

**CORNELIS ELISA VAN KOETSVELD (1807-1893)**  
Father of the empathy for children

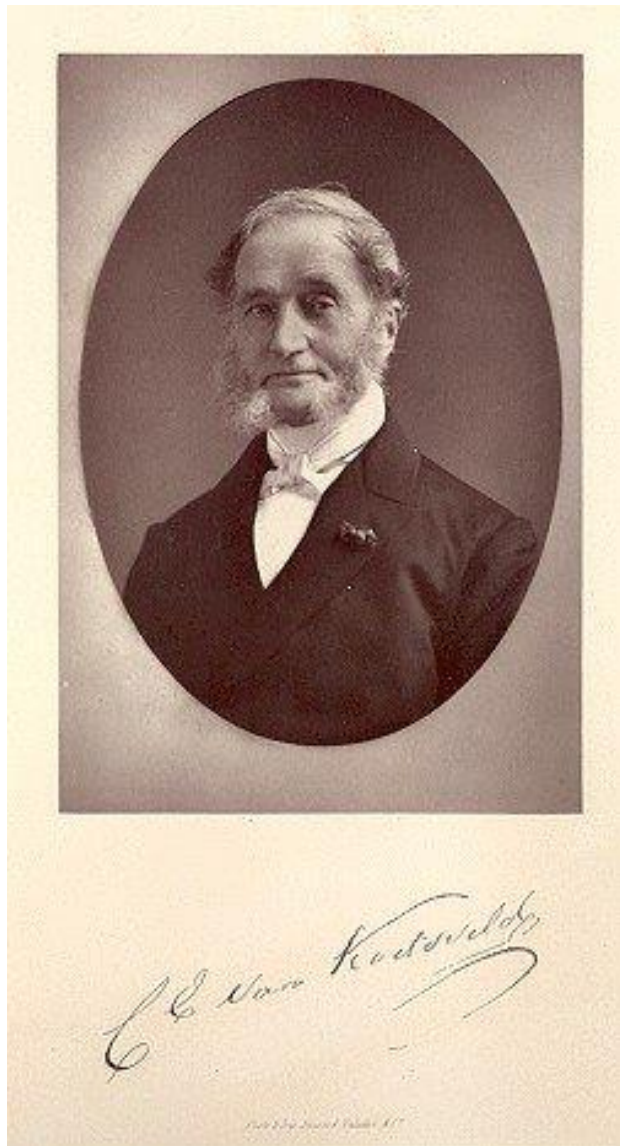
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## 1.Passport



Cornelis Elisa<sup>1</sup> van Koetsveld

The Netherlands

Born: Rotterdam, 24 May 1807

Deceased: The Hague, 4 November 1893

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<sup>1</sup> Often also spelled Eliza.

## 2.Narrative element

*The story below recounts a key experience of Van Koetsveld.*

Not the writing chair but the smoking chair. First leaving the inkwell and the pen untouched. Calmly filling the pipe and pondering on the day. Van Koetsveld lights the oil lamp and thinks of the morning he spent writing the sermon for Sunday and his preparation for the catechism on Monday. A meal of bread and soup – lovely with the fresh tomatoes – and afterwards the house calls. The Neven family with a mother who is ill. She is old but they will probably muddle through together until the end comes for her. She is hoping for a short illness and a blessed end. Read Psalm 73, lovely: 'and afterward you will take me into glory'. Keep it in mind for the funeral service. Van Koetsveld moves to his desk and makes a short note of it.

Then he gets up again and draws on his pipe. He looks through the window, across the Dam, and knows behind it, in Doelen Street, the Both family lives. Would Cornelis still be sitting in the shed? he asks himself. Would Mrs. Both shortly bring him a plate of potatoes with a small piece of bacon? Never has he eaten at the table with his parents and brothers!

Locked up in the shed – and what a shrill voice the boy has! It cuts through everything. Van Koetsveld once more in his mind's eye sees the red face of Mrs. Both saying: 'That is our son Cornelis, Reverend. He is not well.' She gave him permission to have a look at her son and through the half open door of the shed he could make out a boy of about ten years, with tattered clothes, crusts on his face, wild eyes. Were his hands gnarled? He wanted to speak to the boy, but the latter's shouting prevented him from doing so. For a moment the minister laid a hand on his head, but at the touch the boy shrank back into a dark corner. 'That is our son Cornelis, Reverend. The doctor can do nothing for him and we have to work, we cannot tie him up. My husband says he is best off in the shed, but I cannot get used to it. How long will he have to remain there? He is not getting any better.'

After seeing the Both family he went for a short walk along the Lek. My God, what a boy. Made in your image? Have mercy!

The writer takes up a large empty sheet of paper and a pencil. He feels a story is unfolding. It's not every day you meet a child like Cornelis.

As Van Koetsveld describes the home of the Both family in a few well-rounded sentences, the tea that was offered him while the late afternoon sun slanted through the lace curtains, the nervous voice of the mother gathering up her courage to speak about her son Cornelis, and then – as if he could hear it – the loud screaming from the shed... The sight of the boy, the stench, the wild eyes, the filthy, tattered linen shirt...

Van Koetsveld lays down the pen. Should I really write about him? I pray for mercy and should I then write? He dries his pen, replaces the cap of the inkwell and gets up.

## Study questions

2. What do you think happened next ? Finish the story, write the last episode, use about 100 words.

### 3. Historical context

*Van Koetsveld discovered in his work as a minister that a boy who looked like 'an animal person' was teachable. That moved him to a study on children who lagged behind in their development, called 'idiots' at the time. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century his study led to the initiative to allow children like this boy to develop in a special school. In order to understand his work, it will be necessary to sketch the context of the Netherlands during the nineteenth century and the opinions that prevailed at the time on handicapped children.*

#### 3.1 A developing country

In the nineteenth century the Netherlands was a developing country. The greatest issue that the young nation had to deal with, was the unprecedented extent of poverty (Van der Woud, 2010; Jak, 1988, p.111; Heitink, 2001, pp. 106-108) Poverty was mostly regarded as a moral issue, the consequence of a wrong lifestyle. The problem could have been solved by good education, a healthy work ethic and good family life: the ideas of the Enlightenment.

To improve their situation many people moved to the cities where as a result of industrialisation there were jobs to be found in factories. As a result of inadequate living space in the crowded cities many diseases occurred like cholera and typhoid fever, which spread quickly and to which many victims fell.

