

A CHRISTIAN FAITH PERSPECTIVE ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Evidence informed good practices

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Abstract

According to the UN Salamanca Statement of 1994, all children, with or without a disability, have the fundamental right to get access to education, preferably within a regular school. This fits with a general Christian faith approach in which we uphold every child's dignity. On that basis we promote inclusive practises. A Christian school should be a community that is open to all children, regardless of their capabilities, backgrounds or handicaps. Local policies and schools practices differ however, and it is difficult to formulate a universal definition of inclusion. Although the Dutch government is trying to promote inclusion, in the Netherlands, we still have separate schools for children with specific educational needs and the number of pupils attending those schools is increasing. In this article we discuss the question how Christian regular schools can put into practice an inclusive view on education. We start with summarizing the debate on defining inclusion. We connect this with a Christian faith perspective on this topic. Next to that, we elaborate on evidence based good practices for including more children with specific needs in regular schools. This all may help schools developing a more inclusive way of teaching.

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Introduction

Special education usually implies that children with specific educational needs (SEN) can receive specific extra care that addresses children's unique needs. This includes for instance adaptations in the classroom such as differentiated instruction or special services such as counselling by psychologists. In most countries this support is preferably organized within public schools for regular education. This fits with the inclusive view on education of the UNESCO, based on Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Unesco 2007): All children, with or without a disability, have the fundamental right to get access to education, preferably within a regular school. Attending a regular school is assumed to give chances for equal treatment. It also prevents discrimination and promotes the integration of these children into society. In the Netherlands the ideal of inclusion is promoted the policy of the government, called 'Passend onderwijs' (see <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/passend-onderwijs>). This inclusive ideal corresponds perfectly with a Christian perspective on education in which we see every child as precious as they are all given by God (Van Klinken, De Ronde-Davidse, & De Muynck, 2015). In line with this reasoning, a Christian school should be a community that is open to all children, regardless of their capabilities, backgrounds or handicaps (Kooiman-Spratt, 1992, p.11; De Muynck, 2019). Some even say: "Less than fully inclusive is to violate the principle of 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26".

A universal definition of inclusive education?

However, in some countries such as the Netherlands, we still have separate schools for special education, intended for children with severe behaviour, learning, physical and/or mental health problems. The freedom of education, provided by Dutch law, known as 'Article 23', means that we not only have public schools, but also schools based on religion, such as Roman-Catholic, Protestants, Orthodox protestant, Jewish, and Islamite schools. Next to that, we also have schools with a specific view on education such as Dalton. All these schools are funded by the government.

In the following part we will focus on the inclusion of children with specific educational needs (SEN children). However, we realize that based on the above mentioned notion on inclusive education, it is also questionable whether separate schools based on for instance religion, fit with the idea of an inclusive school in which all children are welcome, regardless of their capabilities, backgrounds or handicaps (Kooiman-Spratt, 1992, p.11.). This is a very relevant discussion, which also has attention in Dutch policies. The education council of the Netherlands, which advises our government, for

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instance has started a research on our law of freedom of education. In the light of defining inclusion, this is a very interesting debate, because the idea of inclusion should be extended to religious differences, however it is not the aim of the current article. The current article is based on the Dutch situation of freedom of education, and our system of regular and special schools. Within that framework we want to elaborate on the definition of inclusion.

More specifically, we focus on the questions how Christian regular schools can put into practice an inclusive view on education. The answer to this question relates to the definition of inclusive education. It seems to be quite difficult to formulate a universal definition on inclusive education, as the meaning of inclusive education depends on local policy, culture, school systems, etcetera (Ekins, 2017). The aim of inclusion is apparently close to what is generally seen as universal: eliminate all forms of social exclusion (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). In fact, as agreed by the United Nations, it is a human right. Also the idea that inclusive education is education for all, seems to be universal (Ekins, 2017). This line of reasoning fits with the UNSECO perspectives on common good in education. These are: Respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice, respect for cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility.

Inclusive education: The influence of local policies

The way this aim is achieved however differs amongst countries, and even amongst schools. In the Netherlands for instance, some schools hardly refer to special education, they work 'inclusively' (Visser, Van der Vliet, De Ronde-Davidse, 2017). Other schools have a much higher referral percentage to special schools (see for instance, www.onderwijsincijfers.nl). The labelling of 'inclusive' can be problematic, because the practice of the school can be inherent with the inclusive ideal. To illustrate this: Most of the inclusive schools have separate small classrooms, specifically designed for SEN children. Part of the week SEN children are not in their own classroom, but in this specific small group. But it is of course questionable whether such settings can be called 'inclusive'? Pupils are excluded from the regular classroom, but because they do this in a regular school, these schools are labelled as inclusive schools. This example illustrates the difficulty of the debate related to defining inclusive education.

