SELF-IMAGE AND PEER ACCEPTANCE OF DUTCH STUDENTS IN REGULAR AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Abstract. **This study focused on differences in well-being and peer acceptance of three groups of low-achieving students in regular and special education in the Netherlands. Well-being was assessed by means of a self-image scale consisting of 39 statements and peer acceptance through sociometric nomination and rank-order procedures. Low-achieving students in regular education who received remedial help had a similar self-image and were equally accepted by their peers as the low-achieving students in regular education who did not receive remedial support. Students in special education, however, had a slightly better self-image and were also a little more accepted by their peers than the low-achieving students in regular education. Low-achieving students in regular education who received remedial support neither profited nor suffered from their "needy" status regarding peer acceptance.**

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Children differ from each other; they differ in appearance, behavior, and skill. Teaching children to deal with such differences and to respect such diversity are among the aims of inclusive education. In Italy, such considerations were the main reasons for suddenly and almost completely doing away with special education as an independent entity in the educational system (Filippini-Gaudiano, 1991). The hope was that inclusive education will help plant the seeds of a multiform and more tolerant society. Such notions also lie at the foundation of the Regular Education Initiative in the United States, where the mainstreaming practices of the sixties and seventies have been reactivated (Stainback & Stainback, 1992).

The least restrictive environment principle appears to be a key element in the American pursuit of integration. Whether they have a severe or a mild cognitive disability, or have been diagnosed with autism, all children have the right to be cared for and schooled under the least restrictive circumstances. Children with learning disabilities are no exception. While lawyers originally appealed to the least restrictive environment principle in their pleas for maximum integration of children with learning disabilities into regular school classes, judges have more recently decided that for some children special education may constitute the least restrictive environment (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999).

In 1990 (Ministerie O&W), the Dutch government started its integration policy, WSNS (in English "Together to School Again"), aimed at integrating regular and special education. In the Netherlands, integrating children with special needs in regular education was believed also to be good for children with learning disabilities because it prevents them from being labeled

"different" or even "deviant." In addition, integration is considered to be good for classmates who learn to accept children who are different from themselves. Beyond this ideological motive, the Dutch government had financial reasons for implementing the policy of inclusive education. Teaching children in schools for special education is at least twice as expensive as teaching children in regular education (Ministerie OC&W, 2000a). Similar figures are reported in the United States (Smith, 2001).

In 1975, 20 different types of schools for special education were in existence in the Netherlands, including schools for children with low vision or blindness, deafness or hard of hearing, speech and language impairments, physical impairments, emotional and behavioral disorders, mild mental retardation, and learning disabilities (Bolkestein, Duindam, & Menkveld, 1990). Integration of all these distinct groups into regular education was believed unfeasible as well as undesirable (see also Madden & Slavin, 1983). The largest, growing group in special education constituted children with learning disabilities (including those with mild mental retardation). In 1975, approximately 1.5% of all students in elementary school attended a school for children with learning disabilities. In 1990 this number reached 2.5%, and in 1995 it had risen to 3.7% (Ministerie OC&W, 2000b; Pijl, 1997).

Thus, the Dutch inclusive-education policy was specifically aimed at integrating children with learning disabilities in mainstream education. From the outset, scientific research was implemented to evaluate the process (e.g., Meijer, 1996; Peschar, 1997; Ruijssenaars & van der Aalsvoort, 1997). The specific focus was whether implementation of the new policy led to the desired effect, that is, a substantial reduction in the number of children with learning disabilities in special-education programs. None of these reports, however, investigated whether children with learning disabilities benefited cognitively or emotionally from attending a regular education program.

No Dutch researcher in the nineties, except Ruijssenaars (1996), publicly even doubted that children with learning disabilities benefit cognitively and/or socially-emotionally from regular school attendance. In fact, people who raised such doubts were considered politically incorrect, or worse, as adhering to "apartheid" (Doornbos, 1991). This marginal attention to the potentially negative consequences of inclusive education is striking given the legal proceedings that have been conducted in the United States since 1989 for the purpose of specifying what is meant by least restrictive environment (Roberts & Mather, 1995; Speece & Keogh, 1996).

