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# Supporting young struggling readers at Success for All schools in the United States and the Netherlands: Comparative case studies

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## Abstract

Success for All, a multi-tiered school reform program, has its origins in the US and has recently expanded to the Netherlands. Using a multiple case study approach, we investigated similarities and differences in the way struggling readers are supported at two Success for All schools in the US and two in the Netherlands. First- and second-grade teachers and other staff members involved in the implementation of Success for All and the support of struggling readers were interviewed. We concluded that American and Dutch interviewees agreed on the benefits of Success for All for struggling readers, such as the engaging whole-class lessons and the possibility to offer tutoring. Furthermore, in both countries a tension was observed between the scriptedness of Success for All and the need for flexibility in the support of struggling readers. Regarding differences, we observed that both contextual and cultural factors led to variations in the way struggling readers are supported.

## Keywords

Struggling readers, students at risk, response to intervention, Success for All, school reform, multiple case study, qualitative research, comparative education

## Introduction

For many students with special educational needs (SEN), difficulties in reading have been the primary reason for their referral to special education services (Reschly, 2010). Large differences in reading skills are already visible in the early grades of elementary school (Jepma, 2003; Snow et al., 1998). To prevent the gap between poor and skilled readers from widening, known as the Matthew effect in reading (Stanovich, 1986), students at risk need systematic and intensive instruction, starting early (Hagans and Good, 2013; Reschly, 2010). Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and response to intervention models are useful in this regard, proposing an intensified

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degree of instruction for students who do not benefit enough from Tier 1 whole-class instruction. Generally, one-to-small group tutoring and technology-supported instruction are classified as Tier 2 strategies, and one-to-one tutoring as Tier 3. Special education services are often classified as Tier 4 (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). A recent, rigorous review of (mostly American) interventions for struggling readers in elementary schools by Inns et al. (2019) showed positive effects of both one-to-small group tutoring and one-to-one tutoring. Struggling readers are best benefitted when Tier 2 and 3 interventions are incorporated into a whole-class or whole-school program that also includes evidence-based strategies at Tier 1 (Inns et al., 2019).

### *Success for All*

Success for All (SfA) is an extensively researched whole-school program that includes aligned Tier 1, 2 and 3 strategies (Slavin et al., 2009). The aim of SfA is to ensure that every child, regardless of background, acquires adequate reading skills so he/she experiences success and becomes a motivated learner. SfA was originally developed for high-poverty/Title 1 elementary schools in Baltimore in the late 1980s and was intended to serve as an effective, replicable way of providing different types of support in a coherent manner (Slavin and Madden, 2013). Since then the number of schools working with SfA has increased considerably, and currently SfA is being used in approximately 1000 schools across the US and 200 schools across the UK. SfA includes evidence-based reading curricula (*Reading Roots* and *Reading Wings*), cooperative learning, flexible regrouping by reading performance level, tutoring, frequent assessment, solutions teams that concentrate on topics such as attendance, and a program for social emotional learning called Getting Along Together. Teachers at SfA schools are supported in their professional development by a facilitator, who is responsible for supervising the implementation of SfA in the school (Slavin et al., 2009).

SfA appears to be especially effective in improving the reading performance of initially low-achieving students (Quint et al., 2015). Borman and Hewes (2002) found that students in SfA schools spent fewer years enrolled in special education, completed eighth grade at a younger age, and experienced a lower number of retentions than students at control schools. Slavin et al. (2011) synthesized nine experimental and quasi-experimental studies on SfA and reported a mean effect size (standardized mean difference) of +0.55 on reading outcomes of students in the lowest-performing segments of their classes. Although several studies demonstrated strong effects of SfA on student performance, evaluating SfA is often complicated because of implementation issues. Klingner et al. (2006) observed that schools experienced problems with regrouping, tutoring, and the scripted nature of SfA. The study of the Education Endowment Foundation (2017) in the UK demonstrated large differences between schools, for example regarding the amount of staff available, that have impacted SfA implementation. Teachers expressed mixed opinions about the possibilities to differentiate the curriculum in such a way that the needs of all children were met.

