

## **Integration Illusion: The Dutch's Black and White Schools**

*by Ashley Chin, Sümeyye Ekmekci, Esmeralda Herrera*

Amsterdam, a city proud for its tolerant identity, faces a dilemma of segregation after two of its public schools controversially pointed out their need for more White Dutch students, in order to make the school atmosphere more inclusive and diverse.

“Is this white enough for you” were the words printed across the shirts of young primary school students as they took to the streets of their neighborhood on May 2015. Dutch students from primarily Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds handed out pamphlets requesting White Dutch parents to take a closer look at their school and enroll children there. Not a simple task: The Netherlands has a history of school segregation along religious-political lines. Students either went to Catholic, protestant, or secular schools. At the same time, there still existed segregation based on socio-economic status. Within the last 40 years as Netherlands has become a more diverse city, ethnicity became yet another, perhaps more prominent, part of school segregation.

Both primary schools, De Avonturijn and Catharina School took this highly controversial stand as they were faced with school closure. Both schools are located in ethnically mixed neighborhoods and yet are considered ‘black’ schools because they have over 60 percent students from ethnic backgrounds. They have over 95 percent *allochtonen* students- a term used in The Netherlands to describe someone from a non western background. The problematic terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ schools refer to the high concentration of ethnic minorities or White Dutch. While white refers to native white Dutch students, black refers to ethnic backgrounds such as Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese, and Antillean descent, regardless of ethnic background and generation.

Although 95 percent of the students enrolled in De Avonturijn and Catharina come from migrant backgrounds, their principals explain that this is not representative of the mixed ethnic neighborhood. White Dutch students are being put into schools where there is a higher concentration of White Dutch because parents want their children to have a better education elsewhere. As the racial imbalance increases, both these schools have seen enrollment drops and increasing fear of school closure. This begs the following question: is educational segregation bigger than an issue at these two primary schools or can it steep into societal issues of a 21st century society, how should we prepare to create a multicultural society? What kind of intervention is needed in order for segregation to not become the norm in our multicultural society?

## **‘Black’ and ‘White’ Schools in The Netherlands: A History of Pillarization**

Segregation in the Dutch education system is not a novel phenomenon. By virtue of a general system of ‘pillarization’ there have been separate public, Catholic and Protestant schools in the Netherlands for decades. Pillarization is part of the Dutch tradition of tolerance, in which religious groups coexisted separately in the public sphere but interacted on governmental levels. On the one hand, this meant that the Dutch society was often regarded as being a tolerant and relatively diverse society in which different religions and ideologies each had their own place. On the other hand, pillarization has also been considered as fostering a segregated society. Every pillar, for example, had their own social institutions, newspapers, broadcasting organizations, schools and political parties.

Even though pillarization has increasingly lost its significance since the 1960s, the current education system is still reflective of the Dutch pillarized past. There are two principles central to the Dutch education system that stem from the Dutch history of pillarization, and that have enabled educational segregation. First, parents in the Netherlands are completely free to choose which primary or secondary school their children will attend. [Guido Walraven](#) from the Dutch National Knowledge Center for Mixed Schools has described that socio-ethnic school segregation is partly a result of parents’ freedom to choose a school for their children. Previously, most parents sent their children to the schools of the pillar that they were affiliated with. Now, as pillarisation has decreased, parents still enjoy complete freedom to choose the schools that they deem best- most often, such schools resonate with the parents’ own cultural backgrounds. Second, Article 23 of the Dutch constitution, which was passed in 1917, guaranteed equal government funding for both public and private schools. This means that there are equal possibilities for schools from different traditions to be formed, provided that such schools can attract a sufficient number of students. As a result of this history, only 30 percent of the Dutch primary school pupils now attend public schools, whereas the other 70 percent attends schools with a specific religious orientation or a specific educational program.

As said before, the persistence of the pillarization system has paved the way to the current state of segregation in the educational environments of the Netherlands. In addition to pillarization, immigration flows from the former Dutch colonies as well as the influx of Turkish and Moroccan workers during the 1960s and 1970s led to further residential segregation within the Dutch society. Consequently, it became evident that high numbers of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands were concentrated in specific areas, and as a result, their children would often attend the schools that were most nearby. Residential segregation thus often intensified the already existing gaps between different ethnic groups in the education system. This does not mean, however, that residential segregation can always account for segregation in educational environments. By way of explanation, schools in mixed neighbourhoods are often not reflective of their neighbourhood’s population. As mixed

neighbourhoods are comprised of a mixture of white Dutch residents and residents from an ethnic minority background, one might expect the school's population to be mixed as well. However, the opposite is often true: De Avonturijn and the Catharina schools function as two examples of ethnically segregated schools located in mixed neighbourhoods.

