



## Possibilities and limits of school integration of students from Southern Europe in Amsterdam schools

## Posibilidades y límites de la integración escolar del alumnado procedente del sur de Europa en las escuelas de Ámsterdam

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### Background

In recent decades, the integration of immigrants into society has become one of the main concerns of policy makers in Europe. Many European countries face the challenge of integrating different groups of immigrants residing within their borders for different reasons and education plays a key role in this process. From a historical perspective, the Netherlands is a country that traditionally has a continuous flow of immigrants. The city of Amsterdam represents the main receiving pole of foreign population in the country and is also attractive for many immigrants with skilled jobs. Some sociologists claim that, despite the official vision of 'tolerance', there is a current of racism in Dutch culture, which other authors have described as strongly monoculturalist and intolerant of pluralism. The 'new racism' is based on the way cultural differences are perceived and their inability to assimilate into Dutch culture gives them the status of perpetual outsiders. Taking into account the existing literature and what has been published so far, further research on intercultural education is of great interest due to the increasing presence of foreign pupils in schools. Much research has been done on Turkish and Moroccan pupils, who are considered culturally distant, but little is known about the educational attention to "southern Europeans", who are closer, but not quite similar, as we will see throughout this paper.

### Aims

This research has focused on establishing the degree of integration of Italian and Spanish pupils in the Dutch school system, exploring their family context, finding out about the most frequent learning difficulties, analysing the educational attention they receive and determining whether the actions carried out ensure a good reception and, if not, proposing possible ways of improvement.

### Method & procedures

For the development of this work, we have used a qualitative methodology, as we are interested in learning about and exploring the phenomenon of the integration of pupils in Amsterdam from the perspective of the participants and their experience. In the process of methodological construction, we have opted for in-depth interviews and focus groups with families, students and teachers. Specifically, 16 interviews were conducted with parents, two focus groups with students and six interviews with teachers. We have used a non-probabilistic and intentional sampling, of the "snowball" type, whereby some individuals from the population are located and these lead to others who lead to others until we have a sufficiently large sample.

### Results & discussion

What emerges from this work is that the main problem, both from the point of view of families and teachers, is learning Dutch, the difficulty of learning this language, which is so different for Italians and Spaniards. It is essential to know the language in order to communicate with classmates, teachers and families and it is important for integration. It is also fundamental to obtain good results in the Cito test (an assessment that test knowledge of Dutch and comprehension, mathematics, world orientation and study skills. Based on the

results of this test, teachers recommend the most appropriate level of secondary education for the child) and thus to gain access to certain secondary schools, especially those leading to university education. Both schools and families agree that the lack of vocabulary and the different level of native speakers influence performance and results in the Cito test. The tests are designed for a monolingual population and often do not reflect the language bilingual pupils know. Although teachers generally recognise that this type of assessment based on the Cito test is appropriate for all students and should be changed, the reality is that access to university is very difficult for Italian and Spanish students. Teachers do not see this as a problem, because they believe that in the Netherlands you can have a good job without a university education and that this is a fair system, which gives more opportunities to the best. From our point of view, in the Dutch system it does not only depend on the abilities of the student but on the opportunities and the "cultural capital" with which everyone starts, i.e., the set of forms of knowledge, education, skills and advantages that a person has and that give him or her a higher status in society. In the discourse of the Dutch teachers interviewed, different degrees of discrimination according to ethnic group are detected: Turks and Moroccans seem not to be assimilable because they are considered very different culturally, and Southern Europeans are considered culturally assimilable, although language represents the main barrier to integration, interpreted as assimilation.

### Conclusion

The main measure implemented by the Dutch education system for foreign pupils is additional language support, but this measure fails to put these pupils on an equal footing with native pupils in terms of school performance, maintaining specific difficulties related to language and not to learning the content itself. The position of the education system is assimilationist, with the disappearance of the teaching of the language of origin that was taught decades ago and which would have been the basis of additive bilingualism and not subtractive bilingualism as it is today. It seems a contradiction to support the use of the mother tongue to achieve a higher academic level in the local language, but the benefits can be explained by the concept of linguistic interdependence, i.e., the two languages reinforce each other and therefore the pupil learns both. Another remaining challenge in relation to foreigners, which is of serious concern to Dutch teachers, is the existence of 'black' schools (with a high percentage of non-Western minorities) and 'white' schools (with a high percentage of native Dutch pupils), which can clearly have a negative impact on pupils and perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices about ethnic minorities. Thanks to free school choice, middle-class parents are more mobile in finding the 'right' school. Schools with "good" or "bad" reputations and specific pedagogical/religious profiles have a different, historically cultivated geography, which means that the range of options for parents is not the same. Addressing school segregation is a much more complex challenge than expanding or limiting parental choice. Educational segregation is a social problem that must be a common priority for policy makers and school board members.

**Keywords:** education, European students, multiculturalism, Netherlands

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