As deficits in reading/language, especially among students with low socioeconomic backgrounds, are persistent in the Netherlands too (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2019; Smeets et al., 2019), the University of Groningen took the initiative to introduce SfA step-wise in the Dutch context. In the first phase of the research and development (R&D) project (2015–2018), six elementary schools participated. First, the *Reading Roots* curriculum for Grade 1 was developed, as an addition to the widely used phonics curriculum *Veilig Leren Lezen* (Zwijssen, 2003). The main things *Reading Roots* adds to *Veilig Leren Lezen* are the emphasis on cooperative learning and the use of “shared stories”: short stories with sentences in large letters to be read by the child and smaller letters to be read by an adult. These stories are taken home after reading them in class.

After developing *Reading Roots*, the *Reading Wings* curriculum was developed for students in the higher grades of elementary education. *Reading Wings* is designed as a comprehensive

curriculum, which can fully replace previously used programs for reading/language instruction in the higher grades. Because of the limited number of classes and teachers that participated in the first phase of the project, flexible regrouping by reading level was not yet possible in most participating schools. To be able to provide differentiated instruction, additional materials were developed. Teachers in Grade 1 could choose to read “light” (shortened and simplified) versions of the shared stories with their low-achievers and to give more challenging assignments to their high-achievers. In the higher grades, opportunities for extended instruction or enrichment activities were scheduled in the last week of every seven- or eight-week instructional cycle. Furthermore, *Reading Wings* teachers could divide their students into a high- and a low-performance subgroup, because materials for two different within-grade levels were developed. SfA’s solutions teams and the Getting Along Together program were not yet introduced in the Dutch version of SfA. The development of these components was not prioritized because schools were satisfied with the programs and procedures to address non-academic issues that were already in place. After three years of implementation of SfA in the Netherlands, positive effects on the text reading skills and oral language skills of first graders were observed. No effects were found on reading comprehension of first graders, nor on the performances of second- and third graders. The degree of implementation of SfA varied between classes and schools (Mullender-Wijnsma et al., 2020).

### *Comparing schools in the US with schools in the Netherlands*

With the current study, we want to add a new perspective to previous research about the support of struggling readers by comparing four schools that have implemented SfA from two different countries. As SfA has been established for a long time in the US and has only recently been introduced in the Netherlands, this study provides insight into the topic of expanding an evidence-based multi-tiered school reform program to new contexts. Large variations between countries exist in their educational systems and in the way struggling readers are supported (Ferguson, 2008; Norwich, 2008). Therefore, it is important to investigate how factors on the national level impact SfA implementation. Furthermore, this comparative study encourages educational researchers and practitioners to look beyond borders and reflect on what is considered normal and why, and thus it can contribute to the development of more inclusive policies and practices (D’Alessio and Watkins, 2009).

We expect that a number of differences between the US and the Netherlands can affect the way students with SEN are identified and supported. First, most schools in the US are larger in size. In 2016, an average school in the US served 528 students, versus 224 students in the Netherlands (IES/NCES, 2018a; Rijksoverheid, 2018). Regarding demographics, the child poverty rate is higher in the US, and the US student population is more diverse in terms of ethnicity (Owings et al., 2015). Furthermore, the average expenditure per student is somewhat higher in the US (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019). However, almost all educational funding in the Netherlands comes from the national government, while funding in the US comes from federal, state, and local sources, resulting in large differences between districts and states. In both countries, schools receive extra resources when they are serving large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Title 1 in the US; the weighted student funding in the Netherlands) (Owings et al., 2015). Although the average teacher–student ratio in primary education is quite similar in both countries (1:17 in the Netherlands vs 1:15 in the US (OECD, 2019)), the teacher–support staff ratio differs significantly. In the US, nowadays this ratio approaches 1:1. The proportion of paraprofessionals, librarians, and other support staff is far higher than in almost any other OECD country (IES/NCES, 2015; Richmond, 2014). In contrast, Dutch general elementary schools employ on average one support staff member per five to six teachers (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, 2017). One of the explanations for the large difference in support staff between the US

