

Ethnic minority parents' and teachers' orientation on collaboration between home and school: strategies and contexts

Frederik Smit y Geert Driessen
Radboud University Nijmegen

Resumen

Tras los atentados islamistas del 11-S y del asesinato del director de cine holandés Theo van Gogh, hay una tendencia creciente entre los políticos y profesores holandeses a preocuparse por la responsabilidad de los padres acerca del modo en que sus hijos se comportan en una sociedad multicultural. En Holanda, la educación moral y el fomento de la cohesión social son prioritarios en la agenda política. En los últimos años, las tensiones sociales entre grupos étnicos han cambiado el clima social en este país con una tradición previa abierta y tolerante. Dos estudios en Educación Primaria y Secundaria, se llevaron a cabo sobre las expectativas de los padres y las relaciones de los profesores ante las circunstancias interculturales. Ambos estudios se realizaron en la ciudad de Róterdam donde existe una gran diversidad étnica. Las conclusiones más importantes fueron que los padres de las minorías étnicas quieren tener mucha más implicación en la educación de sus hijos y que entre los profesores hay demasiadas diferencias en cuanto a conocimientos y conciencia de la interculturalidad. Para resolver estos problemas debería intervenirse específicamente en la mejora de los déficits comunicativos en las escuelas.

Abstract

After '9/11' and the Islamic-inspired murder of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh, there is a growing tendency among Dutch politicians and teachers to draw attention to parents' responsibility for the way their children function in a multicultural society. In the Netherlands fostering social cohesion and moral education are high on the political agenda. In the last few years, social tensions between ethnic groups have changed the atmosphere in this formerly open and tolerant country. Two studies, both in primary and secondary education, were conducted, concerning parents' expectations and teachers' reactions to intercultural circumstances. Both studies were carried out in the ethnic diverse city of Rotterdam. Important conclusions are that ethnic minority parents want to be much more involved in education and that teachers vary too much in their intercultural consciousness and knowledge. To solve problems especially the communication deficits in schools should be addressed.

Introduction

Changing roles of parents and teachers

As in other Western countries, the Netherlands has seen a tendency towards giving schools a clearly defined role in the transfer of moral standards and values and to strengthen the notion of the school's educational task (Smit & Driessen, 2005). Parents and teachers are increasingly expected to have meaningful interactions to make a combined effort in defining education and child rearing (Epstein, 1987; Epstein & Sanders 2000; Klaassen & Smit, 2001). More and more, the relation between parents and school is characterized by cooperation and consultation (Ravn, 2003; Smit, Van Esch & Walberg, 1993). Parents are seen as partners with whom one should cooperate (Martínez-González, 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Smit, Moerel, Van der Wolf & Slegers, 1999; Smit & Van Esch, 1996). Several educational goals (e.g., increasing children's political awareness, cultural awareness, health awareness, environmental awareness) have become the tasks of school and family combined. Also, there is a greater tendency among teachers to draw parents' attention to their responsibility for their children's learning performances. Parental involvement is seen by politicians as an important means to combat educational disadvantage (Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2005; Smit & Van Esch, 1993). And parents try to exert more influence on schools and school boards. Since parents play an active role in defining a school's policy, both the educational authorities and the school management are held accountable, and they are being forced to make their policies more accessible (Davies, 2003; Smit, Van der Wolf & Slegers, 2001).

Discrepancies between policy and practice

The foregoing can be seen as the ideal situation, the situation policies are striving for. However, in practice parenting and school education are often two separate activities. Parents usually do not make many efforts to keep in touch with school as far as their children's upbringing at home and at school is concerned. Parents rarely contribute actively to the exchange of information on the well-being and development of their children at school. The upbringing at school is not really integrated with the upbringing at home (Smit, Moerel & Slegers, 1999). The exchange of knowledge and experiences at parents' evenings and in contacts with teachers does not have any connection with parents' pedagogical behavior. In the Netherlands, especial-