It stands to reason that aid had to be given. Since olden days the poor were supported by the deacons or the charity work of the church. The great numbers of poor people in the cities kept the welfare workers of the churches fully occupied: in a city like Leiden almost half the inhabitants were living on charity. 'Bread and pennies' were distributed among the poor after the service on Sundays (Bos, 1999, p. 87). The mentally handicapped and others who were 'suffering' also had to rely on this aid to the poor (Jak, 1988, p. 111).

#### Awakening humanity

There was a vast culture of societies and extensive social life springing from the Enlightenment. The 'moral civilian' wanted to improve society and the national community. Societies were founded like the Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen (Society for general upliftment) (1784) and the Maatschappij van Weldadigheid (Society for beneficence) (1820). Besides this help many explicitly Christian activities were organised in which ministers often took the lead. Many a minister became more and more of a pastor with a social commitment in his particular congregation (Van Drenth, 2015A, p. 125).

During the first half of the nineteenth century the Réveil took shape in the Netherlands. This international revival movement gave a strong stimulus to the reformed faith, including practical love of one's neighbour. Various Réveil

initiatives likewise counteracted the social needs. Men and women of the Réveil who were sympathetic towards the fate of their neighbours, did not only want to give practical help, but also to combine this help with spreading the gospel. This was called the 'inner mission' and had its origin in Germany (Janse, 2012, pp. 172-174).

The aid given by all these societies, associations and private initiatives were not centrally coordinated. Many helpers and givers were amateurs who were not sure what they were trying to do. In this way help was usually not given efficiently: resources either did not suit those who received them or did not reach those who needed them most (Weijers, 2000, p. 465). In 1854 a new poverty bill was passed. Taking care of the poor then became a duty of the government. The government provided this aid which was strictly regulated, via the existing church and private institutions.

So there was financial help for various social problems, although it was complex, and philanthropy was flourishing. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century the realisation grew that poverty was a structural issue and that charity solved nothing. What they needed were social improvements.

Improvements often originated from private initiatives. Janse states that traditional philanthropic activities were complemented by degrees by modern and experimental social work in the nineteenth century (Janse, 2012, p. 172). The work done by Van Koetsveld can also be seen in this light. He experimented with a boy 'who acted in a completely asocial way, almost like an animal human being'. Van Koetsveld called him an idiot. Idiocy to him was a wide concept for a child who could not be educated in the usual way as a result of malfunctioning or wrongly developed mental capacity.

The idiotic boy was allowed to attend the Sunday school with his brothers if he kept his clothes whole in the week that followed (Onstenk, 1973, p. 97). To the great joy of Van Koetsveld the boy proved to be teachable. At a certain point he was able to stop his destructive behaviour and showed that he could appreciate a reward. Fascinated by this Van Koetsveld decided to study idiocy.

### 3.2 Study

For centuries feeble-mindedness was regarded as a normal phenomenon in society (Mans, 1998). 'Exceptional individuals' were often neglected or abused. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century a change gradually took place in this: they were no longer seen as 'disturbed' or compared to animals, but as human beings, for whose welfare people cared. Around 1840 this matter was beginning to receive attention in several places in Western Europe. The abnormality was no longer sought in the individual. Attention shifted to the social environment (Van Drenth, 2005, p. 153). Beggars, mentally deranged persons and idiots did not fit into a civilised society; they constituted a social issue that had to be solved.

A solution for children who lagged behind in their development was not a simple matter. Many of these children -- if they were not ill -- were regarded as demented (Weijers & Tonkens, 1999, p. 353). The Act on Mental Derangement (1841) allowed them to be locked up. Van Koetsveld was convinced that this psychiatric approach did not help, just as little as the philanthropic help to the poor (Weijers, 2000, p. 465). To get a good outline of the various views and treatments that had been practised elsewhere, penetrating study would be needed. Van Koetsveld knew that he could not go about it like an amateur if he really wanted to get results. He could elaborate on studies of foreign scholars. He drew up a list of sixty titles on the care for the mentally deficient from the period since 1790. He studied this literature (in Dutch, French, German, English, Danish, Norwegian, Italian and Latin). According to Van Hulst this was an almost incredible feat (Van Hulst, 1973, p. 323). The Swiss doctor J.J. Guggenbühl (1816-1863) particularly appealed to him. This man had founded an institute in Interlaken in 1841 where he received 'backward' children and tried to improve their development by means of medical and pedagogic aids (Mans, 1998, pp. 151-153).

After studying the subject literature Van Koetsveld wrote *Het idiotisme en de idioten-school (Idiocy and the school for idiots). Een eerste proeve op een nieuw veld van geneeskundige opvoeding en christelijke philanthropie (A first experiment in a new domain of medicinal education and Christian Philanthropy )* (Van Koetsveld, 1856). This is acclaimed as the most important monograph written on the subject in the Netherlands during the nineteenth century (Jak, 1988, p. 111). Early French psychiatrists distinguished between mental illnesses of the deranged and backward development of the mind. Van Koetsveld endorsed this insight. With this he was the first one in the Netherlands who succeeded in showing in a convincing manner that idiotic children were not mentally deranged (Van Drenth, 2015A, p. 125). This new insight made room for a pedagogic approach instead of a psychiatric one.

Van Koetsveld believed in the healing effect of a good education. His credo was: healing by means of education. He was convinced that mentally handicapped children were capable of development. They did have mental powers but these were underdeveloped. Most parents, however, were unable to guide their idiotic child properly. For that one needed qualified staff. The means of educating them was teaching: for every type of abnormality a particular pedagogic didactics was imperative.

### 3.3 Diagnostics

The new diagnostics had certain consequences. Medical or psychiatric approaches were no longer adequate; the mind had to be developed. To make this happen, demanded great care. A general approach was considered as undesirable by Van Koetsveld. By means of study, observations in his practice and statistical processing of his data he reached specific diagnoses and distinguished four categories of idiocy. Guggenbühl had written much on the first



category, the cretinoid. Cretinism was a typically Swiss issue: cretins showed dwarfish growth due to a lack of light and air. It afflicted children living in deep valleys. This category was not found in the Netherlands.

Backward children formed the second category. Their minds functioned less effectively and their capacity was less or different. They were not very teachable but with modified treatment they could indeed develop into craftsmen or servants.