Moreover, in the Netherlands, we have a tendency of late referral to schools for special education (as children are aged 7 or 8). This is among other things, due to the fact that our law on 'passend onderwijs', requires that children follow education preferably within a regular school. As a consequence, schools try to avoid referral to special education as much as possible. The trend

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originated is that schools try to include SEN children for some years, but after 2 or 3 years still have to decide that a school for special education is a better place in order to improve the development and wellbeing of specific children. The result being that very often, children enter a special school with a serious developmental delay. Instead of educating, special education teachers mention that they must first do some 'repairing'. The late referral trends evoke the question, why not start within special education and try to include those children within regular education, after they have a strong base? This hardly appears to happen (<https://www.onderwijsincijfers.nl/>). It also evokes the question what needs to change in order to overcome the late referral trend. In other words, how can all children remain in regular education? We will illustrate later on some best practices, which may be helpful.

Next to late referral, there is the trend that an increasing number of children with a severe physical and/or psychological delay gets a so-called exemption for education (see for instance <http://www.autipassendonderwijsrecht.nl/thuiszitters>). Although attending a school is compulsory in the Netherlands between the age of 5-16, and the government has a policy on reducing exemptions, the fact is that the number of exemptions has increased over the past 9 years. Strictly spoken, inclusive education thus fails, and their fundamental right to access to education is violated. Many regular schools are not able to educate all children, and apparently also special education schools are not able to include all children with specific needs. Many factors play a role here, hence delays may be so severe that education conform Dutch policies is impossible. Also, cases are known in which parents decide that the given education is not suitable for their child. However, next to such explanations, these increasing numbers are at least an indicator that education for all is difficult, and development of inclusive education is necessary (<https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/kubo-leert-het-meest-op-een-gewone-school~b36adf3c/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.nl%2F>). It becomes clear from the above mentioned Dutch context, that inclusion can imply different things. It is a complex concept (Ekins, 2017), which still is difficult to put into practice.

Inclusive teaching: attitudes, self-efficacy, knowledge and teaching skills

Although many schools wrestle with putting inclusive education into practice, an increasing number of schools show improvements and recently a Dutch movement has been launched for stimulating inclusive education (www.naarinclusieveronderwijs.nl). Characteristic of 'inclusive' schools and also of schools for special education is their commitment to children with specific educational needs. Teachers have strong believe in these children. They educate with passion, see every child as

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purposeful and try to look first at developmental possibilities. These teachers are also convinced that inclusive education is best for all children. For instance setting minimal learning goals for all students, may reduce the gap in learning outcomes amongst children (Bosker, 2005). Moreover, inclusive education may not necessary have a negative impact on learning outcomes of 'average' students (Ruijs, 2017). It stimulates an inclusive society in which children are helpful and develop the belief that it is normal to be different, because we are all different (Roebben, 2011). Also the European Agency for special needs and inclusive education (2012) agrees upon this. Based on international research the agency concludes that inclusive education has a positive effect on all children. This includes enhanced social relations, role modeling with peers, enhanced learning outcomes, higher expectations, more cooperation amongst staff members, and enhanced integration of families into society. We have to note here that recent research revealed that currently, some children develop themselves better in special education (Zweers, 2018). This may be due to the fact that a lot of schools simply do not have the requested expertise at this moment. Expertise is needed at different levels in school. We first describe what is characteristic of teachers who are capable of including SEN children in their classroom.

Inclusive teachers have an inclusive attitude and they do their very best to prepare all children for inclusion into society. For these teachers, relation is a prerequisite for learning outcomes, and therefore investment in relation has priority. In fact, those teachers make children feel included, instead of only being included (Ekins, 2017). This is coherent with the literature suggesting that inclusion is all about values (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). More specifically, attitudes are the biggest barrier for inclusion (McMaster, 2015). Teachers with a more positive attitude towards children with specific educational needs, are more willing to make necessary adaptations (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014; Ross, 1996; Soodak & Podell, 1993). These differences amongst teachers became very clear in a research by Van der Veen, Smeets, and Derriks (2010). It appeared that in 40% of referral to special education, a comparable student was found in regular education. On other words, the chance of referral to special education is smaller when teachers have a more positive attitude towards SEN children, and when the number of SEN in the classroom is above average.

