## Towards perspectives for research, policy and practice

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# Towards perspectives for research, policy and practice: rethinking educational inequality and segregation in Dutch primary education

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent discussions in science, politics and society offer starting points for rethinking the approach to the wicked problem of educational inequality. In our paper, we want to do this by reviewing research, policy and practice in primary education in the Netherlands. Our reflections are first focused on the state of the art in research and the complex educational system from a theoretical perspective (section 2); next we focus on examples of how educational inequality and segregation in policy and practice are addressed in the Netherlands (section 3). Finally, we discuss the new methodological approaches that should be complemented with a new philosophical perspective on segregation and inequality in public policy (section 4). We develop new perspectives using the Netherlands as a specific case study, expecting our perspectives have a more general meaning and might also be useful in the fight against educational inequality and segregation elsewhere.

## 1. Introduction

Education is the key for fostering social mobility but can also reproduce existing inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For years, education scholars have observed that due to the interwoven inequalities across different domains in society, education alone is not the solution. Education can and does make a difference, but only within certain limits. To quote Bernstein fully: "education cannot compensate for society, but schools that aspire to be 'incubators of democracy' have a moral duty to try" (Bernstein 1970, quoted in Reay, 2011, p. 2). At the same time, education can be an engine for emancipation for certain individuals and groups – the key question is, of course, under what conditions? Which characteristics of the education system, policy makers, schools, and families are important in this respect, and which contextual factors play a role in this?

Educational inequalities and opportunities are related to wider disparities and inequalities across race, gender and social class, in multiple domains such as health care, mobility

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and the labour market. Perhaps the most important interaction with the educational system is the dynamics between schools and housing. Where children are born and go to school is often a predictor for their educational success (Lareau, 2011). Segregated cities and neighbourhoods are one of the main causes of school segregation and educational inequality (Boterman, 2019). Other causes of school segregation are related to the institutional landscape such as admission policies of schools (school boards) and, in some contexts more than others, the role of parental choice (Holme, 2002). The relationship between geographies, housing, schools, and education policy is however not straightforward. They are interrelated in highly contingent and complex ways. Unravelling and solving the issues of school segregation and educational inequality are, therefore, complex activities. At least three characteristics make those issues tough and often untamed: our knowledge about causes, mechanisms and remedies is in part inconclusive and/or contested; addressing the issues requires many actors to cooperate; and actors have different normative or ethical views on the subject.

In this paper we first argue that we need another *approach to policies*, *practice and research*, one that fully appreciates the layered and complex inequalities and acknowledges that we need to combine knowledge about causes, mechanisms and remedies from different disciplines and to focus interventions not only on individual schools and school districts, but first and foremost on (cooperation at) the systemic level. In that way we might start to tame the first two characteristics of the tough and often untamed issue of educational inequality and school segregation.

The dominant political view of the last decades was that a successful educational career is only due to individual merit. Recently, Michael Sandel (2020) has summarised the negative effects of this normative view: people who are successful tend to think it is only their own doing and they think people who are not successful have only themselves to blame. This "tyranny of merit" neglects the fact that the odds are stacked in favour of the already fortunate; in other words it neglects the layered and complex inequalities.

In this paper, we also argue that we need another *(normative) view*, that fully appreciates the layered and complex inequalities and acknowledges that the issues at stake are not only about equality, but also about equity and social justice (Merry, 2019; Onstenk & Walraven, 2021). In that way we might contribute to taming the third characteristic of the tough and often untamed issue at hand. We think the view of Sandel is inspiring here, since he offers an alternative way of thinking about success as well as a constructive perspective on how people in a democratic and diverse society might contribute to the common good (Sandel, 2020).

Recent discussions in science, politics and society also offer starting points for rethinking the approach to the tough problem of educational inequality. In our paper we want to do this by reviewing research, policy and practice in primary education in the Netherlands. Our reflections are first focused on the state of the art in (international) research and the educational system from a theoretical perspective (section 2). Next we focus on examples of how educational inequality and segregation in policy and practice are addressed in the Netherlands (section 3). Finally, we discuss new (methodological and other) approaches that should be complemented with a new philosophical perspective on segregation and inequality in public policy (section 4). We develop new perspectives using the Netherlands as a specific case study, expecting our perspectives have a more

general meaning and might also be useful in the fight against educational inequality and segregation elsewhere.