Meijer, Pijl, and Hegarty (1997) argued that empirical arguments could not decide for or against inclusive education. It may be difficult to decide on empirical grounds to what extent inclusive education is successful, but this should not prevent researchers from investigating the issue. Recently, Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld, and Karsten (2001) published the results of an empirical study on cognitive and emotional development of Dutch students in special and regular education. Ongoing research by Bakker (Bakker & Krijger, 2002; Bakker, van Alem, & Broere, 2002) also aimed at investigating precisely this issue.

Peetsma et al. (2001) found that after four years, Dutch students in regular education progressed more in academic performance than their peers in special education. After two years, however, school motivation based on teachers' assessment was significantly better in special education than in regular education. Moreover, interviews conducted with the students indicated that those who suffered from psychosocial problems appeared to be better off in special schools than in regular schools. These results do not provide an unequivocal answer to the question of whether inclusive education is generally more profitable for children with learning disabilities. While there appear to be academic merits of inclusive education, the same does not hold true when shifting the emphasis to children's psychosocial well-being. Results of research conducted outside the Netherlands also indicate that an overly optimistic attitude is not warranted.

In a meta-analysis of 17 sociometric studies conducted in the United States between 1978 and 1991, children with learning disabilities were hardly accepted by their "normal" peers in regular education. In fact, they reported feeling ignored and detested (Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Research by Le Mare and de la Ronde (2000) showed that students with learning disabilities who attended regular education classes belong to the least popular. This finding is especially disturbing, as Kuhne and Wiener (2000) provided evidence for the stability of social status during the school years. Thus, the validity of the famous contact hypothesis, "to know them is to find them tolerable," is debatable (Coben & Zigmund, 1986).

With only a few exceptions (e.g., Banerji & Dailey, 1995), numerous U.S. studies of self-image and self-esteem of children with learning disabilities are even less clearly in favor of their integration into regular education (Harris & Sipay, 1990). Studies from other countries, for example, Italy and Greece, also point in this direction (Leondari, 1993). Thus, it appears that the self-esteem of children with learning disabilities does not benefit from regular education attendance.

The overwhelmingly negative results of evaluation research led Larrivee and Horne (1991) to question the integration practices prevailing in the United States at

the time of their study. Even greater doubts were raised when the unfavorable social-emotional status of children with learning disabilities in regular education was shown to stem more from the special status assigned to them than from their mediocre school performance. Moreover, Wiener, Harris, and Shirer (1990) showed that neither the achievement nor the IQ of children with learning disabilities appeared to be adequate predictors of peer acceptance. In fact, the label "learning disabled" itself seemed to place them in a marginal position (see also Le Mare & de la Ronde, 2000; Shessel & Reiff, 1999).

It should be noted, however, that research by Vaughn, Hogan, Haager, and Kouzekanani (1992) contradicts the foregoing observations, finding that due to the diagnostic label assigned to them, children with learning disabilities are believed to be more accepted by their peers than low-achieving children lacking such a special label and status. These authors suggested that the label has an apologetic effect and thus a protective rather than a stigmatizing function with only positive consequences for the students' self-esteem. This thinking is in keeping with a long tradition of sociological theory (e.g., Brantlinger & Guskin, 1987; Parsons, 1970; Scheff, 1966).

The present study included three distinct groups of low-achieving students: (a) one group comprised low-achieving students attending a school for regular education who did not receive additional help, (b) one group comprised low-achieving students attending a school for regular education receiving additional help, and (c) one group consisted of low-achieving students who attended a school for special education. High/Medium-achieving students in regular education served as a control group.

Three main questions were investigated: (a) is the well-being of students in special education different from low-achieving students in regular education? (b) is peer acceptance different in the three groups? and (c) does being labeled "learning disabled" serve as a protective factor for children in regular education?

METHOD

Participants

The research group consisted of 568 Dutch students: 419 students, aged between 7 and 13 years, attended a school for regular education, and 149 students, aged between 8 and 15 years, attended a school for special education. While the usual skewed distribution of boys versus girls in the three special education schools (70% versus 30%) was encountered, boys and girls were equally represented in the regular education schools.