The third group consisted of 'the real idiots'. Van Koetsveld described idiocy as a condition (a lack of will, apathy) and as an illness. The disease could be congenital or could have been caused by injuries. It was a complete or partial disturbance of the central nervous system.

The fourth group was small and consisted mainly of boys. They lived in a world of their own, often without any communication. The relationship with the outside world caused tension. When they were interrupted in their activities or their freedom was restricted it caused problems. This observation by Van Koetsveld seems to be the classic description of autism.

### 3.4 On the way to a school

Since 1840 a single institute or school for mentally handicapped or 'idiots' was realised here and there in France, England, America and Germany. The Netherlands was relatively slow in doing this (Weijers, 2000). Towards the middle of the nineteenth century there already were three schools for the deaf and one for the blind (Graas, 1996, pp. 28-30) but as yet no provision had been made for 'idiots'. Seeing that in those days even many 'normal' children did not attend a school, this was not surprising. Since 1806 education was regulated on a national basis in the Netherlands. For the first time it was laid down by law that everybody had to have access to a primary school. In the so-called Volksschool (school for the people) enlightened ideas took form. For instance, lessons were no longer given individually but in classes. Unfortunately this kind of education benefited mainly the intelligent pupils and interest in the weaker pupils waned. They would have been better off in the old system of individual education (Weijers, 2000, pp. 466-467).

Although the 'volkschool', as the name indicated, was meant for the whole population, the fact that it was there did not imply that all children actually attended school. Many children under twelve years of age worked in factories like their parents and worked long hours. By the so-called Children's Act of 1874 child labour was formally abolished, but since it was not enforced, child labour actually continued for another 25 years. It only came to a definite end when compulsory education was introduced in 1901.



It was against this background that Van Koetsveld campaigned for a school for idiotic children. In Van Koetsveld they had a good advocate. Van Koetsveld cited with approval the London minister and philanthropist Andrew Reed (1787-1862) who was of the opinion that the work on behalf of the idiots deserved 'attention and admiration': 'We plead for those, who cannot plead for themselves' (Wright, 2001, p. 42). The general view was that the standard care offered by the asylum was sufficient. So Van Koetsveld's idea was something new in the Netherlands. That brought attention for the work on behalf of idiotic children, but Van Koetsveld would have to wait some time for admiration. Prejudice was still prevalent as well as shame sometimes. From one neighbourhood authority in The Hague Van Koetsveld heard about idiots that they had no 'such objects' there, although there proved to be several hundred living in that district (Onstenk, 1973, p. 97). Van Koetsveld also had to fight for the school to be

exempted from examinations. But at last the plans came together and in 1855 The Hague 'Idiot School' could be opened. While thousands of normal children (still) did not attend school but worked in factories, in The Hague the first idiotic children were going to school.

The purpose of this school was: the 'physical, mental and moral forming of children who were unfit for normal, even lower education due to inadequate or faulty mental development.' (Van Koetsveld, 1856, pp. 238-239). They started in 1855 with eleven children and in 1860 the school already had seventy children. A number of them came from outside The Hague. Van Koetsveld wanted to get them a home where they could live. This was realised in 1856, when the school was housed in a more appropriate building. The internal pupils were given a complete day programme in which every member of the staff was involved. Attention was given to all everyday activities: becoming potty-trained, eating, playing and walking properly. Acquiring good habits was a purpose in itself, it had a very good effect on many children. In this way they learned how to live in a community.



In the school experienced and motivated, patient educators were teaching. On the one hand they pursued the development of the children's intellectual capacity, on the other hand they were also teaching them social conduct. Part of the education was given individually, but music and story telling were intended to bring about connection between the children who were living within themselves. There also was a medical doctor involved and of course a minister for religious instruction: Van Koetsveld himself. With the use of pictures he told simple Bible stories and in this way tried to inculcate a consciousness of good and bad in the children (Jak, 1988, p. 133). He succeeded in teaching the children respect. Although they did not always fully understand the story, they sensed the devotional sphere of the Bible stories and songs.

### Study questions

3.1 Why did Van Koetsveld attach so much importance to social education? What connection do you see between this and the Christian faith? What is the difference between social education and character education, as explained in the book of Kim Estep (2010)?

3.2 Van Koetsveld observed that the idiotic children did not understand all Bible stories, but stated that they did listen and sensed the devotional sphere. He regarded this as very important. How important is – in your context – the devotional sphere in schools? Do you recognise something from your own school practice (or your church milieu)?

## 4. Theme - A Christian character – moral and religious education

*Van Koetsveld himself had been formed by the Bible and wished to educate not only the candidates for confirmation but in particular also the idiotic children to a Christian personality.*

Van Koetsveld wrote to Queen Emma that only someone who had himself been formed by the Bible would be able to give his child a Christian upbringing (De Jong-Slagman, 2013, pp. 281-282). Therefore an educator should not only know the Bible, but also be formed by it. This could be seen in Van Koetsveld's own life. As a child he was mostly formed by the Bible by his mother and grandmother telling him stories from it. This contributed to his choosing to study theology. Besides his work as a minister he devoted much time to vulnerable people. Onstenk gives various examples of this (Onstenk, 1973, pp. 1-2).

Following the example of 'the Great Master' Van Koetsveld looked up those who were lost. The idiotic children had stolen his heart. The encounter with an idiotic boy from his own congregation was 'the small Biblical seed' from which great things originated (graas, 2008, p. 44). By looking through Jesus' eyes, he saw more than an 'animal human being' or a social problem in this child: it was a creature of God with an identity of its own. They had to be brought out into the light and to be given a Christian education. There were more aspects to this education than merely the physical and mental; he definitely considered the moral development equally important. By telling simple stories from the Bible he wanted to stimulate their moral development.

Van Koetsveld wanted to teach the idiotic children to live in a community in which they could serve God. He contributed to this not only as a giver of religious instruction at school but also as a catechist. 'Normal' children were taught in the confirmation classes but idiotic children did not enjoy this privilege. All his working life Van Koetsveld had experimented with the didactics of catechism and he wanted to reach them too. A proper religious upbringing required a special relationship to be established between the youth and their minister from early on (Houtman, 2013, p. 119). This applied to idiotic youths to a still greater extent. Van Koetsveld was prepared to do everything to form young idiots to the point where they could confess their faith and be confirmed as members of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church). For this purpose he also wrote a simple catechism booklet for them: Simple explanation of the twelve articles of the apostles' creed, the ten commandments and the Our Father; abridged, particularly for use by those who cannot read (1839).