and the Netherlands concerns the extent to which students with SEN are educated in the general school. While the Dutch system has been two-tracked historically, with separate special and general schools, the US system has a continuum-oriented tradition (Norwich, 2008). In the US, nowadays about 0.4% of all students are placed in separate special education schools or residential facilities (National Council on Disability, 2018). Students with specific learning disabilities, attention difficulties or speech or language impairments normally attend schools for general education. They are supported by a special needs teacher or paraprofessional during (part of) the day, who assists in the general classroom or teaches the students in a separate room. In the Netherlands, the percentage of students educated in segregated settings is 4.5% (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2019). This segregated setting can be either a special elementary school (for students with moderate learning and/or behavioral difficulties) or a special school (for students with severe intellectual, physical, sensory or behavioral difficulties). “Education that fits” (free translation of the Dutch policy program “Passend Onderwijs”), introduced in 2014, promotes a more continuum-oriented, inclusive system, but has not led to a decrease in the proportion of students in special education settings so far (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2019). In a recent evaluation of the policy, teachers in general education schools expressed dissatisfaction with the possibilities they have to adequately support students with SEN in their class (Smeets et al., 2019).

### Case study research

Implementation of whole-school reform programs like SfA takes place in real-world contexts, in authentic schools that are rooted in traditions and that have to deal with regulations on different levels. Qualitative studies add depth not available through quantitative designs, by describing which implementation challenges are faced and investigating which contextual factors enhance or impede the effectiveness of a program (Klingner and Boardman, 2011; Merriam, 1998). This is even more important when focusing on struggling readers, because flexible implementation of the standard curriculum might be needed for these students. As including multiple cases strengthens the precision and enhances the validity of the findings (Merriam, 1998), we used a multiple case study (or collective case study) design (Creswell, 2007). This allowed us to show different perspectives within and between the countries on the support of struggling readers in elementary schools. The questions addressed in this study are:

1. *What are the similarities regarding the support of struggling readers between two US schools and two Dutch schools that implemented SfA?*
2. *What are the differences regarding the support of struggling readers between two US schools and two Dutch schools that implemented SfA, and which factors explain these differences?*

### Method

The cases in this study are four schools that implement SfA. Staff members of the schools were interviewed to gain more insight into the way struggling readers are supported. In both the US and the Netherlands, two SfA schools were selected. Throughout this paper, pseudonyms are used for all school and staff names. The first letters correspond with the first letters of the country names. The two participating schools in the Netherlands, Navigator and Nicholas, were the two schools that were involved in the development of SfA in the Netherlands since the beginning of the R&D project. These schools had been working with SfA for three to four years at the time of study. The two schools in the US, Union and Upwood, were selected in consultation with a coach affiliated with the SfA foundation, who was connected to several SfA schools. Criteria for participation in

the study were: (a) the school had to be experienced with SfA for at least five years to rule out the impact of possible start-up issues; (b) the school had to implement SfA in (at least) first grade and second grade; (c) the school had to be within a few hours' drive from Baltimore to limit travel expenses for data collection; and (d) the two US schools had to be located in the same state to minimize variation because of state funding differences. All four participating schools were accredited public schools for general education. Below, a short description of each school is provided.

### *Schools*

Navigator, located in a suburban area adjacent to a medium-sized city in the north of the Netherlands, served approximately 325 students (K–5) in the year of study. The student population was predominantly white and 22% of students were from disadvantaged backgrounds, with their parents/caregivers having completed less than two years of secondary school. The school received additional funding for these students under the weighted student funding system in the Netherlands. Using full-time equivalents to correct for some teachers being part-time employed, as we will do in the sequel of this article, the teacher–student ratio was 1:13 (Scholen op de Kaart, 2018). One principal, 26 homeroom teachers (of which some worked part-time and shared a homeroom class), one support coordinator/instructional coach, and two paraprofessionals were employed at Navigator (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, 2017). Physical education was taught by a specialized teacher.

Nicholas is located in a medium-sized city in the north of the Netherlands. In the year of study, Nicholas served approximately 240 students (K–5), from mixed ethnic-cultural backgrounds. For 19% of students, the school received additional funding because of their disadvantaged background. The teacher–student ratio at Nicholas was 1:15 (Scholen op de Kaart, 2018). The 15 homeroom teachers (of which some worked part-time and shared a homeroom class) were supported by one principal, one support coordinator/instructional coach, three paraprofessionals, and a specialized teacher for physical education (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, 2017).