In a review study, De Boer, Pijl en Minnaert (2011). note that the majority of teachers in the studies included, are undecided or negative in their beliefs about inclusive education. They do not rate themselves as very knowledgeable about educating pupils with special needs. In the same time, teachers in the Netherlands are developing a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of SEN children in the regular classroom (Smeets et al., 2017). However, teachers still remain negative about

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children with emotional and/or behaviour disorders (i.e., Scanlon & Barnes-Holmes, 2013). Recent research revealed that chance of referral to special education is higher when there is a disturbed relation with children with specific needs (Zweers, 2018). In other words, a stable relation between a teacher and his SEN children may prevent referral to special education. Next to teacher attitude, the other most effective predictors of accepting children are: their perceptions of competence (self-efficacy) and teacher training (for increasing knowledge and skills) (Oosterhuis, 2002). Teachers who have a high level of self-efficacy and a more positive attitude towards SEN children, are extra motivated to make necessary adaptations in the regular classroom (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014; Ross, 1996; Soodak & Podell, 1993; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). These factors influence student engagement, classroom management and instruction, which eventually has an effect on student outcomes (Warren & Hale, 2016).

In line with this reasoning, Zee (2016) states that teachers who are more convinced in what they are capable of doing (i.e., they have a higher level of self-efficacy), are better in differentiation, classroom management, setting rules, and motivating students. Moreover, a higher level of self-efficacy stimulates that teachers are more resilient in case of setback, those teachers set higher goals, and they dare to make themselves vulnerable (Bandura, 1997). Unfortunately, in teacher training programs, not much attention is paid to these teacher factors (Warren & Hale, 2016). Moreover, the perception of teachers not always represent their real competences. For instance, teacher trainers within primary schools rate teacher competences necessary for inclusive education lower than teachers themselves do (Ledoux, 2017). Next to that, the cause of learning and/or behaviour problems often is seen as a child factor. In the literature this is called external locus of control (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). For instance regarding behaviour problems, teachers do not have much attention for their influence on disruptive behaviour of children (Sontag, Reitsma, & Schipper, 2012). However, problems are often the result of more factors, including the influence teachers have. On the other hand, teachers who have a more internal locus of control, are willing to look at what they can change in order to develop more inclusive education. This also helps to overcome their vulnerability and feelings of incompetence. All this underpins Ekins (2017) suggesting that putting inclusive values into practice is difficult and dependent of your own ideas and local practices.

Enhancing inclusive practices: teacher training

Teacher training, aimed to stimulate more inclusive practices in regular schools, thus needs to enhance knowledge and teaching skills, but also has to pay attention to locus of control, teacher

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attitudes, and self-efficacy (Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012; Scanlon & Barnes-Holmes, 2013). Training should broadly stimulate the development of reflective practitioners, sensitive for diversity (Oosterhuis, 2002). No one size fits all approach but stimulating a more flexible action repertoire. Effective training methods are direct feedback in the classroom or by using video feedback (Stormont et al., 2014). Another effective way of learning is enhancing knowledge, in combination with experienced teacher who give examples of teaching in the class. This needs to be practiced by the learning teachers, with coaching and feedback on the long term (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Verbal support and observing others is also helpful, but less effective (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Finally, it is important to implement teacher training for enhancing inclusive practices in the whole school. Support from the whole school team is indispensable (Montgomery & Mirenda, 2014), and without a clear shared vision, inclusive practices will not improve. Research and good practices of inclusive education all underpin the importance of a shared vision on inclusion (McMaster, 2015; Miles & Ainscow, 2011).

Shared vision

A teacher needs to know what characteristic is for their school and this should be visible in their way of teaching. As definitions on inclusive education differ per context (Ekins, 2017), every school should have a team meeting on this topic. This however is currently not a common practice. A recent Dutch research revealed that 7 out of 10 schools do not have a shared vision (Ledoux, 2017). Ekins (2017) strongly makes clear that an own vision is important. A vision that fits with teacher capabilities, but also with training opportunities. Real daily practices should include cooperation amongst teachers and learning should also include cooperation amongst schools. From earlier research it appeared that teachers in regular education can learn a lot from their colleagues in special education (Visser, Van der Vliet, & De Ronde-Davidse, 2015). For instance by co-teaching. But also some practical tips were given, such as more structure within regular schools is needed. Not only during teaching but also within the school building. Examples are: same place at the coat rack, predictable position of the teacher in the classroom and using icons during the day. Unfortunately, the tendency is that teachers still want to resolve problems by themselves (Ledoux, 2017). Moreover, less than 3 out of 10 teachers mentions that they experience a shared responsibility (Ledoux, 2017). For enhancing inclusive practices, an open learning environment within school based on a shared vision thus seems to be a prerequisite. In the following part we will go into detail how Christian schools can come to a shared Christian faith approach. This may stimulate individual schools to develop their own mission and vision regarding inclusive education.