Information regarding the scholastic achievement of the students attending regular education schools was obtained through their teachers, who were asked to distinguish among three types of students: A group of high- and medium-achieving students (i.e., High/Medium group) and two groups of low-achieving students (i.e., Low and Low + groups). Low-achieving students did not perform particularly well, but did not receive any remedial help. The Low + group was comprised of students who received special help in or outside the class and/or were on a waiting list to enter a school for special education. No further distinction in scholastic achievement level was made for students attending special education schools. Table 1 presents an overview of the distribution of students across the different achievement groups.

Table 1

Percentages of Students in Regular and Special Education Across Achievement Groups and Sex

	Education			
		Regular		Special
Students	**High/Medium**	**Low**	**Low +[a]**	
Sex				
Boys	30.3 (172)	3.9 (22)	3.9 (22)	18.5 (105)
Girls	28.0 (159)	4.2 (24)	3.5 (20)	7.7 (44)
Total	58.3 (331)	8.1 (46)	7.4 (42)	26.2 (149)

Note. Values in parentheses represent absolute numbers.
[a]+ refers to receiving remedial teaching.

Instruments and Procedure

Two instruments were used. A self-image scale determined the students' well-being, their relationship with their teacher and their classmates, whereas a sociometric questionnaire determined the students' acceptance by their peers (see below). Both instruments were administered on the same day. First students were asked to fill out the self-image scale and then they answered the questions on the sociometric questionnaire.

The self-image scale contained 39 statements about students' beliefs and opinions concerning their school behavior and school attitudes. Using a 5-point scale (ranging from "always" to "never"), the students were asked to indicate the degree to which each of the statements applied to them. All statements are listed in

Table 2

Factor Structure and Factor Loadings of the Self-Image Scale

	Factor				
Statement	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
When I finish an assignment, I usually think I've done it right.	*0.72*	0.12	0.22	0.11	-0.04
I think I am good at school.	*0.72*	0.21	0.25	0.09	0.17
I think I learn well.	*0.68*	0.09	0.31	0.13	-0.01
If I have done my best and turn my work in, I usually think I've done well.	*0.67*	0.05	0.04	-0.02	-0.06
I think I am just as smart as other kids in my class.	*0.62*	0.08	0.34	-0.03	0.08
I think I am good at everything.	*0.59*	-0.21	0.11	0.13	0.16
I think I look good.	*0.59*	0.01	0.43	0.13	-0.04
The kids in my class like to play with me.	*0.58*	0.20	0.12	0.25	0.44
I am a cheerful kid.	*0.49*	0.18	0.38	0.26	0.06
I stay calm and pay attention during an assignment.	*0.42*	0.20	0.12	-0.19	-0.05
I like going to school.	0.20	*0.76*	0.02	-0.27	-0.01
I like it at this school.	0.10	*0.74*	-0.04	0.11	-0.03
I usually feel like going to school.	0.20	*0.70*	-0.01	-0.10	-0.04
I'm glad I'm at this school.	0.06	*0.69*	0.17	0.15	-0.11
My teacher is nice to me.	0.32	*0.65*	0.02	0.36	0.01
If I had my choice, I would rather be at a different school.	-0.16	*0.64*	0.02	0.36	0.01
I feel good with my teacher.	0.12	*0.62*	-0.05	0.04	0.17
I think my teacher is strict.	-0.14	*0.53*	0.15	0.15	0.18
My teacher is nicer to other kids than to me.	0.12	*0.52*	0.16	-0.04	0.19
My teacher is less strict to other kids than to me.	-0.16	*0.47*	0.13	-0.20	-0.08
I would like to look different.	0.09	0.01	*0.72*	0.03	-0.02
I'm satisfied with how I look.	0.31	0.08	*0.71*	-0.03	0.08
I'd rather be somebody else.	-0.06	0.15	*0.67*	0.25	0.19
I'm happy with myself.	0.46	-0.02	*0.65*	-0.03	0.11
I would like to be different from what I am.	0.16	0.20	*0.64*	0.21	0.11
I have a nice face to look at.	0.28	-0.02	*0.58*	0.10	0.02
I think I am dumb.	0.24	0.06	*0.54*	0.06	-0.01
Just before I get a difficult assignment, I get nervous.	0.06	-0.06	*0.51*	0.04	0.32
I think I do a lot wrong during gym.	0.12	-0.02	0.19	*0.63*	0.04
I think I'm bad at sports.	0.12	0.04	0.39	*0.62*	0.03
I'm good in gym.	0.18	-0.10	0.36	*0.55*	-0.13
I like gym.	0.05	0.21	0.03	*0.55*	-0.28
The other kids think I am no good in gym.	0.01	-0.09	-0.03	*0.55*	0.15
I feel lonely in class.	-0.17	0.12	0.18	-0.01	*0.72*
I remember what I learn well.	0.35	-0.05	0.10	-0.18	*0.52*
If I know the answer to a question in class, I dare to answer.	0.07	-0.16	0.15	-0.17	*0.52*
The kids in my class tease me.	-0.09	0.31	0.04	0.31	*0.49*
I have lots of friends in my class.	0.38	0.16	-0.20	0.33	*0.44*
I think the kids in my class are nice.	0.37	0.19	0.13	0.24	*0.43*