## 2. Theory: core systemic elements and their relationships

Historically segregation is associated with institutionalised racism and the state-sanctioned separation of different racial groups in the United States across neighbourhoods and schools. The concept of school segregation, however, is now an extensively studied topic, that commonly refers to the unequal distribution of children with certain characteristics over schools, including ethnic, religious and social-class backgrounds. Segregation in schools is both studied as a cause (Oberti & Savina, 2019) and as an effect of inequalities (Musterd, 2020) (See Figure 1). There is wide agreement in the literature that unequal educational systems tend to be segregated and that inequalities related to race, ethnicity and economic and cultural capital are key explanatory factors of school segregation. School segregation is seen as a function of school choice policies and the choice or selection practices of parents, who can draw on different strategies and resources to select schools for their children (Burgess et al., 2015; Wilson & Bridge, 2019). Also, a vast body of literature has established that segregation in schools is often closely tied into the spatial inequalities, residential segregation and sorting, in urban contexts (Boterman et al., 2019). Where you live affects what schools can be attended, and highly segregated and unequal cities tend to have highly segregated school systems too.

Despite consensus on causes of segregation there is conflicting evidence about the extent to which and under which conditions segregation is a central factor in educational inequalities. A range of studies across different educational contexts, which assessed school effects reveal both strong evidence that school segregation is associated with
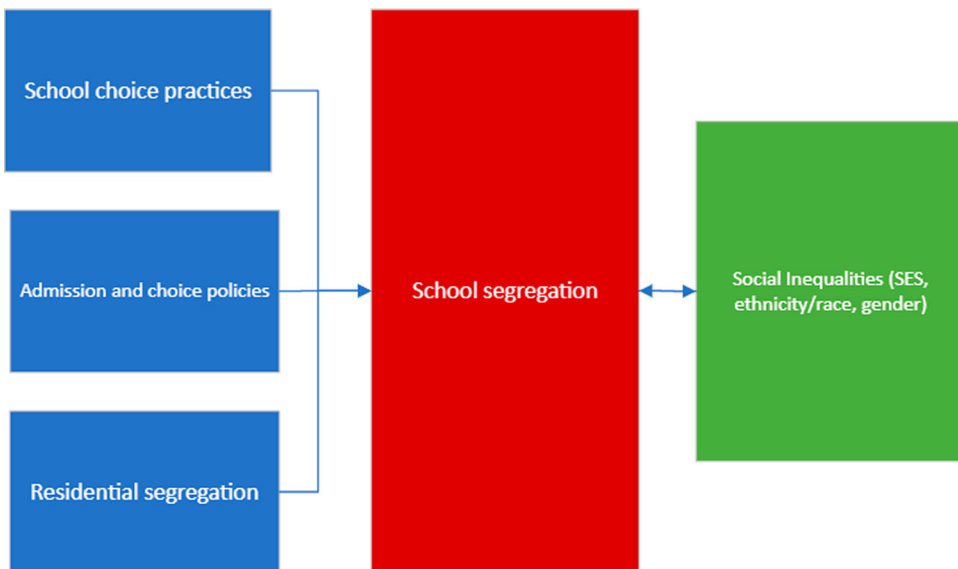


**Figure 1.** Main relationships of school segregation.

educational inequalities in terms of learning outcomes (Nieuwenhuis & Hooimeijer, 2016) and evidence that school segregation *per se* is not contributing to worsening existing inequalities of groups and/or individuals (Merry & Boterman, 2020). Much depends on the exact definition and types of outcomes that are studied. For instance, more ethnic or racial diversity in schools does not appear to be directly associated with more favourable academic outcomes. Some Dutch studies even suggest that increasing ethnic diversity may be detrimental to the opportunities of some children (Dronkers & Van der Velden, 2013). For the mixing of children of different social economic backgrounds (SES) more positive outcomes have been reported (Kahlenberg, 2004; Kuyvenhoven & Boterman, 2021; Sykes & Musterd, 2011). Correspondingly, high concentrations of poverty sometimes appear to reduce already lower levels of opportunities in segregated schools (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005); while attending schools visited by the socio-economic elite is also argued to contribute to the hoarding of privilege (Merry & Boterman, 2020). The specific effects of school segregation are, however, highly contingent on what effects are studied and for whom they are expected to matter.

School segregation – its causes and effects – should, however, perhaps be understood in a less narrowly defined manner. While establishing school or peer effects on individual outcomes is important, segregation as it manifests itself in educational contexts is more a property of the entire system. Under specific circumstances it may be possible to isolate specific effects, but segregation and educational inequalities have all the characteristics of a complex system (Dignum et al., 2022). While it is possible and useful to study various aspects of that system in isolation, it is difficult to address the problems associated with that relationship in isolation. Complex systems (Castellani & Hafferty, 2009; Edelmann et al., 2020) – and their corresponding tough problems (sometimes also called wicked problems, but see Termeer, 2019 for a critical view on the concept) – can only be tackled when the workings of the system are understood, and its emergent phenomena disentangled. It requires pulling several strings simultaneously so to say.