With great pride Van Koetsveld told the story of the first pupil of the Idiot School, the thirteen year old Alida, who was admitted in a neglected state and with physical complaints and who developed very well in the institute. She was given a job in the institute for idiots that she performed well. And to his great

joy she was also admitted as a member of the Dutch Reformed church (Van Drenth, 2007, p. 110). In spite of her simple mind she had been formed into a Christian character.

### Study questions

4.1 The personal and moral formation of yourself and your colleagues is of major concern in your occupational practice. How can you, in your position as a teacher leader, nourish the formation process of your (Christian) colleagues? What sources, people and means to you need for this?

4.2 You and your colleagues contribute to the formation of children and young people. To what extent can you take Van Koetsveld as an example?

## 5. Concise biography

Cornelis Elisa van Koetsveld was born in Rotterdam on 24 May 1807. His parents belonged to the wealthy middle class. His father was a judge and wine merchant and took great interest in social matters. His mother passed on a love for the Bible to Kees van Koetsveld. When still young he realised that his parents held different points of view on significant political and church issues. He himself did not conform to one particular trend but learned to follow what was good in various opinions without explicitly taking sides. After finishing the gymnasium (academic high school) he enrolled for theological study and finished this study cum laude in 1830. He married Anna Maria Croes and became a minister in Westmaas. He converted his experiences as a minister into literary short stories. Much of it covered the gap between theory and practice: he had great difficulty with preaching and teaching confirmation classes in a way that could be readily understood. He constantly practised doing this and did make some progress.

Five years later Van Koetsveld left for Berkel and Rodenrijs and in 1838 he became a minister in the small city of Schoonhoven. The publisher Van Nooten was housed there and he published dozens of books by Van Koetsveld. His best known book, a bestseller in the nineteenth century was *Schetsen uit de pastorij te Mastland* (Sketches from the parsonage in Mastland). *Ernst en luim uit het leven van den Nederlandschen dorpsleeraar* (Serious reflections and humour from the life of a Dutch village minister) (1843).

In Schoonhoven Van Koetsveld began preaching children's sermons. These appealed to people and were also published (Houtman, 2013, pp. 126-133). An important experience was the encounter with a child that was locked up: he was not mad and not ill, but nobody knew how to treat him. There was no future for the child but actually no present either. Against the will of others he allowed the child to have part in the catechism which worked out well: the child proved to be susceptible to development. This stimulated Van Koetsveld to undertake a study on these children.

From 1849 up to his death in 1893 Van Koetsveld was a minister in The Hague. There he was also appointed royal chaplain to King Willem III. All the time he was on the look-out for people in social distress. In his stories he exposed all kinds of wrong: poverty, extortion, abuse of handicapped people, drunkenness, prostitution, et cetera.

During the time he lived in The Hague Van Koetsveld also continued his studies on the so-called idiotic children. He had had practical experience with these children, he was interested in poor relief and love of one's neighbour and he knew that he could not go about it like an amateur if he really wanted to accomplish something. Therefore he did a thorough investigation and for a long time studied the developments about idiocy that were going on in Europe. That research led to a profound study: *Het idiotisme en de idioten-school* (Idiocy and the school for idiots). *Een eerste proeve op een nieuw veld van geneeskundige*

opvoeding en christelijke philanthropie (A first experiment in a new domain of medicinal education and Christian Philantropy, 1856)

Van Koetsveld's study had a lovely sequel in the establishment of a school for idiotic children in 1855. This school in The Hague was the first school for special education in the Netherlands. This day school had small classes consisting of children at approximately the same level of development. Very motivated teachers gave substantially structured instruction. During the whole of the teaching programme the emphasis was on the personal development of the child. The ability to do things independently and practical skills constituted the principal part. The lessons in the school lasted an hour at the most and each lesson was alternated with music, playing and movement.

There also was a doctor involved in the school and Van Koetsveld took religious instruction on himself. He told simple Bible stories and succeeded in teaching the children respect. Although they did not always fully understand the story, they sensed the devotional sphere of the Bible stories.

For more than forty years Van Koetsveld's school was the only special school for the mentally handicapped in the Netherlands. Round about the end of the century similar schools were founded in Rotterdam and Amsterdam as well (Graas, 2008, p. 44). Unfortunately about 1900 the school in The Hague met with huge financial and staff problems. The experienced lady teachers who mostly worked with the lower classes and were considered most fit for the contact with the youngest and least developed children, left and it was hard to find suitable new staff, especially for the boarding school attached to the school (Van Drenth, 2004A and 2005). A reorganisation and financial straits meant the end of the school. More than 25 years after Van Koetsveld's demise the school and institution were closed: the end of what was 'the most important and elaborate educational initiative' of the nineteenth century (Weijers & Tonkens, 1999, pp. 356-357). In spite of this sad event Van Koetsveld's ideas lived on in later special education and likewise in the care for the mentally handicapped.

The work for the Idiot School was one of Van Koetsveld's side-lines; his real work was his office as minister. He preached every week and taught the catechism to hundreds of children. And just as in Schoonhoven he preached sermons for children for which he became famous (Houtman, 2013).

Besides he also wrote a comprehensive study on the parables, which was called a work of European standard. For this he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Groningen (De Jong-Slagman, 2013, p. 263).

His most honourable work was the royal chaplaincy. Van Koetsveld regularly preached before King Willem III and Queen Emma who also consulted him in their family about the education of their little girl. He was also asked to give funeral addresses at the burial service for the brothers and sons of the king and



finally for the king himself. His addresses were not eulogies but honest and wise speeches.

### Study questions

5.1 What have you learned about education in the nineteenth century Netherlands?

5.2 Van Koetsveld also conducted sermons for children. At the time this did not go unquestioned. The minister met a lot of trouble to provide the message of the Bible in this way. How much trouble are you prepared to take to reach a similar aim? Which obstacles do you meet?