ly the position of low-SES and ethnic minority parents is of great concern. Traditional, ethnic minority parents say many teachers are much too informal in the way they treat their children; they want greater social distance between children and adults, more respect and discipline. Modern, native Dutch parents stress the importance of their children's autonomy and self-development (Driessen, 2003; Pels & De Haan, 2003). The situation regarding minority parents in the Netherlands is highly complicated¹. A large percentage of these parents, especially those of Turkish or Moroccan origin (the so-called 'guestworkers'), have had little or no education and do not speak Dutch. This means that they have no insight in the Dutch education system and are hardly able to communicate with their children's teachers. At the same time they complain that they have problems talking with their children, because the children increasingly only have a rudimentary understanding of their 'mother tongue', that is, the language of the country their parents were born in. As a consequence of these factors minority parents often do not know what is being taught at school. In addition, some of them, as part of their culture, feel that the educational sphere is not their responsibility, but solely that of the school. This does not mean, however, that they think education is not important. On the contrary, in general minority parents foster higher ambitions than native Dutch parents do (Smit, Driessen, Slegers, & Hoop, 2003).

Perspectives of parents and of schools

In this paper we will summarize the results of two studies which pay attention to the controversies and integration problems which have to be countered in the field of education. If schools want to make a positive effort to recognize the differences in cultural backgrounds and validate the culture of the home in order to build better collaborative relations with parents, they also have to pay attention to ethnic and social issues such as discrimination and racism, alcohol and drugs, criminality and violence in local communities. Paramount is, of course, that schools have knowledge of and react adequately to cultural, linguistic and religious differences between the school and the home situation (Driessen, 2001; Smit, Driessen, Slegers & Teelken, 2007).

One study pertained to the situation in primary schools and was aimed at getting a better understanding of the expectations of ethnic minority parents expect with regard to education. This study was carried out on behalf of the city of Rotterdam. Insight into these expectations was deemed to be important because parents and teachers are increasingly expected to work

together in the fields of child-rearing and education. Involving minority parents in their children's education is seen as an important means to combat educational disadvantage. On the basis of the study's results the city of Rotterdam hoped to be able to make strategic decisions with regard to the gearing of the schools' supply and provisions to the parents' expectations.

The other study was directed at the opinions and attitudes of secondary school teachers and principals as to how to cope with the growing cultural diversity in their schools and how to interact with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The management of this school with a majority of ethnic minority students showed a growing concern for the way in which their white Christian teachers, especially the older ones, were coping with the diversity in their students' cultural and religious opinions, attitudes and actions. The school asked us to investigate the practices and problems of cultural diversity in their school and to make suggestions for an intercultural and interreligious school policy. The question of how to communicate –not only with the parents, but also with their own ethnic minority students– provided the impetus (Smit, 2005).

These two study thus combine two perspectives, the perspective of parents, and that of teachers and principals. Both studies were conducted in Rotterdam, a city that hosts some 170 different nationalities; more than 60% of the primary and secondary school students are from ethnic minorities. A number of the minority groups can be called traditional immigrant groups, such as the Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese. However, recently, many new immigrant groups have come to Rotterdam, e.g., refugees/asylum seekers from Eastern Europe and countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. Both primary and secondary schools in Rotterdam try to take account of the changing situation by paying special attention to, for example, school climate and parent-school relations. Rotterdam seeks to set up a high quality education system for both the native Dutch majority and all of the ethnic minority groups.

Method

Study 1: Parents' expectations

In the first study in primary education, nine ethnic minority groups were selected and native Dutch parents acted as a reference category. The countries included Turkey, Morocco, Surinam, the Netherlands Antilles, Cape Verde, Pakistan, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Russia, and the Netherlands. For every group interviews were conducted with 100 parents of primary

school students. Because many parents did not speak Dutch, bilingual interviewers were employed. The number of 100 parents in each group made it possible to carry out reliable analyses both between and within the different groups. A total of 1000 parents were thus asked to answer questions on topics such as parental participation, school choice and religious convictions, school-parents communication, the importance of moral standards and values, attunement of educational goals of family and school, discrepancies in educational practices at school and at home. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of an extensive review of the relevant literature. Analysis of the quantitative data from the interviews was effected by making use of frequency distributions, correlational analyses and analyses of (co)variance.