We argue that the complexity of school segregation is the main reason why policies that have attempted to counteract it have been little successful. Taking away one cause, for instance providing vouchers to children in disadvantaged school districts so that they can attend better schools elsewhere, may cause several new problems. By allowing some children to escape their school district, processes of creaming off particular children from the already struggling disadvantaged schools may undermine the quality of the public school in the disadvantaged area. Furthermore, the influx of disadvantaged children with vouchers in specific schools may change the choice dynamics of that school, exacerbating levels of segregation. Also, interventions that aim to counteract segregation in choice-based systems, constraining parental choice may help reduce school segregation in those neighbourhoods but may affect the residential choice–school choice dynamic. People may start anticipating the location of a good school in their neighbourhood, which can lead to higher levels of *residential* segregation, which in the long run may exacerbate inequalities in schools too. These unintended consequences are typical of complex systems and – as said – require a more holistic approach to solve their problems. To start sketching some of the key interactions in the complex system of school segregation it is useful to broaden the scope of the idea of segregation. For us the concept of educational segregation does not refer to the idea of an imbalanced or unequal distribution of children across schools alone, but rather to the separation of opportunities in

which the entire educational system is implicated. So, this *segregation of opportunities* refers to the institutional and spatial arrangements under which the educational system (re)produces inequalities.

This approach includes studies of the causes and severity of segregation, as well as more focused studies of peer and school effects, but it intends to capture the entire wiring of the complex system that produces those unequal outcomes in education. Educational segregation as defined as such is thus about the systemic elements of inequality that are inherent in and woven into the institutional arrangements, the discourses that legitimize it and the landscapes in which it is practiced. To understand segregation in this way requires a focus that not just zooms in onto the dynamics of parental school choice, although this is an element of this, but also the more generic characteristics of the system in terms of how much it is geared towards allowing individuals to optimise the educational outcomes of children or rather to optimising collective outcomes.

The relationship between individual freedoms and collective outcomes lies at the heart of the organising of educational systems, but also how they connect to housing (Boterman, 2019; Holme, 2002) and labour markets (Bol et al., 2019). Correspondingly, any analysis of the segregation of educational opportunity should both study the system, consisting of the institutional and historically grown context of educational policies, and the way in which different individual agents navigate this system. This sounds logical, but too often analyses of educational inequality do not study the dynamics between parents as agents, schools as agents, and the educational landscape, consisting of historically grown policy frameworks and variegated geographies of schools together. By only studying parts of the system research may be used or directly suggests directions for solving policy problems, which may have unforeseen consequences. Anticipating these problems, a more holistic approach entails a focus on the dynamical interactions between, among other factors, demographic trends, ethnic/racial residential segregation, home-school mobility, educational funding, costs of public and private education, and the division of competences and decision-making power between parents, schools, local and higher-level authorities.

The next section will explore some of the key relationships and some of the unforeseen effects in the educational policy context of the Netherlands.

## 3. The complexity of Dutch educational policy and practice

### 3.1. The historically grown context of educational policies

To better understand the current situation in the Netherlands regarding education in general and the segregation of opportunities in particular, a glance at the institutional and historically grown context of educational policies is helpful.

The Dutch educational system has a history of segregation along religious lines. Catholics and different Protestant groups had not only their own churches but also their own schools as well as their own newspapers, sport clubs, workers unions, political parties and so forth. From the nineteenth century up to the 1970s this system of pillarisation (Lijphart, 1968) or politico-denominational segregation was dominant. Apart from religious schools there were also public schools and after decades of political struggle it was decided in 1917 all schools got government funding. Today the majority of Dutch

schools still have a religious profile (e.g. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Hindu); the rest are public schools and a variety of schools with their own pedagogy (e.g. Waldorf, Dalton, Montessori, Jenaplan and Freinet). Almost all schools are state funded (only 1% of primary schools were private in 2018 [Onderwijsraad, 2021], however, more recently private education is growing). There still is substantial segregation, but nowadays mainly along the lines of ethnicity and social economic status (SES). Historically, social standing and class position in society were important for segregation throughout the period of pillarisation as well. Working-class children often went to other primary schools than children from the middle or higher class, and secondary education in the nineteenth century was mainly for higher-class students at first and from 1863 onwards (when a new type of school was founded) also for some bright middle-class students.

The Netherlands also has a tradition of projects and programmes to promote educational equality, especially since the 1970s. At first those were targeted at working-class children, then the focus was on children from guest workers (mainly from the Mediterranean) and recently on children with parents with lower SES. Most prominent among the programmes was national equity funding for schools; the criteria for funding changed over time and so did the total budget.