Union, located in a medium-sized city in the state of Virginia, served approximately 680 students (K–5) in the year of study. Students were from highly diverse ethnic-cultural backgrounds. The population consisted of 37% English language learners (ELL) and 77.7% of the students were eligible for free or reduced meals (Virginia State of Education, 2018). Because of the high poverty rate, the school received additional Title 1 funding. The teacher–student ratio at Union was 1:16 (IES/NCES, 2018b). In total, 26 homeroom teachers, six ELL teachers, three SEN teachers, a literacy coach, a librarian, and seven paraprofessionals were working at Union in grades K–5. Furthermore, the school had specialized teachers for physical education, music, and art. The leadership team consisted of one principal and one assistant principal.

Upwood is located in a rural/suburban area, in close proximity to a small city in the state of Virginia. Upwood opened 10 years ago. The school served approximately 300 students (K–5) in the year of study, of which the vast majority was white, and 48% of all students were eligible for free or reduced meals (Virginia State of Education, 2018). The school did not receive Title 1 funding. The teacher–student ratio was 1:15 (IES/NCES, 2018b). The 17 homeroom teachers at Upwood were supported by one principal, six paraprofessionals, two SEN teachers, an instructional coach, a student intervention specialist (SIS), a librarian, and a tutor. The school also employed a physical education teacher (full-time), a music teacher, and an art teacher (part-time).

### *Teachers*

In each of the four schools, the homeroom teachers of a first-grade class and a second-grade class were contacted in consultation with the SfA facilitators of the schools. When two part-time

**Table 1.** Interviewees.

Name	Age	Sex	Country	School	Job	Years of experience as a teacher	Years of experience with SfA
Nina	42	F	NL	Navigator	Grade 1 homeroom teacher	19	2
Nicole	56	F	NL	Navigator	Grade 2 homeroom teacher	33	3
Nellie	57	F	NL	Nicholas	Grade 1 homeroom teacher	36	3
Nora	40	F	NL	Nicholas	Grade 1 homeroom teacher	17	3
Nathan	30	M	NL	Nicholas	Grade 2 homeroom teacher	3	1
Ursula	47	F	US	Union	SfA facilitator/literacy coach	19	6
Umaiza	46	F	US	Union	MTSS coordinator	22	1
Udile	26	F	US	Union	Grade 1 homeroom teacher	4	4
Ulyssa	26	F	US	Union	Grade 2 homeroom teacher	4	3
Umberto	50	M	US	Upwood	Principal	10	4
Ulla	33	F	US	Upwood	SfA facilitator/instructional coach	11	7
Urielle	48	F	US	Upwood	SEN teacher	10	10
Ulrika	61	F	US	Upwood	Grade 1 homeroom teacher	40	9
Uma	33	F	US	Upwood	Grade 2 homeroom teacher	12	8
Steven	49	M	US	n/a	SfA coach	6	21

teachers were connected to one class (which was only the case in Dutch schools), the teacher who taught most days was interviewed. At Nicholas, we decided to interview both teachers of the Grade 1 class together, because they both worked full-time and both taught a subgroup during SfA instruction. Nine homeroom teachers in total participated in the study. In Table 1, teachers' ages, years of experience as a teacher, and years of experience with SfA are displayed.

### Students

To illustrate how struggling readers are supported in the four involved schools, teachers were asked to select two struggling readers from their homeroom classes. This provided us with concrete examples of how policies are put into practice at the schools. We asked teachers to name two students who were performing approximately six months below age-appropriate level on reading (purposive sampling). Active informed consent from parents/caregivers was obtained. The procedures were approved by the institutional review board of the Department of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences (University of Groningen) and by the school boards of the participating US schools. The parents of one of the selected US students did not give consent. In one Dutch classroom, only one student was eligible for participation, because all his classmates performed around or above their age-appropriate level. Therefore, the final student sample consisted of 14 students (seven Dutch and seven American). Student descriptives can be found in Table 2.

