnaire) and the examination of its psychometric qualities were central, in Chapter 7 the current situation was described. This latter was done without using the Social Participation Questionnaire. The Questionnaire was only in its definitive form after the analyses described in Chapter 6 were conducted and a new round of data collection was not possible. Nonetheless, the data gathered during the validation process were regarded as a suitable alternative to describe the current state of pupils’ social participation in regular education, as it provides interesting and relevant outcomes regarding each of the key themes. It would have been a lost opportunity if these would only have been used as input to validate the Questionnaire. In future research, the Social Participation Questionnaire is intended to be used on a large scale in order to provide an overview of the social participation of pupils with special needs.

Another consideration with regard to the third phase of the study concerns the interpretation of the outcomes. Those concerning the state of the social participation of pupils with special needs give rise for concern as in three out of four important areas of social participation, pupils with special needs perform significantly less well than typical pupils. However, the outcomes should be slightly nuanced.

First, taking into consideration the social participation of pupils with special needs on its own merits without making comparisons with typical pupils provides some nuance. For instance, although pupils with special needs have less friends compared to their typical peers, the vast majority of them (85.7%) 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, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 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, distinguishing different categories of disabilities, in stead of considering the pupils with special needs as one homogeneous group, provides some nuance for certain subgroups. In our study, the social participation of pupils diagnosed as having speech/language disabilities was assessed highest, followed by those diagnosed as having motor disabilities. The social participation of pupils diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders, behavioural disorders and
intellectual disabilities was assessed less positively. In stead of treating pupils with special needs as one homogenous group, it might be better to distinguish different categories of disabilities. Although the worrisome results regarding the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular education can be slightly ameliorated, they should be taken seriously. Some people might consider it unfair to compare pupils with special needs with their typical counterparts, as the former will probably perform less well in several areas. One could consider laying down specific standards for pupils with special needs, in stead of comparing them with the norms of typical pupils. However, this would be an artificial solution, as although teachers might take account of those norms, pupils and peers will not. Irrespective of having specific standards for pupils with special needs, the consequences of being lonely or of being neglected will remain the same. Thereby, although on first thoughts it might seem unfair to compare pupils with special needs with typical peers, it is justifiable to make the comparison.

8.4 Implications of the study

8.4.1 Implications for educational policy

Inclusive education mainly arose from an ideological perspective. It was thought that all pupils with special needs should be educated alongside their typical peers, which fitted with the wider societal tendency towards inclusion, implying no one should be excluded. Despite the fact that ideological reasons laid the foundation for the inclusion of pupils with special needs, it is crucial to evaluate these pupils’ development in regular education. In Chapters 2 and 7 of this study, the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular education is evaluated. The outcomes described in Chapter 7 in particular have important implications for educational policy, as they again show that the physical presence of pupils with special needs in regular education does not automatically lead to optimal social participation. Policymakers should therefore take into consideration that additional measures need to be taken in order to make inclusion successful.

Based on the outcomes of the third phase of the study, in stead of concluding that additional measures need to be taken in regular education, one might
conclude that it is better to send pupils with special needs to special schools. After all, on three out of four important areas of social participation, these pupils perform significantly less well than their typical counterparts. However, this is a too simplified conclusion, as it is unknown how the pupils with special need in the study would have functioned in special education settings. Possibly, the social participation of pupils with specific categories of disabilities in special schools might have also fallen short of expectations. 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 unpopular in both education systems to a similar degree. Related to this, Karsten, Peetsma, Roeleveld and Vergeer (2001) found little evidence to support the idea that at-risk pupils make less progress, in academic or psychosocial development, in regular education settings than those in special schools. The outcomes of the studies of Karsten et al. (2001) and Mand (2007) indicate that the social participation of pupils with special needs does not automatically improve when they attend a special school, as in both regular and special education settings some pupils are seen as outsiders and are at risk of becoming isolated.

8.4.2 Implications for teacher training

As the number of pupils with special needs attending regular education is growing, teacher training should increasingly aim at taking this group into account. It would be advisable to distinguish different categories of disabilities in teacher training, since this study has shown that the social participation of pupils with different categories of disabilities differs.

In school curricula, the focus is mainly on achieving academic skills, like reading and writing and, in keeping with a modern competitive society, the importance attached to examining these subjects is increasing. As a result, in teacher training, academic skills have priority, with too little attention seemingly paid to social aspects of education. It is vital to emphasize these social aspects more, as a pupil’s wellbeing in the classroom seems to be a prerequisite for acquiring academic skills. Several studies (e.g. Asher & Coie, 1990; Ollendick, Weist, Borden & Greene, 1992) have shown that when a child becomes isolated or is rejected in the classroom, this negatively affects school performance. If teacher
training were to focus more on pupils’ social participation, teachers might be able to notice problems earlier in this area and take measures. It is anticipated this would then positively influence pupils’ performances in several areas.

8.5 Further research

The Social Participation Questionnaire helps teachers assess the social participation of pupils with special needs. When teachers notice problems in this area, they need to know which interventions can be arranged. Therefore, it would be advisable to study possible interventions.

In former years, interventions were usually solely aimed at the pupil with special needs, of which the often used social skills training is an example. The long-term effects of this kind of training are often disappointing (Pijl, 2005). One possible explanation is that classmates’ image of the pupils who participate in the training does not change and they do not alter their attitude and behaviour. As a result the trained pupils do not have many possibilities to practice their new skills: they will not see the benefit of their new skills and after some time the acquired skills will fade away (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). From an educational (orthopedagogical) perspective, interventions involving both pupils with special needs as well as classmates and/or teachers seem more appropriate. In stead of focusing on the pupil with special needs, the functioning of pupils within their environment and the characteristics of this environment should be pivotal. Analysing environmental factors and arranging changes to the environment should be central to any interventions.

Several factors, which might influence a pupil’s social participation could be directive for the nature of the interventions. A first factor concerns the characteristics of pupils, with and without special needs, in inclusive classrooms, as these characteristics might well influence pupils’ social position in the classroom. Recent studies suggest that the ‘similarity hypothesis’ (Male, 2007) might be one of the possible causes of social problems of pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms. This hypothesis is based on the idea that children have the tendency to associate with similar peers. This tendency seems to be a disadvantage for pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms, as their special needs make them different from their typical peers. In view of the
effectiveness of interventions, it is important to discover the relation between pupils’ characteristics and their social participation in the classroom.

*Teacher characteristics* are a second factor, as teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education might influence their acting in the classroom. It is widely acknowledged that the view of teachers is a key element in successfully implementing inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Monsen & Frederickson, 2004).

Third, *the organisation of the class and school* are factors which should be taken into consideration within the scope of interventions. For instance, the attitude of school staff in schools with much experience in inclusive education might differ from that of a school staff who lack experience, which might influence a pupil’s social participation. In addition, preconditions (like teaching aids, support staff) could be relevant aspects.

A final factor concerns *parent characteristics*, as the outcome of inclusion seems to depend to a large extent on the attitudes of parents of children with and without special needs (Smith Myles & Simpson, 1990).

In concluding, when more research is aimed at studying the factors which influence the social participation of pupils with special needs, and when these factors are taken into consideration when drawing up interventions, this is expected to contribute to optimising the situation of pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

### 8.6 References