There has been a substantial majority in Dutch parliament for the principle of equity funding to combat educational inequality since the start of the 1970s. Combating school segregation, however, was on the national political agenda only twice (maybe because of the history of educational segregation along religious lines and the reluctance of religious political parties to educational change that affects the position of religious schools). The first time was when a coalition government of Christian democratic and Social democratic parties held office (2007–2010) and the social democrats wanted to counter school segregation and were able to get the issue in the coalition agreement. Parliament urged the government to try out policy measures in local pilots and a Knowledge Centre for Mixed Schools was set up to support the pilots (among other things). The pilots were planned to last until 2012 and the new government did not continue the desegregation policies – the Social democrats were no longer part of the coalition and the Christian democrats and conservative liberals in office did not think the national government had a role in the matter.

The second time school segregation came on the national political agenda was in recent years. From 2016 onwards the Inspectorate of Education published research on educational inequality and segregation, showing inequality of opportunities and segregation was increasing and students tend to live in "bubbles of like-minded peoples" more frequently (Inspectie voor het Onderwijs, 2016, 2018, 2020). The Inspectorate found it worrisome, kept on reporting on the subject and gradually political support to counteract it increased. The sense of urgency was related to discussions about increasing educational inequality, discussions held against a background of inequality in general and growing concerns about ways in which inequalities in education, health, income and housing are connected (RVS, 2020, writes about "complex inequality"). Stimulated by parliament the Minister of Education launched a "Policy Agenda against Segregation in Primary and Secondary Education" in December 2020. In January 2022, a new coalition government was installed, and the coalition agreement included remarks about equal opportunities in education from preschool to higher education, for instance equal admission (to create a level playing field) and an extended seventh grade (to postpone tracking

in secondary education). There was no explicit mention of segregation in the coalition agreement.

## 3.2. A closer look at the systemic elements of educational inequality

In section 2 the main systemic elements of inequality were identified: institutional arrangements, discourses and the agents. In this section, we take a closer look at those elements in the context of the Dutch educational system.

A dominant feature of the institutional arrangements in Dutch education is the autonomy of schools and their school boards (Boterman & Lobato, 2022). There is no national curriculum, but parliament and government agreed to core goals for each type of education, and it is up to the autonomous schools to decide how to design their teaching to reach those goals (e.g. there are over 50 core goals for primary education). National government sets quality standards and delivers the budget; the Inspectorate of Education focuses on the quality standards and core goals. Local governments have limited powers, although they get part of the equity funding and can supply extra budgets for schools. There is a national law on what is on the Local Educational Agenda, for instance equal opportunities and segregation. The law urges the participating local government and school boards to keep their talks "oriented towards agreement". That phrasing might seem odd, but it is necessary because none of the actors involved has the power to push decisions through – a classic example of the Dutch art of "*poldering*" (deliberating until everyone agrees what should be done, to get and keep "the polder dry"). A consequence of that situation is that one actor can hinder or obstruct decision making, for instance when central admission policy requires all school boards to cooperate. That is why the dynamic between actors is crucial in the Dutch educational system.

Apart from local and national government and schools and school boards, parents and students are also important agents. Parent involvement is crucial in the development of children and their school career. Research shows it matters "where your cradle was standing" – a saying that was recently rephrased as "congratulations with the diplomas of your parents". It matters which school parents choose for their children, what contacts they have with the teachers, what they do when the advice for secondary education is lower than expected, et cetera. School choice practices and admission policies are other examples to illustrate another systemic characteristic of Dutch education: the responsibility for the collective outcomes is not clear-cut. As there is a free choice of schools, parents understandably want the best school for their children – but who is in charge when the unintended outcome of all parental choices combined is segregation? Likewise, since schools are autonomous and have room for manoeuvre for their own admission policy, it is in their interest to compete for students – but who can convince schools and school boards to view the unintended segregated outcome as a collective responsibility? While there is always a tension between individual (parental and school) liberties and collective responsibilities, the Dutch educational system is particularly poorly apt to deal with those problems (Sissing & Boterman, 2022).

Dissatisfaction with a system without proper tools to deal with collective responsibilities and unintended outcomes is growing. To continue with the example of admission and choice: both school leaders and parents, interviewed on the subject in the middle-sized city of Utrecht, were unsatisfied with the situation (Walraven et al., 2020).