Study 2: Opinions of teachers and principals

In the second study in secondary general education several group interviews were held with eleven teachers and school principals. In this qualitative study we explored some further details of the attitudes and practices regarding the religious and cultural diversity of the school population. Some of these teachers and principals we interviewed had very explicit opinions with regard to their pedagogical assignment and necessary school policies. The respondents were asked to give their opinion as to whether schools and teachers need to pay more attention to moral education and to moral standards and values in general. They were also asked to give information on the nature and practices of the religious denomination or religious identity of their school and to state their opinions, attitudes, practices and experiences regarding the diversity of religious and cultural standards and values in their school and in society at large. Moreover, attention was paid to their ideas on the actual, desired and possible school policies in this field. An extensive interview protocol was constructed. For the analysis of the group interviews, audio recordings were made and transcribed. The answers to all of the questions were then categorized into the relevant rubric. Finally, with the aid of statements from the discussions, the questions from the protocol were analyzed. For purposes of reliability, all of the transcribed texts were analyzed by two researchers. In a number of research sessions, it was next attempted to obtain agreement on the observed results. The starting point for analyzing the questions was always the field of tension between the opinions and practices of the secondary school teachers and the differences of opinion between the teachers and school leadership.

Results

Lack of communication

The study into parents' expectations shows that the minority parents' own upbringing, faith and traditional culture constitute their major frame of reference for raising their children. Parents from countries strongly characterized by traditionalism and collectivism place more emphasis on relational standards and values, such as obedience, respect and helpfulness, in their parenting than parents from more modern and more individualistically oriented societies (cf. Pels & Nijsten, 2003).

The results of the study further show that nurturing children in the family and educating children at school in fact are rather isolated processes. As a consequence, there are some severe bottlenecks in the pedagogical attunement of family and school. There is little exchange of opinions and experiences between family and school. Tradition oriented parents from other countries than the Netherlands are of the opinion that teachers treat their children too much in an informal way; they prefer more distance between the teacher and the children.

On all points, minority parents attach more value to learning to obey the rules. Their major pedagogical goals are keeping to the straight and narrow and honesty, followed by bearing responsibility and equality of the sexes. Of the native Dutch, only a very small group attaches importance to their children adhering to religious rules. Most Moroccan and Pakistani parents, however, attach great importance to their children adhering to such rules, because they want to raise their children in their faith. Cape Verdean parents are similar to Surinamese and Pakistani parents in that they set high ideals in terms of their children's educational careers and attach great importance to their children doing well at school. Dutch parents attach the most importance to their children learning to work together.

The findings above indicate that the most important bottleneck is not so much the actual and experienced difference in values between the school and parents from other countries. More important seems to be the problem of the lack of communication between family and school regarding the emotionally important issues of (traditional) values and child rearing practices. This was also found in an earlier study of the pedagogical assignment of the school and the relations between home and school conducted with native Dutch parents (Klaassen & Leeferink, 1999). In the present study we have investigated further the nature of lack of communication in respect to minority groups.

Because of the fact that these new findings can be seen as important not only for expanding our scientific knowledge, but also for educational policy and practice we will now concentrate on the specific findings about the relationship of parents from minority groups and school. The first question was: 'Do parents feel that they have problems in their contacts with teachers and school?' The answer to this question is presented in Table 1; the table gives the mean percentages per country and the eta correlation coefficient, which gives an indication of the differences between the various countries.

Table 1. *Problems in the contact between parents and school (in %)*

	Country ^a										Total	eta
	TUR	MAR	SUR	ANT	CPV	PAK	YUG	SOM	RUS	NLD		
Problems occur:												
- always	0	0	0	4	1	2	0	11	0	0	2	.24
- frequently	3	0	0	2	4	3	1	4	0	1	2	.12
- occasionally	17	14	13	19	9	9	8	15	18	14	13	.11
- seldom	14	5	9	6	3	6	14	6	22	8	9	.19
- never	66	78	77	68	74	78	70	55	49	72	69	.21
- do not know	0	2	1	0	7	2	7	5	11	5	4	.19
I have never had contact with the school	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	4	0	0	1	.14

^a Countries: Turkey, Morocco, Surinam; Antilles, Cape Verde, Pakistan, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Russia, the Netherlands.

In the present research 240 or 26% of the parents say that there have been problems in the communication between home and primary school. Somalian parents report more frequently that they have always had problems. These 26% of parents were asked as to the causes of the problems in contact with teachers or the school. The spread of the reasons given by these parents is presented in Table 2. This table gives the different countries of origin on the basis of the categories 'always', 'frequently' and 'occasionally' on a five point scale.