### Data collection

The main sources of information in this study were semi-structured teacher interviews. Topics that were addressed in the interviews were the support of young struggling readers in the school in general, the teacher's experiences with SfA, and the support of the two selected students. A set of guiding questions was used, but the interview style was flexible and responsive to the input of the interviewees. As we not only compared schools but also compared schools in different countries, incomparability of terminology is an area of concern (D'Alessio and Watkins, 2009). To become familiar with

**Table 2.** Students.

Name	Age <sup>a</sup>	Sex	Country	School	Grade	Homeroom teacher
Owen	7.1	M	NL	Navigator	1	Nina
Pam	8.5	F	NL	Navigator	2	Nicole
Iris	7.8	F	NL	Navigator	2	Nicole
Lola	7.2	F	NL	Nicholas	1	Nellie & Nora
Perry	7.1	M	NL	Nicholas	1	Nellie & Nora
Luqman	8.5	M	NL	Nicholas	2	Nathan
Hannah	8.9	F	NL	Nicholas	2	Nathan
Lauryn	6.9 <sup>b</sup>	F	US	Union	1	Udile
Lizzy	6.9 <sup>b</sup>	F	US	Union	1	Udile
Oscar	8.2	M	US	Union	2	Ulyssa
Henry	6.8	M	US	Upwood	1	Ulrika
Patrick	7.6	M	US	Upwood	1	Ulrika
Pete	8.1	M	US	Upwood	2	Uma
Isabel	8.6	F	US	Upwood	2	Uma

<sup>a</sup>Ages at the end of the school year (July 1, 2018 for Dutch students; July 1, 2019 for US students) are displayed.

<sup>b</sup>For these students, only the age in years was available. The age in months was estimated based on the compulsory school entrance age in the state of Virginia.

the educational system in the US and to solve translation issues, the first author discussed the research plan and the interview questions with researchers from the SfA foundation and started with three weeks of participant observation at Union before collecting data. After that, one research week per participating US school was scheduled for the interviews. In addition to the teacher interviews, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the SfA facilitators of both schools, the MTSS coordinator at Union, the SEN teacher at Upwood, and the SfA coach that was connected to both schools. As the SfA facilitator of Upwood recently started her job, she was interviewed together with the principal, who was closely involved in reinforcing SfA implementation at the school. Descriptives of these interviewees can also be found in Table 1. For the descriptions of the two Dutch schools, in addition to the teacher interviews we made use of data from interviews with tutors, observations of tutoring sessions, a questionnaire for teachers and a questionnaire for facilitators about SfA implementation, and minutes of meetings with teachers, facilitators, and tutors. These data were gathered during the R&D project in the year of study and the two years before, as the first author was already involved in research on SfA at these schools. Because of this existing collaboration we already knew, for example, which staff members were involved with SfA, whether students were divided into different subgroups during Tier 1 instruction, and how Tier 2 and Tier 3 tutoring was organized at the participating schools. The information was verified during the teacher interviews. All interviews were conducted by the first author. The data collection in the Netherlands took place in school year 2017/2018; the data collection in the US in 2018/2019. Data were collected in the second half of the school year, as students had received at least half a year of formal education by then.

## Analysis

In total, 13 interviews were conducted. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The analysis of the interview data proceeded through several phases. First, the transcripts were entered into ATLAS.ti, version 8.0 (Friese, 2018). The constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to identify common themes (e.g. tutoring; professionals involved in the support of the



student; pros and cons of using SfA). Subsequently, per interviewee the responses were summarized in a report. Each teacher report consisted of a description of the class context, the teacher's experiences with SfA, and a student-specific part about the two selected students. The reports of the SfA facilitators, SfA coach, MTSS coordinator, and SEN teacher contained information about the school context, the support of struggling readers in the school in general, and their experiences with SfA. The reports were provided to the interviewees for a member check, a procedure to validate the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2007). Only one interviewee requested to change a detail in the report.