Note. Numbers in italics indicate the most heavily loading item on that factor.

Table 2. The statements were derived from the School Vragenlijst (SVL; School Questionnaire) by Smits and Vorst (1991), supplemented with items from the CompententieBelevingsSchaal voor Kinderen (CBSK; a Dutch version of the Competence Perception Scale for Children by Harter, 1982).

The sociometric questionnaire contained three nomination-procedure questions and four rank-order procedure questions. According to the nomination procedure, each group member is asked to name those members of the group who, in their opinion, meet a number of defined criteria. In the present study, all children were asked to name three children from their class whom they considered a friend, three children whom they would like to invite to their birthday party and, finally, three children with whom they would like to work on an assignment.

According to the rank-order procedure, all members of a group are evaluated by each other in terms of specific criteria. The rank-order procedure used here was derived from Agard, Veldman, Kaufman, and Semmel (1978). The children were asked with respect to all of their classmates, how much they would like to conduct a difficult assignment with the child, play with the child during a break, invite the child to his or her birthday party and, finally, sit next to the child in class. In each case, three answer options were available: I'd like it, okay, I wouldn't like it.

The two procedures are associated with certain advantages and disadvantages. Despite rather high correlations between the two procedures, they do not appear to be interchangeable. Asher and Taylor (1982) argued that the two procedures measure different dimensions of social status. That is, the nomination procedure captures the popularity of children, whereas the rank-order procedure captures their general acceptance. For this reason, it is more likely that the isolated position of some children in a class will be revealed by the rank-order technique than by the nomination technique. In addition, the rank-order technique is less sensitive to fluctuations, and therefore produces particularly stable results (e.g., French, Waas, & Tarver-Behring, 1986; Johnson, Ironsmith, & Poteat, 1994). In the present research, both procedures were used to obtain the most detailed picture of the social acceptance characterizing the different groups of children.

RESULTS

First, the data obtained by the self-image scale will be analyzed, then the results of the questions regarding the sociometric questionnaire. Finally, we will examine the relationship between self-image and peer acceptance.

Self-Image

Table 2 presents the results of a factor analysis with varimax rotation. It produced five dimensions, which could be characterized and ordered in terms of the amount of variance explained of the children's self-images; Factor 1: self-confidence (21.7%), Factor 2: relation to teacher and school (10.3%), Factor 3: physical appearance (6.5%), Factor 4: sport achievements (5.4%), and Factor 5: relations to classmates (5.0%). The values of Cronbach's alpha varied from 0.72 to 0.91, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency for the various dimensions. Thus, the results obtained with this instrument are suited for further analysis.

Table 3 lists the results of a comparison between the low-achieving students (Low and Low +) in regular education and their High/Medium-achieving peers. *T*-tests revealed that four out of five aspects of self-image differed significantly in favor of the High/Medium-achieving students. That is, self-confidence, $t(413) = -5.82$, $p < .01$; relation to teacher and school, $t(413) = -3.93$, $p < .01$; physical appearance, $t(413) = -3.90$, $p < .01$; relation to classmates, $t(413) = -3.62$, $p < .01$. The difference on the sport achievement factor was insignificant but in the same direction as the other four aspects, $t(413) = -1.09$.