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Towards a Christian faith approach

As we explained, there is no consensus about inclusive practices. Local policies are quite different. In the Netherlands, for instance, youth services are organized at a local governmental level, extra facilities for SEN children as in support at school are organized at a regional level, and education in general has nationwide rules. At school level, the way schools think about inclusion differs. There are even different views depending on the developmental disabilities of children. Teachers in regular education are the most negative towards the inclusion of children with emotional behaviour disorders (i.e. Scanlon & Barnes-Holmes, 2013). Thus although we may have some universal values, the problem is that local contexts differ, and that people think differently about inclusion. As a consequence, local practices are subjective, they differ and not all schools are able to put the universal idea of education for all, into practice. Ekins (2017) argues that it might be best to see inclusive practices as an ongoing process. According to Wrigley (2003), it is a journey of hope based on shared beliefs, values, and real commitment. This also implies that although special education may not be an inclusive setting, it can be an environment which helps children grow into society. What works obstructing is that there still is a predominant view on education, in which children are labelled based on a medical model. Deficits are seen as a child factor which is difficult to change (Bruggink, 2014). This predominant view is visible in special and regular education. However we notice a change towards a more environmental view, in which delays in children are also seen as outcomes of environmental factors. This transition enables developing a mindset that every child has developmental possibilities.

It is thus important to notice that school teams need to develop their own view, which fits with their values and beliefs. A view that connects with their current knowledge and teaching skills. In such a view, development is possible. For all Christian schools it is worthwhile looking at attitudes underlying the process of inclusion and linking those attitudes to Christian faith. Nworie (2016) proposes a Shalom Model of Inclusion. The model is founded on the belief that human beings are created in God's image (Imago Dei). Around the heart of the model, four domains are built: shared curriculum experience, shared strengths and needs, reflective and differentiated pedagogy, and community and collaborative praxis. Interestingly, these domains are not exclusively Christian. In fact, these are prerequisites of inclusive practices at regular schools, and practices in special schools (see for instance the profile of inclusive teachers of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; Ainscow et al., 2006; Ekins, 2017; Forlin 2010; McMaster, 2015; Mitchell, 2014).

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The heart of the model (the Imago Dei) seems to be the main difference between a predominantly secular view on children's developmental possibilities and a Christian view in which we see every child as purposeful as they are all given by God. Interestingly, again, this starts with an inclusive attitude, just as argued above. This attitude results in Christian teachers who see their profession as a call to service and a way of serving God, which is visible in an inherent inclusive drive.

From mission to inclusive practices: Leadership within Christian perspective

Development in inclusive education requests specific leadership characteristics. Leadership needs to promote a strong commitment to accepting and celebrating diversity, it should encourage a sensitivity to cultural issues, and setting high, but realistic goals for all pupils is essential (Mitchell, 2014). More specifically, Mitchell (2014) mentions: Provide and sell a vision. This is accomplished mainly by the attitude of the leader. His or her acting has to reflect the vision he or she promotes. Christian leadership essentially concerns relationships and interdependence. A vision should be developed together with a team and the living out of this vision has to be done in cooperation (Cracknell, 2017). If a child is registered at a school, it is a team decision. All staff members agree that a specific child is welcome at their school. In fact, all children are the responsibility of all teachers (De Ronde-Davidse, Visser, & Van der Vliet, 2017). A leader should encourage such a mindset. A leader should also be able to handle disturbances and be alert on overt and covert resistance within school. Especially regarding inclusive education, teachers can feel resistance. It is upon a school leader to overcome this resistance. A leader therefore needs to create a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and expecting teachers to set high objectives for themselves and their pupils. In other words, a supportive, collaborative dialogue needs to be common good (Ekins, 2017). In the study of Ekins this became clear by how staff members of developing inclusive schools came together. There was time for reflection on practices, sharing values. This was at formal and informal moments. What specifically became clear from her case study, was that thinking in terms of development is essential when working towards more inclusion. It requires a leader who is able to create such a learning environment, who supports the staff, a leader who is able to implement local policies.