## 6. Source text

*The source text consists of the introduction to Van Koetsveld' study: Het idiotisme en de idioten-school (Idiocy and the school for idiots). Een eerste proeve op een nieuw veld van geneeskundige opvoeding en christelijke philanthropie (A first experiment in a new domain of medicinal education and Christian philanthropy, 1856).*

5 "If our century distinguishes itself from and above all its predecessors by the many humanitarian and philanthropic institutions, by seeking out first of all the lost, according to the example of the great Master; if in establishing so many primary schools and crèches for the very young, still in particular the neglected and degenerate or by nature the underprivileged whom they choose as the objects for their most loving care;-- in these pages I come to ask a place for a new, at least in our country, new branch of instruction and education, of forming and saving people, in a word for truly Christian philanthropy. I come to plead for the most unfortunate of 10 our generation, because (according to our motto, taken from foreign institutions) they cannot plead for themselves; because – and this is most unfortunate – by many they have always been denied the privilege of being human, our brothers, the family of God!

15 Human and yet inhuman! Of human form and appearance, and yet not recognised as such! Cast out, given up as hopeless, exposed to public ridicule, or more often hidden away in shame, but still cared for with unspeakable love by the faithful care of a mother who cannot bear to see them looked upon by others with disgust or wished dead or counted their being alive by the providence of God as a punishment.

20 Unhappy ones! In turns ridiculed and pitied, detested and oppressed or spoiled, how seldom have you been properly understood by anybody, and lifted up from the depths of your helplessness to be human as we are!

25 Such is the unfortunate kind of human beings for whom I come to ask a look of sympathy, a heart full of Christian compassion, but in particular a saving hand. And this human race does not dwell on the distant islands of the South Sea or in the icebergs of the North where courageous missionaries go to save a single human soul. They live among you, in your midst: across from you here in the same street; over there locked up in the corners of an institution; here and there one on the road, left to the mercy of the rabble, or even taken around at the fair; but always he is the idiot, that is, the singular person who makes no contact with the great organic whole of human society, and almost less so with his equals; the one who says little or nothing and likewise learns little or nothing from you; to him it is all the same whether science is on a high or low level, whether godliness or wickedness, order or chaos, peace or war prevails in the land, always the 35 same as long as there is someone who feeds him, the way one would throw

40 a domestic animal its food; yes! often even more helpless than the latter since he not always knows to pick it up and would starve to death because the food has to be taken to his mouth by hand. And even if he is not always so very helpless, still to a lesser or greater degree he always is idiot, solitary or standing by himself; only to be reached in one of two ways by people: by love, that cares for him or by disgust, that avoids or ridicules him. This aversion looks so great and so natural that all-comprehensive science has only in this century fixed its penetrating eye on him.

45 When Dr. Guggenbühl, whose merits I have tried to describe in a recently published little book, was touring England and asked the personal physician of the Queen about idiots, he got the answer that the doctor did not know any. Nevertheless, within a few days the foreigner with some help located  
50 some twelve and now just as many thousands or more have been discovered in the kingdom of Great Britain. I experienced something similar two years ago in this field which had been briefly pointed out but never explored by us when I started looking for them, stimulated by the example of Abendberg and the recollection of an idiot whom I had taught in my previous congregation. Some time later when I aired my opinion to a few  
55 people, namely that in our country a total of about three thousand idiots would be found – counting only those under twenty-five years – even men of experience and with knowledge of science shook their heads while others asked me the most uncommon questions, and perhaps made fun of my premature zeal for such a strange illusion. Here and there on thinking about  
60 it, one had heard of a mad child in a home, some remembered a single fool that used to beg on the streets, or had seen some born as idiots in institutions for the insane, but how I came by the idea that this so-called idiocy could be so common and especially what I intended doing about it, was a riddle to many. They praised my good intentions but in addition asked  
65 me whether these rare cases which were always incurable would reward the trouble and care given to them. Yes! people argued – and this argument clinched it? -- that anyway nothing could be done for it since no one is able to teach a child who has no brains to learn. At most one would be able to train them to become living machines, the way one trains a dog. Why then  
70 expend so much money and energy on something of which the result was so uncertain and bound to be trivial? -- My answer to someone who asked me this, was whether he would say the same if he had had the bad fortune to count an idiot growing up among his own children.

75 In the meantime I proceeded without rest with my research, all the more encouraged by the indifference and prejudice. For in the end, after many enquiries there were doctors and teachers, people who worked in poor relief and district chairmen who recalled having seen a few such deformed or wretched children, even in our city; house calls by my fellow ministers brought in more such reports; helpful neighbours sometimes did even  
80 better but they all usually added : "but it was children for whom nothing

could be done." -- And now, after two years of unremitting tracking, now that we can already point out an established institution, now many a person is amazed by this new kind of human misery, brought to light from secret hiding places in the community. But people are still not at all convinced that a child can be taught anything if it has no capacity, or that something good could come from teaching a few crazy children their letters with incredible difficulty.