Table 4 shows the results related to all five aspects of self-image of all three groups of low-achieving students (Low, Low +, and Special Education). *T*-tests were conducted on the differences between the Low and Low + groups, and between the Low + and Special Education groups. The comparisons between the Low and Low + groups showed one significant difference. The sport achievement score of the students in the Low + group was significantly higher than that of the Low group, $t(84) = -2.49$, $p < .05$.

The comparisons between the Low + and the Special Education groups revealed two significant differences. Students in the Special Education group assigned themselves more self-confidence than the Low + students in regular education, $t(189) = -2.35$, $p < .05$, but the Low + students perceived their sport achievements to be better than the Special Education students, $t(189) = -3.18$, $p < .01$.

Analyses of sex differences with regard to self-image showed no differences between boys and girls in the High/Medium-achieving group nor in the Low + group. However, in the Low group, sex differences were found stemming from less self-confidence and greater dissatisfaction regarding relations with classmates in girls than in boys, $t(44) = 3.17$; $p < .01$, and $t(44) = 3.03$; $p < .01$, respectively. In the group of Special Education students, boys' self-image was also better than girls' self-image in four out of five aspects. That is, physical appearance, $t(147) = 4.00$; $p < .01$; sport achievements, $t(147) = 3.84$; $p < .01$; self-confidence, $t(147) = 3.71$; $p < .01$; relations with classmates, $t(147) = 2.21$; $p < .01$.

Table 3

Mean Scores of Self-Image of Students in Regular Education

Dimension	Achievement Groups	
	Low and Low +	High/Medium
Self-confidence		
M	2.99	3.49
SD	.76	.71
Relation to teacher and school		
M	3.72	4.03
SD	.76	.62
Physical appearance		
M	3.78	4.09
SD	.76	.64
Sport achievement		
M	4.17	4.26
SD	.61	.66
Relation to classmates		
M	3.80	4.05
SD	.64	.55

Note. Maximum score was 5.

Table 4

Mean Scores of Self-Image of Low-Achieving Students

Dimension	Achievement Groups		
	Low	Low +	Special Education
Self-confidence			
M	2.89	3.08	3.42
SD	.70	.82	.82
Relation to teacher and school			
M	3.75	3.69	3.62
SD	.80	.72	.83
Physical appearance			
M	3.73	3.83	4.00
SD	.80	.74	.64
Sport achievement			
M	4.00	4.33	4.01
SD	.65	.52	.80
Relation to classmates			
M	3.74	3.86	3.84
SD	.72	.55	.69

Note. Maximum score was 5.

Peer Acceptance

The number of scores that the children could obtain in the sociometric questionnaire depended on group size. In addition, the popularity of a child is relative. One can imagine, for example, a child receiving a number of "okay" scores and being among the most popular students in one class and among the least popular students in another class. For this reason, the children were identified not only per question but also per class as least popular (< 20th percentile), average popular (between the 20th and the 80th percentiles), or most popular (> 80th percentile). As a result, the variables received an ordinal character, which motivated the use of a nonparametric test to calculate the significance of any differences between the groups.

Mann-Whitney statistical analyses on the comparisons of each of the three nomination procedure-based questions between the Low and Low + groups revealed no significant differences (see Table 3); "Friends" $U = -.57$; "Birthday" $U = -.31$; "Assignment" $U = -.98$. The same comparisons between Low + and Special Education students, however, revealed that all three comparisons were significantly different. Students in Special Education were nominated more positively than the Low + students; "Friends" $U = -2.03$, $p < .05$; "Birthday" $U = 2.14$, $p < .05$; "Assignment" $U = -1.93$, $p < .05$.

The same statistical analyses on the comparisons of each of the four rank-order procedure-based questions between the Low and Low + groups again revealed no significant differences; "Assignment" $U = -.66$; "Break" $U = -.86$; "Birthday" $U = -.19$; "Sit next to" $U = -.74$. The same comparisons between Low + and Special Education students showed that, here also, all four comparisons were significantly different. Students in Special Education were rank-ordered more positively than the Low + students; "Assignment" $U = -3.17$, $p < .01$; "Break" $U = -3.31$, $p < .01$; "Birthday" $U = -2.31$, $p < .05$; "Sit next to" $U = -2.62$, $p < .01$.