What are the causes of the problems in contact with teachers or the school? Almost half of the parents reported that the problems were caused by differences of opinion on child rearing between themselves and the teacher. Slightly less frequently mentioned were that there was no extra regard for their specific requirements, and their own language difficulties.

Table 2. *Causes of problems in contact between parents and school*
 (% always + frequently + occasionally)

	Country										Total	<i>eta</i>
	TUR	MAR	SUR	ANT	CPV	PAK	YUG	SOM	RUS	NLD		
My own initial anxiety	21	37	5	68	18	5	17	56	18	9	30	.47
Sex difference between me and the teacher	3	5	0	32	12	5	9	56	0	0	15	.54
Lack of interest on the part of the teacher	35	26	23	55	29	25	13	56	16	26	33	.33
Different opinions on child-rearing	53	5	55	65	65	30	48	67	29	48	48	.37
Teachers do not abide by agreements	26	0	9	74	29	20	22	58	11	39	30	.51
No attention paid to my specific requirements	47	5	27	77	29	30	39	64	29	57	42	.41
The language used by the teacher	29	32	0	71	12	25	13	64	37	4	35	.47
My own language problems	47	32	0	68	41	40	26	72	37	0	43	.42
I see no need for / have no interest in contact	0	0	5	61	6	10	0	8	0	13	11	.64
<i>N</i>	34	19	22	31	17	20	23	36	38	23	240	

^a Countries: Turkey, Morocco, Surinam; Antilles, Cape Verde, Pakistan, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Russia, the Netherlands.

The most important causes of the problems in contact with the teacher or school for the Somalis are their own language difficulties, differences of opinion on child-rearing, the language used by the teacher, initial hesitation on their own part and the gender difference between parent and teacher. Antillean parents in particular give as causes the lack of regard for their specific requirements, that teachers do not abide by agreements and the language used by the teacher. Moroccans and Turks have far less command of the Dutch language than Surinamers or Antilleans.

In this research, which concentrates on primary education, attention is also given to how the problem should be addressed. At least two thirds of the parents with problems agree that the problem can be tackled by providing more information about the standards and values current at the school, paying more attention to disruptive or unacceptable behavior of students and paying more attention to what parents have to say. More than half of these parents suggested that greater influence of parents on the current standards and values would be beneficial. An ample majority of the parents is dissatisfied about the say they have in matters concerning moral standards and values, their influence on educational ideas of the school, and the extent to which teachers pay attention to religion. A small part of the parents also have no idea as to what is going on in this field.

Both primary and secondary school studies show that there are large differences between the various ethnic minority groups, but also that the larger part of the parents are really interested in the education that their children receive. They indicate that they are committed to this education and also wish to participate in it. The problems arising from this, however, usually involve the communication between parents and school. Compared with native Dutch parents, minority parents worry more about the communication process, particularly because it does not always run so smoothly. This goes in particular for immigrants who do not have a good command of the Dutch language (cf. Driessen, Van der Slik & De Bot, 2002). They have the impression that this communication is mainly going in one direction: schools provide information, but show little interest in the specific views, wishes and expectations of minority parents. Particularly with regard to matters relating to their faith, accents on cognitive or socio-emotional educational goals, and differences in the pedagogical approaches at home and at school, which constitute points of special attention. Parents complain there is hardly any communication, neither unilaterally, nor bilaterally.

The pedagogical goals of minority families usually differ strongly from those of native Dutch families. Uprooted from their own traditions, many immigrants tend to adhere to strict rules for their children and create a world of their own in this environment that is strange to them. No command or a limited command of the Dutch language reinforces this attitude. Lack of sufficient orientation in society, however, causes all kinds of conflicts. For example, they do not understand the way in which teachers treat their children, especially when there are behavioral problems. In line with their own tradition, these parents advocate strict rules and see teachers as experts who are masters that need to be obeyed by their children.