Higher-educated parents felt uncomfortable to use informal ways for getting their child to the school they wanted, as it felt like using "the right of the smartest". School leaders pointed out the competition between schools in a neighbourhood led to shadow-lists with increasingly younger children. Both groups wanted the situation to end and hoped that someone could stop the informal practices. The report put things in motion. The local council urged the alderman of education of Utrecht to act, the school boards saw it was time for change and together they developed plans for central enrolment for all schools. With room for participation of teachers, school leaders, parents and other citizens transparent rules were formulated that created a level playing field. A website and a helpdesk were set up, flyers were made, a procedure for complaints compiled and an ombudsperson appointed. The new policy started in October 2021 and will be monitored and evaluated. Experiences from other cities (like Nijmegen, Amsterdam, The Hague, Haarlem) show that central enrolment creates a level playing field and therefore contributes to educational equality (Walraven et al., 2019). The rules to assign children to schools have to do with living in the neighbourhood, having siblings at the school and having a parent working at the school. A next step might be to add rules about school composition to combat segregation. Only in the city of Nijmegen admission policies are also based on school composition, which should reflect the composition of the population in the neighbourhood and the city. However, this rule is the last one on a list, but since all children have a place in a school after the rules higher on the list are applied, we do not know what the effect of the rule might be.

Another story of good intentions leading to unwanted (side)effects is about preschool facilities. In the Netherlands, those facilities are highly segregated and often a prelude to segregation in primary education. The first good intention was to arrange preschool services for children at risk that are (almost) free of charge, to improve their starting position in primary education. That led to facilities specialised in catering for children at risk with a focus on language development and parent involvement. It also led to day-care facilities for other children, with parents who could pay. The unintended effect was that the two groups of children and parents did not meet each other; they were separated or segregated.

The second good intention was to arrange for continuity in the support for children at risk from preschool to the early years of primary school, for instance by using the same pedagogical principles and similar learning materials. In general children of the specialised preschool services would go to the same school of primary education (taking advantage of the continuity). The unintended effect was that parents who could pay for day care tended to look for other primary schools and so, again, the two groups of children and parents did not meet each other but were segregated.

Another characteristic of the educational system is early selection and tracking. Compared to other countries (Bakker et al., 2011; OECD, 2019) selection for secondary education is rather early in the Netherlands, at the age of 12. This is a problem for students who are at risk and/or need more time to flourish (Van der Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). Early selection and tracking were discussed several times in the policy discourse over the last fifty years, from a high-profile policy report in 1975 (that led to polarised reactions) to an advisory report of the Education Council in 2021, but nothing much has changed. A constant in the debates was fear that bright students might be hindered

in their road to excellence. An upcoming argument had to do with excellent schools and competition between schools. That matches with the domination of forms of neoliberalism in the political discourse in many (Western) countries over the last decades, also in the Netherlands. Education was best organised as an economic market with free choice of the "consumers". Neoliberalism was combined with a meritocratic ideology (Karsten, 1999). One of the pitfalls thereof is that people who have a successful educational career tend to think it is only their own doing and tend to see unsuccessfulness in others as their own fault (Sandel, 2020). Others think they are blaming the victim, misjudge what it means to be born in fragile circumstances and neglect the extent to which "disadvantage" is produced in societies. We will come back to the meritocratic ideology and alternative views in our concluding section.

Dominant as the streams of neoliberalism and meritocracy might be, there is also an ongoing substantial undercurrent in Dutch educational discourse of endorsing policies of equal opportunity (supported by majorities in Parliament). However, while equity funding decreased during the years of austerity policies, at the same time commercial extracurricular tutoring, homework support and exam training grew very fast – with a strengthening effect on unequal opportunities.

### 3.3. Policy interventions: an overview

To combat educational inequalities and school segregation several interventions and measures are implemented in the Netherlands. The Ministry of Education (2020) presented five clusters of measures and using that typology we have placed all relevant measures in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Overview of Dutch policy measures and interventions.

| A. Cluster of measures (Ministry of Education) | More direct measures | More indirect measures |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. To make agreements | - Consultation between school boards and local authorities on a Local Educational Agenda | |
| 2. To create a level playing field | - Admission policy<br>- Informing parents | - Equity funding<br>- Address moments of risk in a school career |
| 3. To connect school and neighbourhood | - Parent initiatives<br>- School visits with a group of parents | - Projects focused on encounter<br>- Twinning of schools |
| 4. To adapt school policies | - Extended seventh grade; education for 10–14 year olds<br>- Policies stimulating learning progress | - School advice for two levels in secondary education<br>- Differentiation<br>- Lessons that transcend levels of education |
| 5. To create knowledge | - Monitoring<br>- Evaluation and other research<br>- Knowledge Centre for Mixed Schools | |
| B. Other measures | - Policy for school buildings | - Policy on residential segregation |

Several sources emphasise the importance of combining diverse types of measures to get an effective mixture. Our theoretical explorations in section 2 showed that it is ineffective to pull one of the strings of the tangle, among other things because that might lead to problems elsewhere. The evaluation of thirteen years of the central admission policy of Nijmegen (2021) showed that the best thing to do is address the three causes of segregation in one programme. For instance, in a neighbourhood that has recently become more mixed in housing (because of intervention) you communicate with all parents of young children about their school choice while all primary schools cooperate in a common admission policy. The Knowledge Centre fort Mixed Schools advised the same approach (Onstenk & Walraven, 2021; Walraven et al., 2019, 2020 and forthcoming).