Booth and Ainscow (2002) also underpin that a leader should make sure that the school has enough resources. This enables co-teaching, or individual assistance within the classroom. These resources and the needed money is often available, but not always used. A school leader needs to know current policies and has to monitor improvement. A strong faith in team members, a vision that

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stimulates development is crucial for enhancing inclusive practices. A leader needs to encourage his team members and has to recognize struggles. Booth and Ainscow (2002) also mention the importance of adapting standardized procedures. Not all children fit within the standardized curriculum, textbooks or examinations. Consequently, a leader should enable adaptive teaching within his school and needs to provide teachers the necessary training. Contact with parents of SEN children is best on a daily basis (Visser, Van der Vliet, De Ronde-Davidse, 2015). Just a short notice how it was at home and how it was at school, may make a difference. It is upon the school leader to monitor how the contacts with parents of SEN children are. Parents of SEN children often need to deal with a lot of different people who support them and/ or their child, therefore frequent communication is essential.

Conclusion: essential elements and examples of good practices.

The main question of this paper was: How can Christian schools become more inclusive? In other words, how can they put into practice that a Christian school should be a community that is open to all God's children, regardless of their capabilities, backgrounds or handicaps (Kooiman-Spratt, 1992, p.11.)? We started this paper by figuring out what inclusion means, and concluded that it is quite difficult to come to a universal definition due to local different policies (see for instance Ekins, 2017). We proposed a Christian faith perspective which may help school teams to develop their own mission and vision. A vision in which we see all children as part of God's creation (Nworrie, 2016). This relates to bible citations as: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". We argued that it is necessary that local missions and visions relate to existing expertise within the school, and include opportunities of development. We mentioned the importance of teacher characteristics as attitudes, knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy and mentioned several effective training methods to increase these aspects of teaching. We ended with necessary leadership skills. All these elements are essential when stimulating education for all. However this remains quite abstract. As Ekins (2017) justly argues, it is more useful to look at inclusive practices than to focus on the ideal of education for all.

How do countries and schools put universal inclusive values into practices? What barriers are there and what is helpful? For the Dutch context, a main barrier is the fact that our education system is driven by learning outcomes. We still try to fit all pupils within a standard framework, based on the standard of the average pupil (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Education for all requires a different way of education, based on human dignity. It requires a system in which we appreciate differences

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amongst children. From God's perspective, every child is unique, and we should find ways to include this vision in daily practices in schools. As mentioned above, school leaders need to stimulate the development of shared vision amongst teachers. What other practices are helpful and evidence informed? We help you by ending this paper by sharing some examples from good practices from inclusive Christian schools in the Netherlands, with a list of tips and tricks.

At Kroevendonk in Roosendaal, already fifteen years ago, they shifted towards a Christian faith perspective on inclusive education. They educate in line with Jesus words: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." The school has a safe and caring environment and is open for all children. Loving, caring and learning to develop valuable relationships like Jesus taught us, is their main drive. They started with training at team level focused on the teacher role in interactions with pupils. The main idea was always: every child has developmental possibilities. Next to relevant training, extra support was organized within the classroom. This enabled teachers to differentiate their lessons. More knowledge on special educational was obtained by stimulating a master's degree. Kroevendonk also has a school psychologist. Due to cooperation with a child centre, located within school, the expertise of a physiotherapist, a nurse, and a speech therapist is available. The focus is not only on children with developmental delays, also for highly gifted children the school has relevant knowledge and skills. All children are monitored by a development document. Three times per year this is evaluated with the parents. Development relates here to the vision of the school: every child has developmental possibilities. If necessary, documented goals are adjusted. The school works as a team and keeps developing themselves. A main issue at the moment is for instance behaviour problems in relation to the question which treatment is necessary. In application of a new child is approved by all staff members, thus not only by the school leader. All children are the shared responsibility of all staff members.

Other examples of good practices (De Ronde-Davidse, Visser, & Van der Vliet, 2015) are in line with practices at the Kroevendonk. A strong commitment and a shared vision is the starting point of all schools we visited in our research on good practices. Their Christian faith is visible in vision statements as: "We are doing it together, never give up. See Luke 5 where the disabled man is brought to Jesus by his friends through the roof". "This is blessed by Jesus, the man is being healed and his sins are forgiven." One school had extra support for children with language delays: a

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Soundfield-system. It strengthens the teacher voice by 2 decibel. Especially children with language delays and children with concentration disorders benefit from this system. Many other practical examples can be given, dependent on the needs of pupils. Our main point is that these schools demonstrate that a Christian faith perspective on inclusive education can be put into practice, but that local practices may be different. At all inclusive schools although we notice a strong belief in developmental possibilities, a strong commitment towards all children, and the willingness amongst team members to learn from and with each other. Also parents are seen as an important partner. Expertise is nearby and available, in other words, the school leader is able to organize the necessary support within school. We hope this may inspire other schools to become more inclusive.

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