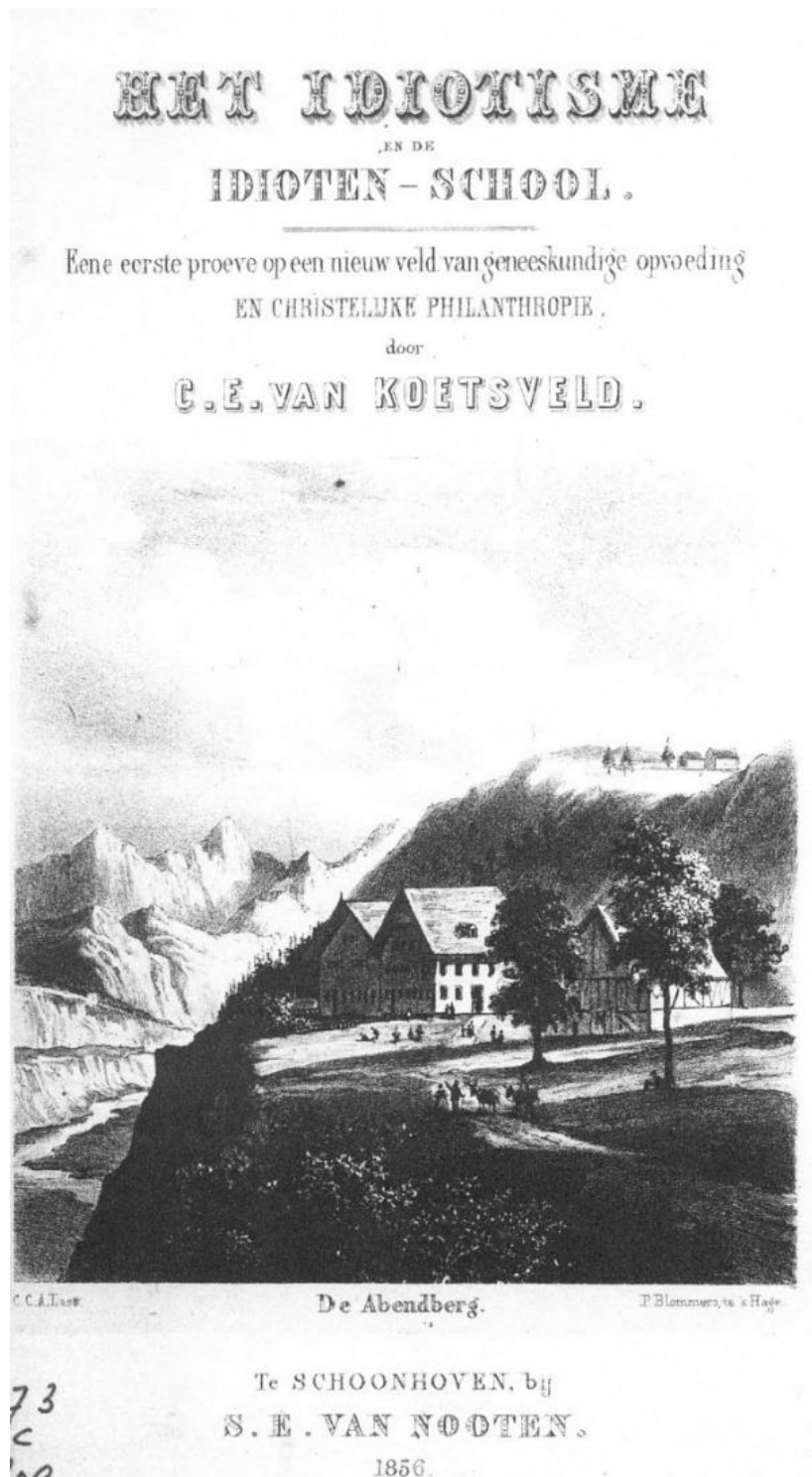
All this does not surprise me and I would probably have had the same prejudices, if it were not that Providence had directed my eyes and my footsteps to a domain where I have no other claim to credit – in so far as credit is at stake here – than that I brought a foreign plant into the Dutch garden. Since up to now, the name and object of our institution is not understood, outside even less than here, I feel obliged to pass on to others the first principles of this science, the first alphabet which I had to learn myself. For this reason, with reference to the two words on the title page, I want to point out first the disease and thereafter the cure.

I know in this I am daring to go into a field that is not specific to my own study and work – because I have waited in vain for someone else to do it. I will therefore abstain from learned terminology or scientific elaboration as far as possible, keeping in mind that I have not been called to write for teachers, far less for medical practitioners. I do have the right, however, to bring to their attention a dark and sombre borderland situated between both spheres that up to now has been receiving far too little attention, or was left by the one to the other. By giving a list of the literature on the subject that is known to me, and by airing some ideas or questions and finally also by telling something of my limited experience I hope to entice people more competent than myself to undertake a study that deserves to become a life mission of a young pedagogue or physician. In addition at the same time I desire to arouse among the public in general the interest that would make this study more rewarding and cause them to support its results.

May I therefore, in conclusion to this introduction which probably is too hopeful, tell in a few words what reception I think this booklet deserves? - Reader! On walking through our great public libraries, you will here and there see an exposition of an old dusty book, printed in rough letters and bound in a wooden cover, yes, sometimes a single page that you could not lift from the ground, and yet is of great value because it belongs to the incunabula of the art of printing books. Likewise we are shown, in royal collections, the misshapen figures of the old Spanish school of painters, which are nevertheless worth their weight in gold, or at a photographic exhibition there might be a proud display of the first, almost completely faded daguerreotype, as the poor beginning of an amazing art. Well now! It is the wish of my heart that this little book may become antiquated like

this. And if it chances to fall into the hands of a competent reader, that he may say: 'The man's intentions were good, but now we know better.'

Source: (Van Koetsveld, 1856, pp. 1-7).



## 7. Influence and legacy in later times: special education and care for the handicapped

*With his school for idiots Van Koetsveld is classified by Dutch norms in the canon of education and by European norms in the canon of social work. In the fields of special education and care for the feeble-minded he deserves to get credit.*

### 7.1 Special education

#### Special education

The initiative of Van Koetsveld was the beginning of special education in the Netherlands. His pioneering work for 'idiotic' children was already widely appreciated in the nineteenth century. So for instance the school is mentioned in a work giving a general account of The Hague from 1859. In it the author, F. Allan, writes about the establishment of the school and categorises it as 'one of the most significant ventures of our time'. He enumerates a number of examples of neglected 'dumb' children who were learning to read and write but also of a boy from a rich background who 'since birth was pampered by the most tender love' who had now begun to work and as a result improved (Janse, 2012, p 120-122).

Four years after the school had been established Allan saw the first fruits of the education but the heyday of the school lay between 1870 and 1890. Then there were about a hundred children in the school. Annually there came a hundred to a hundred and fifty foreign visitors, even from Japan and America (Jak, 1988). Specially for their benefit Van Koetsveld wrote a brochure with the title *Een bezoek in het gesticht en de school voor minderjarige Idioten, te 's-Gravenhage* (A visit to the institution and the school for underage Idiots at The Hague). This was also translated into French. The school and institution received international acclaim: reports were exchanged with foreign institutions. However, the day school remained unique: it was the first in Western Europe and an example to other countries (Jak, 1988, p. 135).

Dorien Graas who studied the history of special education in the Netherlands, shows that special education is indebted to the pioneering work of Van Koetsveld (Graas, 1996). Due to that work he rightly has been given a place in the canon of education (Los, 2012, p. 119). There still is a school for special education in The Hague that bears Van Koetsveld's name with honour.

### 7.2 Care for the handicapped

Apart from the fact that special education in the Netherlands began with the idiot school, one can hardly overestimate Van Koetsveld's influence in the field of care

for the mentally handicapped. Van Koetsveld realised the importance of thorough scientific research and invested much time to come abreast with the current knowledge of his time and with new insights. He incorporated this in his study on idiocy. Even then he realised the importance of statistics in his attempts at diagnosis and was convinced that the pedagogues (and psychologists) had to have a place in the care for the handicapped, besides medical practitioners. Graas states that there was some rivalry over areas of responsibility among these disciplines, that is surfacing again today (Graas, 2008, p. 83).