## 4. Discussion & conclusion

Presenting several examples from the context of the Netherlands, this paper illustrated the complexities of addressing educational inequalities associated with segregation of schools. The cases we discussed have in common that policy interventions that are pushing just one "button" run the risk of not solving the problem and may even be exacerbating the problem due to the intricate and complex ways in which education inequalities are (re)produced. In short, we have presented some reflections on implemented interventions and concluded that they often fail to deliver on their initial goals. The main question thus is: why do they not work? Why is it so difficult to solve these tough and often untamed problems? We have argued that a first answer is the over-simplification of the problem: pushing just one "button" does not help and policy makers tend to overlook the unintended consequences that are inherent in complex systems.

In Figure 2 we have summarised some of the main relationships that constitute this complexity. It illustrates the central interrelated factors that are associated with segregation of educational opportunity. While this figure is still a coarse simplification, it demonstrates the multiple ways through which potential effects could be channelled. The model shows how segregation of educational opportunity is produced in a complex interplay of institutional factors, such as existing inequalities in society across race and class, the policy design of the educational system, and the agency of parents and schools, who all navigate the specific educational landscapes that are both historically and spatially contingent. Parents make – constrained – choices based on quality, composition, and profile, mediated by distance and the wider spatial (urban, neighbourhood) context. The educational system has emerged in the course of many decades and as such reflects the historical layers of education policies of the past. Correspondingly, potential interventions blocking the effect of one factor on segregation of opportunity may be circumvented and hence trigger or enhance other effects.

Inequality and segregation are hence not individual problems, neither at the level of children or parents, nor at the level of individual schools (although individual children and schools do experience negative effects and are relevant agents of course). Educational inequalities are systemic problems, which require collective action. Collective action requires cooperation of many actors, which is difficult to realise everywhere and especially in the case of the Dutch educational system where responsibilities are fragmented. Because educational inequality and segregation are systemic problems, we propose
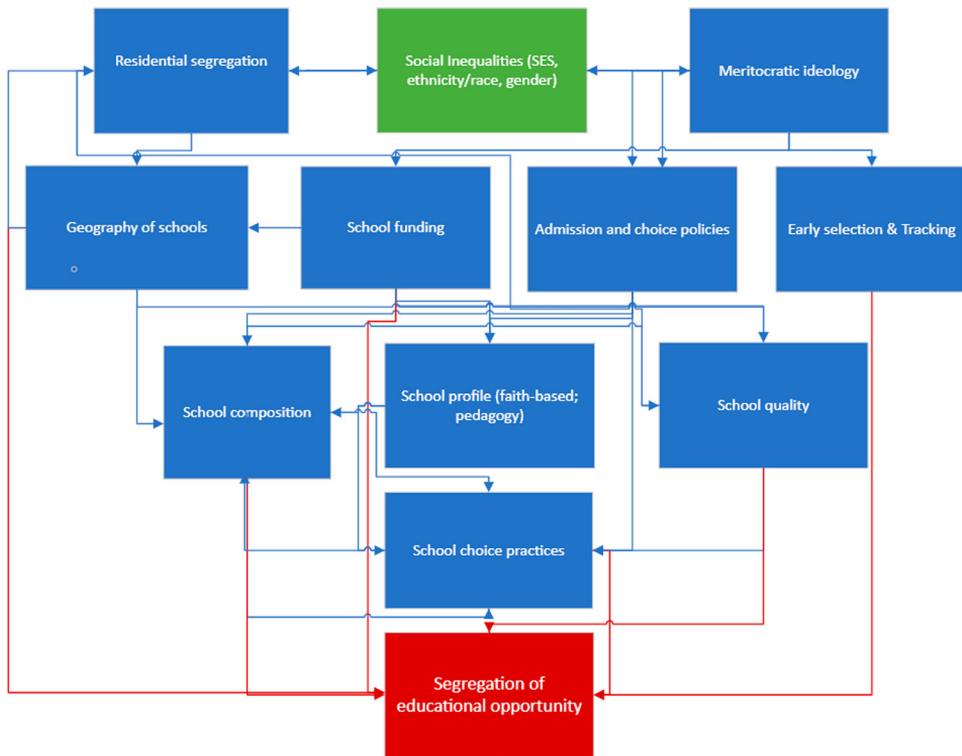
**Figure 2.** The complexity of segregation of educational opportunity.

