

# The Netherlands

The Netherlands is a small European country of almost 16.5 million inhabitants as of July 2006. Its northwestern coastline abuts the North Sea, and it shares borders with Germany to the east and Belgium to the south. It is a constitutional monarchy in which the monarch appoints the head of government (the prime minister, who is also the leader of the majority party) as well as the council of ministers. The Netherlands is industrialized, is a major food exporter, and has a prosperous economy that heavily depends on foreign trade.<sup>1</sup>

## Education of students with disabilities

The Netherlands continues to educate the vast majority of its special needs students in separate schools, making it one of the most differentiated systems in Europe. Students are served by 15 types of special schools, and there is also differentiation by needs and age. Foreign visitors who come to study the system often conclude that, while current practice is segregation at its best, it is still segregation. One explanation for the differentiation is that the Netherlands has had no grass roots movement advocating change as has occurred in some other countries. Recent reforms to include children with disabilities in general education schools was initiated by government officials. Called *weer samen naar school* (“together to school”), the reform was intended to combine aspects of general elementary schools and special schools. Based on the concept of adaptive education, the policy created a nationwide network of school clusters. Each cluster is composed of a special school and approximately 15 general schools that are supposed to work together. In addition, a new funding system allocates approximately half of the special education funds to the school clusters. Perhaps the policy will dismantle the traditional segregated system in favor of greater inclusion of students with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

## Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany is located in central Europe, and with more than 82 million inhabitants, it is the most densely populated nation in Europe. It borders nine countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Germany is a democratic country with a federal system of government headed by a chancellor, with a parliament (the Bundestag) and a president (with mostly ceremonial

functions). Economically, Germany is one of the world's leading industrialized nations, with a strong international focus.<sup>3</sup>

## Education of students with disabilities

The inclusion of students with disabilities in German schools dates back to the 1970s in the Federal Republic (or West Germany, as it was then called). The inclusion movement was mainly initiated by parents seeking the inclusion of their children with special needs into the nursery schools and kindergartens. In Germany, kindergarten refers to preschool education that is both voluntary and separate from the elementary school and should not be confused with the first year of compulsory schooling in most school systems of the United States. After the initial success of their children at the kindergarten level, many parents demanded the students be granted admissions to elementary school as well, but it took almost a decade before the first integrated classrooms appeared. In Germany, as in the United States, public education is mainly a state responsibility; hence, inclusion practices vary from state to state. Some states have adopted inclusion while others continue to operate special schools. Generally, where inclusion has been implemented, it is mostly confined to the primary grades. Students are classified after four years of elementary schooling and assigned to continue in one of three tracks: a general secondary school, a technical-vocational secondary school, and a university preparatory secondary school. Only a few comprehensive or nontracked secondary schools exist in Germany, and it is these schools that typically include students with disabilities beyond the elementary level. Because comprehensive schools are few in number, they cannot include all secondary-age students with disabilities, and some comprehensive school leaders have opposed it; therefore, inclusion of students with disabilities is still sporadic at the secondary level. Additional barriers to inclusion in secondary education are the grading and financing systems. Secondary schools typically assess students in comparison to other students rather than assessing them on an individual basis. Research indicates that students with disabilities attending inclusive schools may develop a lower self-concept than peers who attend separate schools, even when their performance is better in comparison. Many German states use a zero-option or cost neutrality concept of finance, that is, the inclusion of students with disabilities must not cost more than separate special education. Such finance policy discourages the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education but is defended by its adherents on the grounds that the resources necessary for inclusion are not available.<sup>4</sup>

Although Germany has developed some inclusion, it has not yet allocated resources necessary to provide for it on a large scale. Continuance of traditional school structures and the tracking system make it difficult to provide for students with disabilities in general schools, particularly at the secondary level.

Inclusion is recognized by a number of nations around the world, but there is great variety in the acceptance, implementation, and support of the concept. Some countries embrace inclusion and support it; some simply do not have the necessary resources, and some do not see it as a pressing need. Many attitudes from the past continue to influence current outlooks, but there is also evidence that at least some change is in process and more may be on the way.

**Suggested Activity:** Interview an international student on your campus about inclusion in his or her home country. Compare and contrast with what you know about inclusion in the United States. Consider that education of persons with disabilities may be handled differently from country to country, for example the significant differences between the Netherlands and Denmark. Can you think of justifications for both practices in the name of fairness and equal educational opportunity?

## Notes

- 1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Netherlands," *The World Factbook*, at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/nl.html> (accessed on December 5, 2006).
- 2 J. W. Cor Neijer and Luc M. Stevens, "Restructuring Special Education Provisions," in *Inclusive Education: A Global Agenda*, Sip Jan Pijl, J. W. Cor Meijer, and Seamus Hegarty, eds (New York: Routledge, 1997), 115–129; and Kees Den Boer, "Weer Samen Naar School: A National Program for Primary and Special School," in *Inclusive Education in Europe*, 82–93.
- 3 "Facts about Germany," at <http://www.tatsachen-ueber-deutschland.de/811.0.html> (accessed on December 6, 2006).
- 4 Dirk Randall, "A View of Integration in Germany," in *Inclusive Education in Europe*, 39–48.