Thereafter, the interview reports were integrated into extensive descriptions of the support of struggling readers at the four schools. These descriptions were thoroughly discussed with the co-authors and were rewritten into the four descriptions that are presented in the first paragraph of the results section. In these descriptions, emphasis is placed on the components of SfA that are expected to help struggling readers, and more specifically on how these components are implemented and valued. As interventions for struggling readers can differ in terms of content and intensity, we made use of the response to intervention framework to facilitate comparisons across schools and countries. We used the classification of Inns et al. (2019), distinguishing Tier 1 (classroom approaches), Tier 2 (one-to-small group tutoring), and Tier 3 (one-to-one tutoring). Special education services are classified as Tier 4 support, following Fuchs and Fuchs (2006). In Table 3, the types of support the selected students received are summarized. The second paragraph of the results section contains a cross-case analysis of the similarities and differences between the US schools and the Dutch schools regarding the support of struggling readers. The four overarching findings were phrased in dialogue between the first and second author.

## Results

### *The support of struggling readers at four schools implementing SfA*

*Navigator.* Navigator started working with Success for All four years ago, in 2014 (one year earlier than the other Dutch schools, since Navigator was the pilot school). Nowadays, *Reading Roots* and *Reading Wings* (Tier 1) are implemented in Grades 1–4. As mentioned in the introduction, the Grade 1 program *Reading Roots* is combined with *Veilig Leren Lezen*, the phonics program that was already used at Navigator before the introduction of SfA. About 45 minutes are spent on each program. In the higher grades, the entire 90 minutes are spent on *Reading Wings*. Both *Reading Roots* and *Reading Wings* lessons are provided in the homerooms (no regrouping). Homerooms vary in size: for example, Owen's class (Grade 1) consists of 16 students, while Pam and Iris (Grade 2) receive SfA instruction in a class of 23. Grade 2 teacher Nicole says the level of instruction during these whole-class lessons is quite high for Pam, who seems to have persistent difficulties in reading. When Pam has to read a difficult text, she is supported by a peer or by Nicole. New stories and weekly assessments are read aloud to her. No adaptations are made in the Tier 1 curriculum or instruction for Iris.

Struggling readers can receive several types of extra intervention at Navigator. In Grade 1, every day starts with 30 minutes of small-group instruction (Tier 2) for the struggling readers. This group is taught by the homeroom teacher, while the other students work independently. Furthermore, once a week a volunteer reads the shared story with a group of struggling readers before students read it in class (preteaching) (Tier 2). Students who have a limited vocabulary receive extra instruction from a paraprofessional, twice a week for 45 minutes (Tier 2). First graders like Owen, who are in need of additional phonics instruction, can also receive one-to-one tutoring from a paraprofessional (Tier 3). During these sessions, the computer-assisted program *Bouw!* (Lexima, 2019) is used. In theory, students practice four times a week for 15 minutes, but Grade 1 teacher Nina mentions that tutoring sessions are often canceled because the paraprofessional who is responsible for tutoring also substitutes absent teachers at Navigator.

In Grade 2, the *Connect Vloeiend Lezen* program (Smits et al., n.d.) is used for tutoring struggling readers (Tier 2), aimed at improving fluency. The sessions are provided four times a week and have an average duration of 20 minutes. Both the homeroom teacher and a paraprofessional tutor a group of four students. The sessions of the paraprofessional are canceled quite often, for the reason mentioned above. In addition to the interventions at school, Pam and Iris participate in a weekly after-school program led by childcare workers called *Taalatelier* (Doornenbal et al., 2018), targeted at students who are lagging behind in their language development. When students make little progress despite these efforts, which is the case with Pam, they will be referred to a school psychologist for further evaluation.

Overall, the experiences with SfA are positive at Navigator. According to Nina, the greatest advantages of SfA are the high-paced, energetic lessons and the content of the SfA assignments. Another strength of SfA that was mentioned by both Nina and Nicole is the predictability of the routines. Furthermore, both teachers value the way cooperative activities and behaviors are introduced and sustained in SfA lessons. They feel cooperative learning is beneficial for struggling readers, because students are placed in heterogeneous teams and thus can help each other. The challenges faced at Navigator regarding SfA implementation are mostly organizational. Ensuring the continuity and quality of the SfA lessons when a homeroom teacher is absent is difficult, Nina and Nicole noticed.