to extend the meanings of segregation beyond the common conceptualisation leading to descriptions of a particular segregated situation or process of sorting, but rather refer to the systematic disparities of opportunity. Segregation then refers to an imbalance of opportunity, which entails how the design and practices of the educational system as a whole create an unevenness of opportunities for children. This relates to the main theme of this special issue: the inequalities in the Dutch educational system are rooted in the historically grown arrangements of the educational system – and often unintentionally reproduced. The historical carving up of society along cultural-religious lines has been written into the educational landscape. Even in our current times of high levels of secularisation the religious roots of the system are directly related to the levels of school segregation based on ethnicity, lifestyle and identity. Moreover, the historical divisions of education along the lines of social class, with schools for the working classes, and middle and upper classes have been morphed into the current highly stratified system based on meritocratic principles (Merry & Boterman, 2020). So although some old inequalities may have shifted and morphed, there are clear historical roots of those inequalities and there is institutional reproduction into contemporary society.

The attempts to address these issues should hence first and foremost acknowledge the complexity and the systemic aspects of these problems. Solving tough and often untamed problems requires thinking differently and an unravelling of the Gordian knots that strangle our education. This also entails a focus on collective action and shared responsibilities. Segregation of opportunity cannot be solved by parents or

individual schools: it requires an analysis that appreciates the complexity and a solution that focuses on overcoming collective action problems through nudging and coordination. It is an irony of history that the system of pillarisation existed for so long exactly because of the coordination between people at the top of the pillars, and that pillarisation in many ways continued in education after the 1960s, but without elite coordination. During the period of pillarisation coordination was a way of accommodating pluralism (Lijphart, 1968), which was also successful because there were only three big pillars and people had a strong allegiance towards their pillar. That allegiance weakened from the 1970s onwards, one of the pillars got less homogeneous, another fell apart, and elite coordination crumbled. Another reason for coordination to decrease was the introduction of competition and other market principles in the field of education. As a result, responsibilities fragmented, and collective action went out of fashion. That is one of the reasons why coordination today also requires committed political action and a view that does not stare blind on quick fixes by pushing one button, but rather pulls several strings at the same time.

To clarify our position and conclusions we will address some major questions about educational inequality identified in the Call for Papers for the Special Issue of *Educational Review*. (In earlier sections we touched upon those questions only in an implicit way.)

One set of questions is to what extent our view of the inequalities is still applicable at the present juncture, and why? For example, how do class, gender, disability, race and ethnicity continue to shape educational trajectories and experiences? One way in which those characteristics keep on playing a role is through the (often unconscious) expectations of teachers, in their daily work and in advice they give for further education. That is one of the reasons why critical theories are still relevant in this age of globalisation and (super)diversity, for instance critical race theory, feminist theory and intersectionality theory. Highly relevant for the analysis of educational inequality and segregation remains Bourdieu's theory of reproduction of inequalities through types of capital (economic, social and cultural capital) and ways to use assets gained in one field (e.g. economics) for your advantage in another field (e.g. education). The theory also helps to explain the role of vested interests and beliefs, and the reluctance to change in agents benefiting from the status quo (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Another question is what new approaches might tackle these persistent inequalities? In exploring new ways of approaching this persistent issue we connected with the theory of complex systems and identified the main elements of educational inequality as a complex system (Figure 2). We also noticed that at least in the Dutch case responsibilities are fragmented, no agent has the power to push decisions through and no one is responsible for outcomes at the collective level. We called it "the tragedy of the educational commons". Consequently, a novel approach needs to deal adequately with those responsibilities in order to avoid this tragedy of the commons.

We see three fruitful avenues to pursue here. A first is to build on the ways responsibilities are organised when people share and govern common resources, for instance a traditional fishing lake or a public good like education. Standing (2019, p. 306) advocates a governance structure for the educational commons that gives a voice to all those involved in education and directly affected by it (from staff, teachers and students to the local community). A "multi stakeholder cooperative model" would enable all proper interests to be represented in the management and development of education. Hundreds

of schools in the UK have operated something similar, Standing shows, and for the Netherlands it could be a type of "*poldering* 2.0", all at the systemic level.