These ethnically segregated schools are topics of discussion in relation to educational achievements, intergroup relations and racism. A common misconception is that 'white' schools are qualitatively stronger, and therefore many parents prefer schools with no or low levels of ethnic mixing. However, according to a [study](#) by Deborah Jongejan and Jochem Thijs, ethnic segregation in the education system can lead to greater social distance between ethnic groups and can also have negative consequences for the educational achievements of both [autochtoon](#) and [allochtoon](#) students. Similar concerns about social distance between different ethnic groups have also been voiced by De Avonturijn and Catharina, which are located in mixed neighborhoods and yet have a 95 percent *allochtoon* student population. In order to attract more white students, the primary schools organized a campaign during which they distributed flyers, explaining how all children have to learn together, and to grow up together as they will be part of the same society. (*Ze moeten het straks samen doen, dus ook samen opgroeien*).

During the period 2008-2011, twelve cities in the Netherlands have implemented pilot projects in primary education with the goal of achieving a school populations that mirrors the diversity of the neighborhood. Double waiting lists, information meetings for parents and facilitation of parent initiatives for more mixed schools were all part of these projects. Although some cities still implement these policies, the Dutch government no longer labels these activities as a means to prevent segregation. The issue of ethnic segregation in schools can be seen as seeking a balance between freedom of choice and equity. As the freedom of choice is considered to be too important, however, there is no political action against school segregation.

### **Consequences of Education Segregation**

As the political landscape has not presented initiatives in order to effectively increase diversity in segregated schools, the issue remains unsolved. In societies where the multi-ethnic composition increasingly diversifies, such as in The Netherlands, segregated educational institutions imply various complicated effects. Some of these consequences pertain to the segregation itself, while others can be assigned to the problematic classifications of 'black' and 'white' schools.

Over the years, negative images and associations have been attributed to the existence and operations of 'black' schools. According to Roger Baggen, the principal of the Catharina school, 'black' schools are generally believed to provide education of lesser quality: lower test results, and language delays

amongst children with migrant backgrounds are only some of the examples that have stopped parents from sending their children to 'black' schools. Bas van der Geest, the principal of the Avonturijn, is of the opinion that such prejudices are unfounded. He argues that parents often overlook the huge progress that children make in schools with a high concentration of children from migrant backgrounds. Van der Geest continues to explain that, unlike the general expectations society has created of 'black' schools, these children leave primary school with the same Cito-test score as the national average – achievements worth mentioning when one considers the language delays the children had when they first started their school careers. The continuous polarization between the populations of 'white' and 'black' schools inhibits the possibility of eliminating the unfounded prejudices, and perpetuates the negative perceptions that have become concomitant to the existence of 'black' schools.

More significantly, the freedom of choice parents have and the importance this freedom has gained over the years, has led to the so-called process of 'white flight.' 'White flight' is a process through which white Dutch parents continually decide to enroll their children in 'white' schools outside of their home area. Such decision-making is mostly motivated by three general beliefs. First, it is often expected that the quality of 'white' schools is higher than that of 'black' schools. Second, white Dutch parents are often afraid that their children will not receive the same amount of attention in 'black' schools, as they assume that children from migrant backgrounds need more support. Third, according to Roger Baggen, white Dutch parents often prefer their children to engage with other native Dutch children. In a society that is as multicultural as that of the Dutch, this may be considered highly problematic. The process of 'white flight' denies children from native Dutch and migrant backgrounds the opportunity to learn from one another, and to develop mutual understandings for the different possible histories and circumstances the other may come from. As a result, the lack of engagement with each other's culture may lead to 'shock-effects' during later stages of the children's lives. According to [research](#) conducted by Mitchell Esajas, it is argued that this is clearly the case for those who have attended 'black' primary schools and subsequently entered secondary or tertiary education spaces that are predominantly white. These children demonstrate greater difficulties with adapting to the new environment, as they have never had close and/or friendly contact with white native Dutch people. Many of them do not feel at home in these new spaces, which does not only affect their self-esteem but also perpetuates the existing gaps between youths coming from a migrant background, and youths coming from a native Dutch background. According to Mitchell Esajas, this lack of engagement with the other at a young age leads to a lack of opportunity to learn about each other's cultures. For the children that come from migrant backgrounds, who have attended 'black' schools, this often means that they experience a lack of opportunity to learn the dominant culture norms, values, communication styles and dispositions. Adapting to bigger public spaces in the Dutch society

thus forms a greater challenge for them than it does for the native Dutch youths. The process of white flight signifies a systematic segregation in the education system. According to Bas van der Geest and Roger Baggen, this in turn implies a bigger societal problem where neither native Dutch children nor Dutch children with migrant backgrounds learn to live together. Furthermore, the principals argued that such educational upbringing cannot be allowed to persist in the twenty-first century: living in a multicultural society anno 2015 means that we should prepare our children to live in such a society, together.