The great significance of Van Koetsveld's study initially did not remain unnoticed. In 1857 Van Koetsveld was nominated a Ridder in de Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw (Knight of the Order of the Dutch Lion). In this way the government honoured him for his work on behalf of handicapped children (Onstenk, 1973, pp. 100, 102). Thereafter it was quiet for a long time. More institutes for children with certain limitations appeared and Van Koetsveld moved to the background. The fact that his school closed down twenty-five years after his demise, probably also played a role in this. Onstenk also states that he was given a very modest place in the history of education (Onstenk, 1973, p. 102).

Only in the seventies of the twentieth century did he once more receive attention. The dissertation by Onstenk would have contributed to this. Professor Van Hulst was impressed by Van Koetsveld's study on idiocy: he admired his scholarship and regarded him as a pedagogue of a high standard (Van Hulst, 1973, pp. 335-336). As a consequence of this posthumous recognition of an expert his work received renewed attention. In 1988 Theo Jak did a doctorate on the history of care for the mentally handicapped in the Netherlands. An important part of his dissertation is devoted to Van Koetsveld's idiot school. He points out that Van Koetsveld's ideas have had an impact on other institutions for the mentally handicapped, like the great institution 's Heeren Loo (Jak, 1988, p. 135). Consequently Van Koetsveld was rightly given a prominent place in the 'Canon of care for the handicapped'. (Van Gennep, Van der Lans, Van der Linde, Post, & Van Trigt, 2014, pp. 19-21).

At the Rijksuniversiteit Leiden (the University of Leiden) research on Van Koetsveld's work has been going on for some years. The publications of Van Drenth in international scientific journals deal with various aspects of it in different issues (Van Drenth, 2005; 2015; 2016). This also applies to the studies by Ido Weijers who evaluates Van Koetsveld's work as 'the most important initiative in this field', because he gave such great significance to social education: 'making retarded children fit for domestic association' (Weijers, 2000, p. 464). This was an innovative approach with tremendous effect. This is actually the beginning of Dutch care for the mentally handicapped (Paumen, 2014). Van Koetsveld's great merit is that this care saw 'a ground-breaking beginning' as a

result of his initiative (Van Gennep, Van der Lans, Van der Linde, Post, & Van Trigt, 2014, p. 19).

### Study questions

7 During his lifetime Van Koetsveld was granted no professional status or scientific authority for his work (Van Drenth, 2004A, p. 159). More than half a century later he was placed in the Dutch canon for education and in the European canon for social work due to his work. What is your opinion on this? Is such a canon important? Do you see pros and/or cons in it?



## 8. Actualisation

### *Regular or special education?*

Van Koetsveld cared for those judged as the least and wanted them to be brought out and given a chance to develop. An ordinary school was not suitable for idiotic children, therefore Van Koetsveld started an idiot school. Since that time special education – under various names – has had a permanent place in Dutch society.

In this year 2018, however, there (once more) are children sitting at home who do not qualify for special basic education (SBE) but cannot be taught efficiently in the ordinary primary school either. Inclusive education or education for special needs has been a well-known concept in the Netherlands for some years: the emphasis falls on accepting the diversity and equality of the pupils. Handicapped pupils have to follow regular education as far as possible but special education still exists for children who fit in better there. The question as to where the best place for the child is, is much debated.

Van Koetsveld admitted to his school children who were not fit for normal education. However, they had to be teachable, susceptible to education. When he drew up a list of potential pupils for his school, he also made a distinction between children who were probably or certainly susceptible to education, but also admitted that there was a category 'as good as hopeless' (Van Koetsveld, 1856, p. 79). These children were not admitted to the school. Children who made no progress were taken off the school after five years, while some other did get a place in the normal school for basic education. From this can be seen his level-headedness – not to start with a child that has no potential – and his wisdom: if a child developed less or more than was expected, he acted on it.

### *What is the importance of data?*

With his statistics and way of making diagnoses Van Koetsveld made a contribution to documenting numbers and degrees of disorders and handicaps. The data he collected actually created 'idiocy as a specific way of being' on the basis of which children were admitted to the idiot school and the institution (Van Drenth, 2016, p. 481). This was implicitly a judgment on what was **normal**. At the moment the other side of this development is being debated. Frequent diagnosing constantly raises questions. It often serves subsidiary objectives: people need a diagnosis to lay a claim to help they can afford. The diagnosis can also be employed as a justification for specific conduct: the child has a disorder about which nothing can be done, so trying to correct its behaviour is senseless. Some things can have a negative effect: people may no longer explore all possibilities but too easily accept the status quo.

Van Koetsveld tried to get a grip on the phenomenon of idiocy. With this in mind he brought together a whole range of data, both from theory and from his own observations. He used his data mainly to prove that he was entitled to establish the idiot school.

In practice he had to adapt his ideas again: data supplied limited information. Even for him it was difficult to predict how a child would function at school. Observation and common sense in practice played a more important role than data.

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### *A view of living with a handicap*

Whereas in the nineteenth century in the Netherlands people were often ashamed of a handicapped child, two centuries later the idea of a society where things can be made better has taken firm root. In Western Europe this has led to discussions on how handicaps may be prevented. The consequences of prenatal examination are great; many unborn children with Down's syndrome are being aborted. DNA research before and diverse tests during pregnancy should contribute to the prevention of new life with a handicap. This is a painful reminder that the value that Van Koetsveld saw even in the lives of the less privileged is no longer commonly accepted. In his introduction to *Het idiotisme en de idiotschool* (Idiocy and the idiot school) Van Koetsveld pleaded for following the Great Master who looked up the lost. In the nineteenth century this attitude to life was against the spirit of the age, but in the twenty-first century is no less so.

### Study questions

8.1 The relation between regular primary education and Special Basic Education is not unambiguous. Is inclusive education an ideal? What are the pros and cons? Should SBE be abolished?

8.2 For a long time the intrinsic value of life was an obvious assumption. In our culture nowadays this is no longer the case: seriously handicapped, gravely (psychiatrically) ill persons and those becoming demented are an issue to many. People cannot tolerate the suffering or bear to look at it, people regard life with so much suffering as senseless. Can you reflect on this from the perspective of Van Koetsveld's way of thinking that was formed by the Bible? Write a short essay in which you give your own opinion on endangered life, making use of one or more of Van Koetsveld's ideas.