Lack of knowledge

The findings of the study in the secondary school show that teachers vary considerably in their problem consciousness regarding the matters involved here. They do not have organized or structural discussions on the cultural differences and problems at their school. One of the teachers feels that 'You can't force me to become more intercultural.' Some teachers say that they do not want to know much about their students' religious and cultural backgrounds: 'It is not necessary to know everything about each other.' If they show little knowledge of the differences in cultures, they state that this is not a problem to them: 'Ethnic minority students should understand that some aspects of their diverse cultures are unknown.'

A number of teachers do have more appreciation of the particular situation of ethnic minority students. One teacher, for example, pointed out that many of the students at this school live in two cultures or are the offspring of mixed marriages. These factors can cause confusion for the students. In discussions examples of life balancing between two cultures emerge, such as Chinese students who are regarded as adults at home and run a household, but are treated as children at school. Moroccan girls receive conflicting messages from the Muslim community and from the school. Moreover, the emotions and behavior of, for example, Muslim students sometimes clash with the demands of the Dutch youth culture (clothes, expressions, freedom and sexual contact at an early age). Such factors increase the uncertainty and confront the students with such questions as: 'Where do I belong?' 'What is my position, should I wear a headscarf or not?'

In line with the parents' view, the teachers state that schools should pay special attention to the enforcement of rules. In their opinion, parents attach great importance to the fact that schools socialize their children into discipline, keep them under control and teach them to get along with each other in a respectful way. More discipline will also have a positive effect on the learning processes. Adhering to the rules in a normal way provides the student not only with certainty, but also encourages independent action. Teachers acknowledge that, in many other cultures, rules are drummed into the children's minds, but rules can also be learned in such a way that children or students will accept and internalize the rules by themselves. Teachers are important for the learning of rules because they function as role models.

This study also shows that the interviewed teachers had little knowledge of the socialization processes which take place at home, i.e. in the family. School principals in our research plead for teachers paying home visits, from

which they may learn much more about their students than from the formal intake interviews at school which give only restricted information on the students' cultural backgrounds for reasons of privacy.

In connection with question of values in a multicultural school it has been remarked that 'immigrant students noticeably lack understanding of the acceptance of authority.' In a discussion with a teacher about the values and standards of immigrant students the term 'negotiation culture' was used. This teacher was irritated by the fact that immigrant pupils – and their parents – thought they could persuade the teacher to award higher marks so that the student would pass the grade.

A well-thought out and carefully examined relationship with other cultural opinions and customs is important. Teachers must be aware, for example, that immigrant students are not used to looking directly at them, because that is not part of their culture. In connection with this, a teacher remarked that immigrant student must gradually learn to do so, since this adjustment is desirable. The directors questioned had this to say on the subject, 'In recent years there has been more thought on such matters, particularly due to the increased immigrant student population. However, this mostly takes place informally and that is no good thing, because often one reacts to loose statements. There should be a focused dialogue, with study days and such.'

The teachers' cultural knowledge differs from person to person and is also dependent on the subject taught. The school principals point out that the last few years have seen more conflicts and a deterioration in the relations between the native Dutch and ethnic minority groups, not only in society at large but also at school. 'Ethnic minority boys don't listen very well to female teachers.' Islamic consciousness is very much present in a very large part of the male students, but there is no reason to speak of extremists, according to a number of teachers. If a teacher is paying attention to aspects of the Islamic religion, students are eager to hear mistakes or false interpretations.

Discussion and recommendations

The position of ethnic minorities in education is now increasingly problematized in the Netherlands. In relation to ethnic minorities, topics such as violence at school, headscarves, Islamic schools, educational segregation, emancipation, tolerance and discrimination, moral standards and values, and early school leaving are major issues in the public debate (Driessen, 2001; Driessen & Valkenberg, 2000). In addition, the Dutch government also

demands a more active attitude from minority parents in this sphere and they are also given more responsibility.

Both studies show that communication is a prerequisite for parental involvement and participation as well as teacher involvement in the intercultural problems at school and in society. What is not entirely clear is the underlying reason for this lack of good communication. This has undoubtedly something to do with the parents and teachers themselves. As for the parents, this reason may their often poor command of the Dutch language, their low levels of education, or their unfamiliarity with the Dutch education system. On the other hand, both studies also reveal that teachers are not always willing and do not always have the specific communication skills to deal with such a heterogeneity of foreign cultures, languages and religions. A prerequisite of course is knowledge of the very diverse backgrounds of the students. These aspects should therefore be given more focused attention in teacher training institutes, both in colleges initial study programs and refresher courses (Van Kessel & Smit, 1998).