A second way forward connects to remarks we made earlier about a holistic research approach. That needs to be multidisciplinary in that it brings different relevant disciplines into dialogue (pedagogy, sociology, social geography, political science and policy science, among others). To address educational inequalities at a systemic level we need to overcome the isolated silos of disciplines. The approach also needs to be transdisciplinary in that it connects different types of knowledge: academic knowledge from researchers, expert knowledge from professionals and experiential knowledge from stakeholders (parents, children and youngsters). Those actors can learn from each other and with one another, linking their types of knowledge into rather new forms of proof that one might call multi-vocal or multi-focal.

A third and last fruitful avenue to pursue may be to build data-driven models from social complexity science that – even as they may draw on a simplistic model of the complex world – at least allow for investigating the unintended effects between for instance admission policies, residential segregation, school quality and school choice (Dignum et al., 2022).

These new (methodological and other) approaches should be complemented with a new philosophical perspective on segregation and inequality in public policy. In his classic critical essay Young (1958) sketches a dystopian image of "the rise of meritocracy between 1870 and 2033": good intentions will end in new hereditary classes and no room for social mobility. Young intended his essay as a warning and although he predicted a revolt against meritocracy in 2034, he did not sketch an alternative for it in his essay. Sandel (2020) does offer such an alternative for the "tyranny of merit". He asks the pertinent question whether a perfect meritocracy would be just, and like Young (1958) he argues that it would not. Because, Sandel continues, meritocracy is not a remedy for inequality; it is about mobility, and it postulates that everyone has the same starting point; ultimately it is mainly used to legitimise educational inequality.

Sandel discusses the two contemporary alternatives to meritocracy, free-market liberalism and welfare state liberalism or egalitarian liberalism. Those two accounts of just societies offer compelling arguments against the meritocratic idea; they both reject merit as the basis of justice. (At the same time, they generate attitudes towards success that are difficult to distinguish from meritocratic ones – Sandel, 2020, p. 124.) However, "neither offers an account of the common good sufficiently robust to counter the hubris and humiliation to which meritocracies are prone" (Sandel, 2020, pp. 125–126). Instead of the *distributive* justice they offer (fairer, fuller access to the fruits of economic growth) Sandel pleads for *contributive* justice: "an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that goes with producing what others need and value" (2020, p. 206). Contributive justice is about a good life and human flourishing, about "that we are most fully human when we contribute to the common good and earn the esteem of our fellow citizens for the contribution we make" (2020, p. 212). Coming back to the equality of opportunity (and the "sterile, oppressive" equality of results), Sandel even offers an alternative for those: equality of condition. That "enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity" that include "sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning" (2020, p. 224). We do not have much equality of condition today; for instance social groups go to different places and

their children go to different schools. That is a pity, because the common good can be arrived at only by deliberating with our fellow citizens, the democratic project does require "that citizens from different walks of life encounter one another in common places and public spaces. For this is how we learn to negotiate and abide our differences. And this is how we come to care for the common good." (2020, p. 227). A perfect place to learn to practice all that is a mixed school, in our view. Mixed schools offer the best conditions for the "incubators of democracy" as Bernstein (1970) mentioned.

Equality of condition in education is also endorsed by other authors (Lynch, 2020; Lynch & Crean, 2018). They stress equality of condition recognises that inequality "is rooted in the social structures, therefore, those structures should be transformed" (Lynch, 2020). They acknowledge "the link between wider economic, socio-cultural, political and affective structures" (Lynch, 2020), or what we called "complex inequality". For them equality of condition presents "a holistic framework on social change in education" (Lynch, 2020), using principles of equity and justice.

This is in line with the view of Sandel, which not only offers an alternative for the dominant meritocratic view, but also challenges us to think beyond equality in education and equity in funding towards educational justice. This allows us to avoid the tragedy of the educational commons and to address educational inequality and segregation at the systemic level. This is also how we might stop the "merry-go-round" of temporary projects, the vicious circle of "so much reform, so little change" (Payne, 2009) and start working towards sustainable and meaningful results. This is no easy task, since educational inequality and segregation are tough and often untamed problems. In the Introduction we identified three elements that characterise that type of problems (our knowledge about causes, mechanisms and remedies is in part inconclusive and/or contested; addressing the issues requires many actors to cooperate; and actors have different normative or ethical views on the subject). We argued that in order to start taming these complex problems, we need another comprehensive *approach to policies*, *practice and research* as well as another *(normative) view*. The comprehensive approach is both multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary, with a focus on the systemic level. The alternative view regards contributive justice, equality of condition and an eye for the common good. Both the approach and the view we suggested in this paper might allow us to start in the right direction and at the right level when tackling the issue of educational inequality and school segregation – which might be the best available option we have now.

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