*Nicholas.* Nicholas started implementing Success for All three years ago, in 2015. At present, Grades 1–4 are participating. During the daily 90-minute lessons (Tier 1), the Grade 1 class (36 students) is split up into a small group of low performers (10 students) and a larger group of average to high performers (26 students). The progress of the first graders is evaluated every six weeks and they are regrouped if necessary. Nellie and Nora both teach a subgroup. Normally they change groups every six weeks, though in the last few months Nora continued teaching the low-performing group. Nellie was absent often and she was substituted by different teachers, to which the high-performing students could adapt more easily.

Nellie and Nora feel that the combination of two different programs (*Veilig Leren Lezen* and *Success for All*) does not work well. “Too much is being asked from the students in an hour and a half.” In the low-performing subgroup, most time is spent on whole-class phonics instruction, at the expense of SfA activities. Although Nellie and Nora like the SfA assignments and have noticed improvements in the oral language skills of their students, they prioritize *Veilig Leren Lezen*. Nellie and Nora use the light versions of SfA’s shared stories, but they feel the books are still too difficult for their lowest performers. Regarding cooperative learning, Nellie and Nora value the step-wise introduction, but they have the feeling that their students are not ready for the high amount of cooperative activities yet. Nellie and Nora decided to stop using SfA in their classes in the upcoming school year.

A volunteer assists three mornings a week in the low-performing group and also provides tutoring to first graders who need extra practice, like Lola and Perry. The one-to-one tutoring sessions (Tier 3), which are scheduled 1–3 times a week, last 15 minutes on average and are focused on phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, word knowledge, and fluency. The volunteer makes use of activities and materials from *Veilig Leren Lezen* that are suggested by Nellie and Nora. In the beginning of the school year, the lowest performers were selected for tutoring, but later on Nellie and Nora chose to only tutor the students with milder reading problems to better prepare them for Grade 2. The very low performers will repeat Grade 1 or will be referred to a special elementary school.

In Grade 2, for practical reasons no SfA subgroups were composed this year (2017–2018). Last year, students were placed on two different levels, but that was too difficult to organize this year because their homeroom teacher Nathan was often absent. He was substituted by different teachers. Although dealing with differences within the group (consisting of 30 students) is sometimes hard, overall Nathan is positive about teaching SfA. He likes the detailed manuals and the fiction and

nonfiction books that are used in *Reading Wings*. Most students enjoy reading the books, even the struggling ones. Nathan says: “It may take some more time, but they experience: wow, I can read this!” To support struggling readers like Luqman and Hannah, he sometimes reads out loud difficult text passages. Nathan sometimes struggles with the limited flexibility of SfA. He feels that some of the language learners in his class, like Luqman, would benefit from extra vocabulary instruction, but the schedule of the SfA lessons is too tight to do so. It is also not possible to provide additional vocabulary instruction during another part of the day, as there is not enough staff/time to organize this.

However, Luqman and Hannah both participate in 20-minute preteaching sessions (Tier 2), which are scheduled three times a week and are aimed at improving fluency. These tutoring sessions are provided in groups of three students and are alternately led by four different paraprofessionals/childcare workers. Nathan believes the extra practice is helpful, but he also finds it hard that tutored students have to miss (parts of) other activities at school. Therefore, he sometimes decides to cancel sessions. He is skeptical about scheduling much time for tutoring:

In class, we already spend 90 minutes on reading/language each day. . . Some children are just not that good in reading. It is not motivating for them to keep pushing. Instead of focusing on things that are difficult, I want to empower them.

*Union.* Union has been working with Success for All for seven years, since 2012. They are a “full-SfA” school: all SfA components are implemented and SfA is used in all grades. Students are regrouped during the daily SfA reading block (Tier 1). SfA groups are smaller than homeroom classes, because the three special education teachers and six ELL teachers also teach SfA groups. For example, first graders Lauryn and Lizzie were placed in an SfA group consisting of only nine (mainly ELL) students, and second grader Oscar was placed in a group consisting of 12 students.

Since Union adopted SfA, their reading results have considerably improved. MTSS coordinator Umaiza says one of the most important assets of SfA for struggling students is that students are grouped with like-leveled students and that they can show progress throughout the year:

When a student moves, it’s not because it’s the end of the academic year, but a student moves because they’ve reached a certain milestone. . . I think having that opportunity to transition so frequently gives students that feeling of accomplishment.