On the basis of these two studies, the following recommendations were made:

- Education and child rearing should become more integrated; upbringing at school and upbringing at home need to be harmonized.
- Teachers and parents ought to be more aware of the fact that they need each other to communicate better about the pedagogical climates at home and at school, and about how to integrate each other's contributions and develop respect for each other's contributions to the children's upbringing and education.
- It is essential that teachers and parents are open towards each other, become acquainted with each other's cultural and religious backgrounds, and consider education and upbringing their joint task and responsibility.
- Parents should be considered less as suppliers of children and more as serious partners, whom schools need to make sure that students feel at home and also do well at school. More than they do now, schools should take into account the increasing diversity of backgrounds, wishes and expectations of parents.
- Parents should be made aware that they have the obligation to maintain contacts with the school in their children's interest and to collaborate in upbringing and education. On the basis of their own responsibility, they can and should make a major contribution to their children's well-being and development at school.

- The support to parents might consist of providing information on the rights and obligations of parents and schools regarding education and upbringing. In addition, some insight might be provided into what a school-parents partnership entails, what they as partners may expect from each other, and how this relation may be substantiated.
- Through peer supervision, teachers might help to improve their colleagues' expertise in this field within the context of their own work situation.
- Parental involvement in education ought to be placed much higher on the policy agenda in the plans of schools and school boards. This should create a situation in which a school's vision, views on moral standards and values, the relation between socialization and qualification, mutual expectations, and tasks and responsibilities are made much more explicit. And parents should agree to this in writing when they when they come to school to register their child.
- A mutual dialogue should take place in school teams about the school as a community of values. This dialogue should deal with such questions as: Do students from a different cultural background feel that their values are respected? How is this respect or lack of it demonstrated? Do all teachers have this knowledge? Are they all concerned, or are some totally uninterested? Who defines 'respect' and what is the role of the teacher, the directors, and the students in this? What is the role of unwritten rules?
- In school teams there could be a more structured method of discussion about pedagogic relations and interaction. 'There must be more openness about the pedagogic interaction of teachers with their students: teachers must retain their own contribution to this.' It was clear from the research that there are still different opinions about values and standards, and pedagogic functions. This is only to be expected and does not pose a great problem so long as mutual reflection and discussion take place. It is not advisable to assume that everyone has the same ideas and practices. It would seem advisable to intensify the discussion about the interaction with students of differing ethnic backgrounds, in particular consistent attention should be paid to the tension between their own traditional cultural identity and adaptation to the Dutch culture.
- Further training of teachers should be aimed at optimizing the communication and interaction between teachers and parents. The goal of further training might be to provide teachers with tools that allow

- them to improve the roles that parents can play in their children's affective and cognitive development.
- School policy aimed at increasing the intercultural sensitivity of colleagues can make use of various methods – focused discussions among colleagues, the organization of study days, coaching both new and established colleagues, the incorporation of the question in the practical part of teacher training, and visits to other cultures and lands (a more intensive form of acquaintance). It must be realized in this that not all teachers will find extra training and reflection desirable.
 - In initial and further teacher training, more attention should be paid to the teacher's position vis-à-vis parents and also to such aspects as a customer-oriented approach to work, making mutual expectations explicit, and addressing each other about capacities, responsibilities and agreements made.

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Note

- ¹ Ethnic minorities in the Netherlands can be divided into four categories: (1) immigrants from former Dutch colonies (Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles); (2) so-called 'guest workers' from the Mediterranean countries (e.g., Italy, Spain, Turkey and Morocco), who predominantly came to the Netherlands during the 1960s; (3) a more recent influx of asylum seekers/refugees from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, lately especially from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and former Yugoslavia; and (4) immigrants from Western countries such as Belgium, Germany, the UK and the USA. Applying 'country of birth' as the criterion, in 2005 the largest ethnic minority groups were of Turkish, Surinamese, Moroccan, and Antillean origin, with 358,000, 328,000, and 315,000 and 130,000 people, respectively, out of a total Dutch population of 16.5 million.