## 9. Primary concepts

### **Idiocy**

In the nineteenth century idiocy was a normal term for everybody who lagged behind in their development, for people with 'mental retardation'. They were neither ill nor crazy but 'locked in themselves' that is, without social (inter)action and contact. The designation and categorisation of levels of being mentally handicapped originated only later.

### **Social education**

Due to their handicap or disturbance idiotic children miss something essential to human beings. Therefore Van Koetsveld did not favour medical treatment and did not in the first instance pursue good school results, but worked for children who could **function socially** in a community (school, duties, occupation). To achieve this they had to develop physically, spiritually and morally.

### **Special education**

The name of Van Koetsveld is forever associated with **special education** and **care for the mentally retarded**. By realising education and development in an idiot school he could make his pioneering work among idiotic children take form.

### **Forming by means of the Bible**

Van Koetsveld wanted to promote **the moral and religious development** of children and young people. They had to be educated by the Bible. With this intention he therefore wrote a children's Bible, a catechism booklet -- a very simplified version for idiots – and held sermons for children. He personally kept on being involved in religious instruction in the idiot school and attached great importance to listening, praying and singing together.

## 10. Suggestions for further reading

Much has been written about Cornelis Elisa van Koetsveld. Due to the versatility of the person publications often discuss only a few aspects of his life and work. A biography of Van Koetsveld was written by Onstenk:

Onstenk, A. (1973). *'Ik behoor bij mezelf'*. (I belong to myself) *Cornelis Elisa van Koetsveld (1807-1893)*. Assen: Van Goor.

Van Koetsveld's (Orto)pedagogic work was researched by Theo Jak and Dorien Graas. Both these dissertations have abstracts in the English language but Van Koetsveld is not mentioned in these.

The English scientific articles by Ido Weijers and Annemieke van Drenth are accessible and can be downloaded from data banks like EBSCO and ERIC. In his historical approach Weijers draws a comparison between the work of Van Koetsveld and that of others who were active in this domain from early on

Van Drenth is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Leiden and an authority on Van Koetsveld's work. Her articles all have different perspectives: gender, sensory development and the interesting issue of delimitation. What does the practice research have to say about deciding on the admission of vulnerable children to the idiot school? 'What indications were considered guidelines for detecting 'abnormality' in childhood?' (Van Drenth, 2016, pp. 479-487). The articles are of a high standard. For a first acquaintance the article 'Mental boundaries' is the most suitable.

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## 12. Suggestions for action

### *Case study A – Justin in special basic education*

Justin is an enquiring boy of nine who likes going to school and being with other children. He would like to do what they do but actually does not know how. He is uninhibited in his contact and this can degenerate into screaming, kicking and hitting. The teachers do their best but they have difficulty calming Justin down.

Quite young Justin is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disturbance and ADHD. It is then clear why he has difficulty with too many stimuli in class and why his attention cannot be held to the lesson. Extra counselling is given to help him in this. Alas, it does not always help. It occurs regularly that he becomes unmanageable and has to be fetched by his parents. At home he usually calms down and the next day goes back to school in high spirits.

Justin's constantly recurring negative behaviour hinders him in his learning and that is a pity, for the teachers, counsellors and parents think that he is up to it. There are grave doubts if it would not be better for him to receive care and counselling than to keep him at school. But the parents stick to a school environment for their son (De Groot, 2018).

### Study questions on case study A

12.1 Put yourself in the position of Justin's parents and write down a number of arguments why he should be kept at school. Subsequently put yourself in the position of the teacher who finds Justin's behaviour unmanageable and sends him home. Write down a few arguments in favour of this measure.

Act out a conversation between both parties with another student. What is the result? How will Justin experience it?

Case study B – The collapse of education for special needs.

### **'Education for special needs can be quite good, but does not produce results'**

Too many administrative duties, too few hands in class and too many organisations who occupy themselves with a child who needs help. If you ask those involved in education, they know very well where help to children needing extra care goes wrong. Today [27 May 2018] it was made known that a majority

of the Tweede Kamer (equivalent to the House of Commons) demanded that education for special needs be improved promptly.

They are concerned about children who are for instance physically handicapped, highly intelligent or very badly dyslexic. The idea is that they just stay in their own class but at present teachers often hardly find time to give them extra help. This is also the experience of pre-school teacher Simone van Bolhuis from a primary school in Maarssen. "The idea behind it is very good, but in practice it does not succeed because we do not have the resources to give education for special needs. It is very frustrating if you cannot give sufficient help to some children in the class." She says that the classes are at present too full to help children with special educational needs. "It is very good that children who need extra care go to school together with others but then one should also know that the teacher can give them the attention they need." Therefore Van Bolhuis pleads for taking in an extra person in such situations so that the child who needs care or perhaps even the rest of the pupils are not neglected.

#### Assuming responsibility

Henk Keesenberg from a joint venture in Zwolle says that to a great extent the problem is that too many organisations occupy themselves with one child. He pleads for a return to a single coordinator and one good autonomous supervisor. His wish: that teachers could phone only one office when they need extra help for a child. And that in practice the real needs of the child are examined. "From eleven captains on one ship, back to one captain only, seems to me to be much simpler." There have been deliberations where ten or twelve people sat talking around a table about one of my children.

Keesenberg says it now happens that many different people are busy with one child. Karin van Ooijen, the mother of a child who needs extra help, concurs with this.

According to her the truth is: the more people around the table, the fewer tend to assume responsibility. There have been deliberations where ten or twelve people sat talking around a table about one of my children and then one could ask whether it is really necessary. Does it bring us any closer to a solution? No, for actually the involvement is passed on further and further."

#### A long stretch

According to her the level of knowledge concerning all the possibilities of education for special needs of all parties working on the case is sometimes sorely deficient. Thus Van Ooijen herself would have liked to have a specialist in the class for her child, someone who was specialised in dealing with high intelligence and behaviour related to trauma. Such people are hard to find, so that in the end somebody who does not have the required competence is taken on. "It is a long haul with evaluations and strategies of approach. In the end the

solution brings no results. While all the teacher needed was just a few extra hands in class.” (Willemsen, 2018)

Study questions on case study B

12.2 It seems as if education for special needs is a failure. How did this come about? Are children maybe still better off in SBE? To which children does this apply? What are the conditions for education for special needs?