

Educational Disadvantage Indicators

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The pupil weighting system is the core financial element of the Dutch Educational Disadvantage Policy. This policy departs from the idea that children who grow up in an environment where specific “cultural capital” is lacking, face a grave risk of developing severe educational arrears right from their start in school. To compensate for this “deficit”, primary schools and other educational and welfare institutions receive additional budgets from the Ministry of Education they can use for providing extra help to the policy’s target groups. The amount of extra budget is based on socio-economic and ethnic factors in the children’s home situation. Since its implementation in 1974 the system has been changed several times. These changes are described here. For the 2019/20 school year a new system has been developed. Some points of criticism are presented; the most important is that there is no evidence that the system which has cost some 20 billion euros has been effective.

Keywords: educational disadvantage policy ; the Netherlands ; pupil funding ; educational opportunity ; primary education ; combating disadvantage

1. Background

The pupil weighting system is the core financial element of the Dutch Educational Disadvantage Policy (EDP). EDP departs from the idea that children who grow up in an environment where specific cultural capital (cf. Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman), which is assumed to be a prerequisite for an optimal school career, is lacking, face a grave risk of developing severe educational arrears right from their start in school. To compensate for this “deficit” in the home situation, primary schools and other educational and welfare institutions receive additional budgets from the Ministry of Education they can use for providing extra help to the target groups of the policy.

2. Educational Stimulation

During the first phase of the EDP (which was then called the Educational Stimulation Policy and focused on native-Dutch children) that started in 1974, the schools received money to appoint extra teachers based on the number of children from parents in a manual worker profession.

3. Educational Priority

In 1986 a new policy was introduced: the Educational Priority Policy. From then on schools received extra budgets based on three family situation indicators: the parents’ profession (manual worker), their education (lower vocational education), and their country of birth (non-Western immigrant). The main target groups of the policy then were native-Dutch and immigrant children with parents who have a low educational and occupational level. The more target group pupils at a school, the more staffing resources the school received. In order to determine the staff numbers the pupils were ‘weighted’. Immigrant pupils with parents that have a low educational or occupational level were awarded a weighting factor of 1.9. Native-Dutch pupils with a low educational and occupational level received a weighting factor of 1.25. The rest of the pupils, which also included immigrant pupils with parents who have a higher educational or occupational level, simply counted as one pupil; they were referred to as 1.0-pupils. Simply put, a school with only 1.9-pupils would receive almost twice as much budget than a school with only 1.0-pupils.

4. Educational Disadvantage

In the course of the years, the pupil funding system has been reconsidered several times. The most important changes implemented included: tightening the definition of low education level for native-Dutch parents; dropping professional level as an indicator; and then also dropping ethnicity (or more precisely: parental country of birth). Reasons for these changes were, among others, the high number of Dutch working class children relative to those in other OECD countries; the

increase of immigrant children, and especially the third generation that could not be captured by the parental country of birth criterion any longer; and the changing political climate as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks in the US and the murder of the anti-immigrant populist Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. In 1998 the policy was renamed as the Educational Disadvantage Policy. As of 2006 there remained only one indicator, namely parental level of education: the more students with low- and very low-educated parents a school catered for, the higher the extra budget the school received. Three categories were distinguished: a pupil weight of 1.2 for very low-educated parents, a weight of 0.3 for low-educated parents, and a weight of 0.0 for parents with an intermediate or higher education; the two first categories were considered the disadvantaged pupils, the latter category the non-disadvantaged pupils.

In the 2013/14 school year, the total budget for the student weight funding scheme in the primary education sector amounted to €729 million, which was about 6.6% of the total budget for this sector. In that year, 89% of the primary school student population had a weight of 0.0, 6% a weight of 0.3, and 5% a weight of 1.2. In the 2018/19 school year the number of target group pupils had decreased considerably: on a total of 1,405,527 pupils in primary education, 4% had a weight of 0.3, also 4% a weight of 1.2 and the rest, i.e. 92%, had a weight of 0.0. In the 2008/09 school year, the average budget for a 0.0 student was €4,900, for a 0.3 student €6,900, and for a 1.2 student €10,800. Consequently, for a 1.2 student a school received more than twice as much as for a 0.0 student.

5. A new system

In the 2019/20 school year a new phase of the EDP will commence. The data necessary to compute the schools' extra budgets until then had to be collected by the schools themselves, which led to mistakes and fraud. In addition, there were severe doubts as to the validity of the indicator(s). When the system was developed in 1986, the validity coefficient of the three indicators was estimated to be around 0.50, or 25% of explained variance in school success. The present pupil weight indicator (based solely on parental educational level) has a validity coefficient of no more than 0.20 and 4% of explained variance. A consequence of low validity is that many pupils who need extra funding do not receive it (the false negatives) and many pupils who do not need it do receive extra funding (the false positives). In the new system, schools are no longer responsible for collecting the pupils' background information. This information is now centrally available in population data sets at Statistics Netherlands (CBS); this bureau also computes the amount of extra money each school is entitled to. In addition, the number of indicators is increased substantially. They now are: educational level of both father and mother; country of birth of mother; length of stay in the Netherlands of mother; mean level of education of all mothers at a school; whether the parents are in debt repayment. In the 2019/20 school year a total of €750 million will be awarded to schools and preschool institutions based on the new weighting system.

6. Criticism

Before the new system is being implemented it already received a lot of criticism. One point is that as the schools no longer collect the background information on their pupils' home situation, they now do not know who the target group pupils are for whom they receive the extra money. In addition, as a consequence it is impossible to properly evaluate the new system in terms of effects on the pupils' achievement, as the schools do not know on whom to spend the extra budgets. Another point of criticism is that the system's validity probably has hardly increased and that therefore the number of false positives and false negatives largely remains the same.

But there also are more fundamental problems. Because of the Dutch constitutional "freedom of education", schools have almost total freedom in how they use the extra resources. The extra money is awarded in the "lump sum system" and not earmarked. In a study conducted in the 1990s many of the schools indicated that they even didn't know that they received extra budgets to combat educational arrears of target group pupils. In a recent study most of the schools said they used the extra money to create smaller classes and appoint teacher assistants. The point is, however, that there is no evidence whatsoever that both options are effective in improving the educational chances of the EDP target groups. In fact, since the EDP came into effect 45 years ago, there has not been conducted any proper evaluation study into the effects of the funding system. This means that after spending a total of an estimated 20 billion euros on this system, it still is completely unknown what its effects are. What clearly is needed is research into the effectiveness of the disadvantage policy in general, and the funding system in particular.

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