To avoid an artifact of the comparison group, we compared the scores of the four rank order-based questions of the low-achieving students in regular education (Low and Low +) with their High/Medium-achieving peers. All four differences appeared to be statistically significant, with the High/Medium achievement group being rank-ordered more positively; "Assignment" $U = -4.99$, $p < .001$; "Break" $U = -5.31$, $p < .001$; "Birthday" $U = -4.23$, $p < .001$; "Sit next to" $U = -4.12$, $p < .001$. Regardless of procedure used, no significant differences were found for sex with one exception: When children were asked to nominate three children they would like to invite to their birthday party, the names of low-achieving boys were mentioned more frequently than the names of low-achieving girls ($U = -2.04$; $p = 0.02$).

Relationships Between Self-Image and Peer Acceptance

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5. The correlation between the sum score of the self-image scale and the peer acceptance level based on the rank-order procedure was significant in the group of High/Medium-achieving students in regular education and in the group of Special Education students. The correlation values were positive. In these groups, a better self-image appeared to go with higher peer acceptance. In the Low group, this correlation also was positive, but did not reach significance. In the Low +

Table 5

Spearman Rank Correlations Between Dimensions of Self-Image and Peer Acceptance Based on the Rank-Order Procedure

	Achievement Groups			
Dimension	**Low**	**Low +**	**Special Education**	**High/Medium**
Self-confidence	-.04	-.04	.07	.16*
Relation to teacher and school	.29*	-.23	.08	.19*
Physical appearance	-.06	-.07	.20*	.10*
Sport achievement	.14	.19	.11	.16*
Relation to classmates	.25*	.12	.22*	.30*
Sum score of self-image	.17	-.08	.20*	.25*

*Correlation deviates significantly from zero, $p < .05$.

group, none of the relations between self-image and peer acceptance reached a reliable level.

The positive correlation in the group of High/ Medium-achieving students was mirrored in all five dimensions of the self-image scale. In the Special Education group, only two dimensions (i.e., physical appearance and relation to classmates) had a significant positive correlation with peer acceptance. Despite the absence of a significant correlation between self-image and peer acceptance in the Low group, two dimensions of the scale were positively related to peer acceptance (i.e., relation to teacher and school and relation to classmates).

DISCUSSION

In the present study, self-image and peer acceptance of different groups of students in both regular and special education were compared. We focused on one group of Special Education students and two groups of low-achieving regular education students, that is, students who performed poorly but did not receive any additional help (Low group), and students who performed poorly but who received remedial support (Low + group).

Students' self-image was strongly related to performance level. The High/Medium-achieving regular education students had a better self-image than the low-achieving regular education students on four out of five dimensions of the self-image scale. Poorly achieving students with a special status in regular education differed only from the poorly achieving students with no special status when it comes to perceptions of their sports achievements. In this respect, they also distinguished themselves from the Special Education students.

More important, however, is the lower self-confidence of the poorly achieving students with a special status in regular education when compared to the Special Education students. Based on the nomination and the rank-order procedure, the results of the peer acceptance analyses indicate that regular education students who receive remedial help (Low + group) are equally popular or unpopular as the regular education students who do not receive such help (Low group). Thus, receiving supplemental help neither damages nor promotes peer acceptance of these students. Special Education students, however, were rated more popular than their Low + peers from regular education. This finding can be attributed to differences in the reference groups for regular versus special education, because the High/ Medium-achieving students were rank-ordered more positively on all four questions than their low-achieving peers (Low and Low + groups). Thus, the conclusion that students' peer acceptance evaluations are partly based on their school performance seems warranted.

Unlike the almost nonexisting differences in social status between boys and girls, there were striking differences between self-image in the groups of Special Education students and poorly achieving students without a special status in regular education. The self-image of these girls clearly was lower than that of the boys. However, very few differences were observed in the group of poorly achieving students with a special status in regular education, and even fewer differences were detected in the group of High/Medium-achieving students.