In regards to the terms 'black' and 'white' schools, it has also been asserted that the associations, expectations and prejudices attributed to both terms influence the identity formation of children. Roger Baggen mentioned, in this regard, that "we must not think of these children as being naive. They know what is going on; they know that their school is considered as being a 'black' school." In addition, a teacher of a 'black' high school in Rotterdam (who wishes to remain anonymous) has stated that the classifications of 'black' and 'white' schools may negatively impact her students, who show a great awareness of the ways in which others often label their educational environment. A fourteen year old student of the same high school described that, "it is the image of our school that makes the label of being 'black' wrong." In response to these reflective statements by students, the teacher has noticed the ways in which her students have struggled with the expectations created by the stereotypical image of their social or ethnic group. As public opinion developed these stereotypical images of Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese or Antillean youths, she noticed how the students started behaving according to those stereotypes. Thus, the labelling of schools as being 'black' or 'white' further perpetuates the stereotypes and prejudices regarding different ethnic groups. This development has been picked up on by the principals of De Avonturijn and the Catharina school in Amsterdam. In order to address this issue and to diversify their student population, they organized a campaign in May 2015.

### **Is This White Enough For You?**

The campaign conducted by De Avonturijn and Catharina schools are from ethnic minority backgrounds. While these schools have become 'blacker,' the number of students is also slowly decreasing and the schools fear that they may be closed. Concurrently, the primary school located nearby that is considered to be 'white,' has an increasing enrollment rate and even has plans to expand its building infrastructure. In order to address this issue and force the debate, the two 'black' schools organized a campaign. This campaign was supported by the school boards, teachers and the vast majority of the parents. On May 22nd, 2015 pupils of the two primary schools took to the streets of Amsterdam wearing white t-shirts with the text "Is this white enough for you?" On the back, the t-shirts said "Integration is every child's right." These pupils, who mainly come from a non-western

*allochtoon* backgrounds, are considered to be the ones to give this school its name as a ‘black’ school. However, this term is also topic of debate. Bas van der Geest, for example, is of the opinion that the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ schools are alarming terms to use. “We are all just Dutch,” he argues. “I do not like these terms, but to make our point we were forced to use them.” Roger Baggen adds to this by asserting that, “some of these children are second, third or fourth generation *allochtoon*,” and he wonders what relevance the terms *allochtoon* or ‘black’ still have after so many generations in the Netherlands. Indeed, this issue of identifying ‘white’ and ‘black’ seems to be problematic. As one of the mothers told the [Parool](#), she had serious doubts about the campaign. “My stomach turned when I heard about it,” she explained. “Why is there a need for white children? Aren’t we also Dutch?” In spite of her initial response, she still participated in the campaign. “This is a good school, I attended it myself, people must know that,” she explained. This reaction is not that unfamiliar. Indeed, the principals also admitted to know how controversial this campaign would be. Mirjam Leinders, director of the Asko school board, shares the opinions of the principals in recognizing the controversy of the campaign. However, neither of them believed such controversy to negate the need for something to be done.

While 196 students is considered to be the lowest number acceptable after which schools will be closed in Amsterdam, De Avonturijn currently has only 135 students and the Catharina school barely 183 students. Both principals explain that they have done everything they could to make the school more representative of the neighborhood, but yet 95 percent of their students remain from *allochtoon* background in a mixed neighbourhood. The decreasing number of students is, however, not only due to the process of ‘white flight’. Diane Middelkoop, chair of the Asko school board, told the [Parool](#) that a parent of Egyptian descent decided to take his child to another school, because this was one “was too black”. He wanted his children to also grow up amongst children from *autochtoon* background. Roger Baggen - while understanding such parent behaviour - argues that in this way the problem is only being replaced. “Because of these developments in the past few years, it would mean that our school has to close. These children then will be sent to another school, which will again be considered to be too ‘black,’ leading to the exact same problems.”

The Netherlands’ long history of parental choice and school autonomy only just recently emerged as a policy issue. All efforts to limit segregation, by reducing percentage of students enrolled at a particular school, inevitably confronts the deepest held Dutch value: freedom of choice, particularly in education. As the Dutch society continues to debate whether it is limiting if students are encouraged to attend their neighborhood schools, how will we tackle the inevitable-segregated communities? As [Walraven](#) points out that well-intended micro choices can inevitably lead to unintended macro choices, for example, “when parents continuously choose ‘white’ schools because they feel ‘black’

schools underperform will lead to macro societal consequences of segregation at a larger scale.” What then will the balance of freedom of choice and equity look like? Most importantly, should politics intervene with this broken system?

Unfortunately, encouraging parents to attend their child’s neighborhood school is perceived by many Dutch parents as restrictive and due to this, many have resisted. [Simone Kukenheim](#), an alderman in Amsterdam, who is responsible for “education, youth, diversity, and integration” firmly states that the city council cannot take action because “freedom of choice is too important.” Forcing integration on parents is also not the answer, without parents’ cooperation, racial and ethnic integration will not work but today’s current ethnic imbalance in schools and the problematic ‘black’ school term will only continue to widen the ethnic gap in the Netherlands.

### **Interviews**

3 anonymous *Allochtoon* pupils. Secondary Black School in Rotterdam. Rotterdam, The Netherlands. June 18, 2015.

3 anonymous *Autochtoon* teachers. Secondary Black School in Rotterdam. Rotterdam, The Netherlands. June 18, 2015.

Rogert Baggen. Principal of St. Catharina Primary School in Amsterdam. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. June 19, 2015.

Bas van der Geest. Principal of primary school De Avonturijn in Amsterdam. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. June 19, 2015.