This thesis is aimed at the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular primary education, in particular at developing an instrument for teachers to assess the social participation of these pupils.

Chapter 1 describes the background and rationale of the study. Over the past century, the Netherlands has built up a comprehensive system of special education. During the last decades, however, the policy has been to promote the inclusion of pupils with special needs in regular education. A large step was made in August 2003 with the so-called Wet op de Expertise Centra (Centres of Expertise Act), which enables pupils with auditory, speech/language, motor, intellectual or multiple disabilities as well as severe behavioural, emotional and/or psychiatric problems to qualify for a pupil-bound budget (the so-called ‘backpack’) and gives parents the opportunity to choose between regular and special education for their child. An increasing number of parents have decided to send their child with special needs to a regular school because they envisage more opportunities for their offspring’s social participation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the first experiences with the pupil-bound budget in regular primary education. A first impression is given of the cognitive, social and social-emotional development of twenty, mainly young, pupils (average age 5;7 years), with a pupil-bound budget several months after their placement at a regular primary school. It looks at the assessments of teachers, parents and peripatetic teachers regarding the children’s development. Teachers’ satisfaction about pupils’ cognitive development varied, but in the main they were satisfied about pupils’ social and social-emotional development. A notable fact in all assessments is that the parents were somewhat more positive, while the peripatetic teachers were slightly more cautious when assessing pupils’ development. The outcome of a sociometric questionnaire, completed by all pupils of groups with one or more pupils with special needs, provides a more negative picture than that of parents, teachers and peripatetic teachers. This showed that nine out of twenty pupils with special needs were typified as ignored or rejected, although this was not mentioned by teachers, parents or peripatetic teachers. In fact the results also showed that some of the pupils without special needs were ignored or rejected and the percentage did not differ significantly from the percentage of pupils with special needs who were.

Since the study was aimed at the initial experiences with pupil-bound funding, it was impossible to compare the development of pupils with such a
budget with the development of a control group. As an alternative, a panel of independent assessors, consisting of five experienced peripatetic teachers, were asked to judge the cognitive, social and social-emotional development of the twenty pupils with special needs based on anonymous pupil dossiers. The outcomes show that the panel had concerns about the development of 35 per cent of the pupils, which deviates from the views of teachers, parents and, to a lesser degree, the peripatetic teachers. On the other hand, the panel was positive about an equal percentage of other pupils with special needs.

Chapter 3 concerns a literature review aimed at elucidating the social dimension of inclusion in education. The review shows that frequently used concepts like social integration, social inclusion and social participation are considered synonymous by many researchers. In this study, social participation was chosen as a central concept. Based on the literature review, it was concluded that four key themes can be distinguished within the concept of social participation: friendships/relationships, contacts/interactions, social self-perception of the pupil and acceptance by classmates. Subsequently, on the basis of these themes a model of social participation was constructed.

Chapter 4 describes how the model of social participation was used to develop a teacher questionnaire intended to help teachers accurately assess the social participation of pupils with special needs. The first experiences with the quality of the Questionnaire, which comprised four subscales representing the four key themes of social participation, are also described. The outcomes concerning the psychometric qualities turned out to be promising, but should be interpreted with caution because of the small sample. The results of a confirmatory factor analysis (Multiple Group Method) largely supported the division of social participation into four key themes. The reliability of the Questionnaire turned out to be high, whereas the subscales’ reliability varied from moderate to high. Based on these results, a few adaptations were made. It was concluded that a large-scale study should be undertaken to examine the quality of the Questionnaire more in-depth. Chapters 5 to 7 report on this.

Chapter 5 addresses the psychometric qualities of the Social Participation Questionnaire. By means of a non-parametric item response analysis, (Mokken Scale Analysis), the quality of the Questionnaire and its subscales were examined. Based on the analysis results, ten statements were removed from the Questionnaire, resulting in a definite version consisting of 24 statements. The
outcomes of the analyses showed that the four subscales were intermediate to strong. Mokken’s double monotonicty model (DMM) turned out to fit well for each subscale. The subscale scores were on an ordinal scale and the separate statements were invariantly ordered. Furthermore, the subscale scores are comparable across pupils with and without special needs. In addition, the outcomes of the analyses supported the model of social participation, in which four key themes are distinguished. The Questionnaire as a whole and its subscales were found to be reliable. Finally, evidence was obtained for the Questionnaire’s discriminant validity.

Chapter 6 focuses on the convergent validity of the Social Participation Questionnaire. The correlations between the Questionnaire’s four subscales and external criteria turned out to be disappointing: some correlations were relatively weak and some correlation patterns deviated from expectations. Consequently, there was no conclusive evidence for the Questionnaire’s convergent validity. A second order analysis, a confirmatory factor analysis using the LISREL program, did provide evidence for the convergent validity of the Questionnaire. Based on the outcomes of the Questionnaire’s psychometric qualities, it can be concluded that the Questionnaire can become a valuable tool for teachers in helping them notice problems regarding the social participation of pupils with special needs in time. Further research into the utility of the Questionnaire and into the meaning of scores is advisable.

Chapter 7 makes use of the research data employed for developing and assessing the quality of the Social Participation Questionnaire. On the basis of this research data the current state of affairs regarding the social participation of pupils with special needs in regular primary education is described. The outcomes are quite worrisome, as in three out of four important areas of social participation, pupils with special needs perform less well than their fellow pupils without special needs. However, the outcomes should be seen in context. The vast majority of the pupils with special needs involved the study are being accepted, have one or more friends in the classroom, have a reasonable number of interactions with classmates and have a positive social self-perception.

In Chapter 8 the main findings of this study are summarized and the methodological difficulties considered. In the light of this the implications for educational policy and for educational practice are discussed and suggestions for future research made.