Not only in the Special Education group but also in the group of High/Medium-achieving students, a clear relation between self-image and peer acceptance was observed. That is, the greater the popularity of the students, the better their self-image and vice versa. In the remaining groups, virtually no relation existed.

The fact that school performance of students in regular education is of particular significance for their social standing and self-image is well known and confirmed by the findings of the present study. Most surprising was the absence of any noteworthy differences between poorly achieving regular education students without a special status in regular education and poorly achieving regular education students with a special status. Neither self-image nor social standing of the students appeared to differ significantly. Thus, no support is found for the standpoint frequently encountered in the literature, namely, that poorly achieving students in regular education may be stigmatized by the special help they receive (Larrivee & Horne, 1991; Smith & Nagle, 1995). At the same time, support is not found for the opposite and more traditional sociological standpoint, namely, that assignment of the public status of somehow being "needy" has an apologetic and softening effect (Parsons, 1970; Vaughn et al., 1992).

Viewed against this background, students in special education appear to be better off than poorly achieving students in regular education. Their peers accept them more and in one — not unimportant — respect, their self-image is considerably higher: They have more self-confidence. It has already been noted that these findings can be largely explained in terms of reference-group theory. That is, Special Education students receive an adapted form of education, which limits their chances of failure — also in the eyes of their peers. It is striking that the self-perceptions of their social position in the class is more in keeping with reality than the self-perceptions of the poorly achieving students with a special status, which is the group with which the Special Education students can best be compared. It is as if the social climate in a special education school invites less

escapism than the social climate in a regular school. None of this can hide the fact that the images that Special Education students have of their classmates and their relations to the school and teacher are generally less than rose-colored. In fact, the images of the Special Education students are little or no more favorable than those of the poorly achieving students regardless of whether the latter have a special status or not. This raises the conjecture that some students, even after placement in special education, continue to mimic poorly achieving students in regular education.

Do these findings speak for or against inclusive education? The present study cannot provide an unambiguous answer to this question. The finding of no differences between low-achieving regular education students and low-achieving students who receive remedial help with regard to both self-image and peer acceptance clearly offers proponents of inclusive education support for their position. This conclusion is nevertheless premature and may actually be construed as rather cynical when one considers the fact that the situation of poorly achieving students either with or without a special status in regular education is not shown to be at all enviable in the present research. However, to argue for the independent existence of special schools offering a protective environment is just as premature. Although there is no discrimination with respect to performance level in special education, the experiences of these students are not much more agreeable than the experiences of poorly achieving students in regular education. At this point it is difficult to decide whether inclusive or exclusive education is the answer to the problems of a certain proportion of our young students.

Implications for Practice

Although the research question regarding the appropriateness of inclusive education is still undecided, we believe that some important lessons may be learned from our present study and from studies conducted in countries other than the Netherlands. Students with learning disabilities are always at risk, regardless of whether they attend a school for regular or a school for special education, and regardless of whether they have a needy status in regular education (see also Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Great care should be taken by teachers to promote healthy psychosocial development of all these children, with heightened attention to girls, who appear to be particularly vulnerable when it comes to their self-image.

Our study showed that a needy status neither protected nor harmed the peer acceptance or well-being of low-achieving students in regular education. The work by Le Mare and de la Ronde (2000), however, suggests a qualification of this conclusion. In their investigation of students' preference of remedial service, pull-out, versus in-class, young students' preference did not have a differential effect on their social status, whereas older students who preferred in-class service had higher peer-group status than those who preferred pull-out service. This finding indicates that teachers should monitor the development of social status (i.e., peer acceptance) of students who receive remedial support. Moreover, teachers are encouraged to reflect upon the type of remedial service offered to their low-achieving students. If older students' status profits from in-class service, it may be necessary to change the place where remedial support is administered. Kuhne and Wiener (2000) even suggest that low-achieving students receive social intervention to help them maintain or even elevate their social status.

The foregoing warrants heightened attention to students with learning disabilities. Attention to their academic performance is self-evident and has been acknowledged for a long time. However, attention to the students' social and emotional well-being may be of greater importance, because negative experiences in school often affect emotional health right into adulthood (Shessel & Reiff, 1999).

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