Grade 2 teacher Ulyssa is very positive about teaching SfA, because different parts of reading are connected, instead of teaching specific units. Furthermore, reading the books repeatedly, discussing difficult words, and teaching students to have meaningful conversations are valued highly by Ulyssa. She also likes the cooperative strategies and the predictability of the program, which helps students to stay on task. The experiences of Grade 1 teacher Udile with SfA are somewhat more mixed. At first, she was happy to have a scripted program, but in the past few years she also felt that the scriptedness of SfA can stifle creativity. Regarding struggling readers, Udile feels that some students, in particular those who repeat a level in *Reading Roots*, get bored with the books they have to read repeatedly at school and at home. With some struggling readers, Udile chooses to only read a chapter instead of the whole book every day, a strategy that was shared at the national SfA conference Udile attended. She also tries to pair struggling readers with a peer who is patient and likes to help. Both Udile and Ulyssa mention that they find it hard to monitor the reading progress of their homeroom students, as they are placed in different SfA groups. Ulyssa is glad that there is a literacy block in the homerooms: “If we didn’t have that, I would have no idea what my students’ reading and writing abilities were.”

A hindering factor for sustainable implementation of SfA at Union is the high teacher turnover rate, which creates an unstable situation for students and staff. According to Umaiza, the transiency might be explained by the diverse and difficult student population. Regarding the content of the SfA program, facilitator Ursula believes that it is not meeting the needs of all students. While SfA seems to be especially effective for the ELL students at Union, she felt she had to set up a different program for some SEN students. They are now taught a “hybrid program”: SfA’s *Reading Roots* combined with a guided reading program called *Reading Mastery* (McGraw-Hill, 2008). Furthermore, a literacy block is scheduled every afternoon (65–70 minutes) for all students. Grade-specific skills are taught, in particular for writing, spelling, word study, and reading. The one-to-small-group program *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2016) is used, combined with teacher-designed assignments. Ursula explains why Union chose to schedule extra literacy time: “We have to meet our Virginia state standards . . . and they aren’t covered in SfA in the manner that we feel they need to be covered.” Furthermore, Union is the only school in their board using SfA, so they have to balance between the SfA framework and local regulations. For example, Union could not fully implement SfA’s solutions teams, because the school board urged them to align with the structures used at the other schools in the district.

During part of the literacy block, some students are pulled for tutoring. SfA’s new computer-assisted tutoring program *The Lightning Squad* (Success for All Foundation, 2017) is used at Union (Tier 2). Tutoring is provided daily to first- and second graders, who work in pairs under the guidance of a paraprofessional. Ursula says that she would prefer to assign more students to tutoring than she does now, because she sees tutored students making progress, but there is not enough staff to facilitate this. Steven also mentions the small number of students receiving tutoring as one of the weaknesses in SfA implementation at Union. Of the three struggling readers that were selected for our study, only one (Oscar) receives tutoring. Ulyssa says it is really helping him; she wishes he could have gotten it earlier. During the rest of the literacy block, Oscar practices sight words or writing in a small group taught by Ulyssa (Tier 2). Lauryn and Lizzie receive additional support from an ELL teacher who sometimes assists during math, writing or social studies. However, Udile regrets that Lauryn and Lizzie are not eligible for tutoring because they perform “too high,” while they are also struggling and are likely to benefit from a more intensive intervention. Some students at Union receive extra intervention after school, either arranged by the school (called Extended Learning Opportunities) or by the parents (private tutoring).

*Upwood.* Upwood has been fully implementing SfA for nine years, since 2010. Students are regrouped during the daily SfA reading block (Tier 1). Group sizes are reduced during SfA lessons, as the two SEN teachers, the librarian, and the student intervention specialist (SIS) each also teach a group. The paraprofessionals assist students with SEN in the classrooms. Umberto, the principal, says that financing SfA can be difficult when a school does not receive Title 1 funding. However, he says:

All budgeting, you know, is priorities. What is your priority? My priority is for a kid to read. . . If they can’t read, they can’t do math, social studies, science or anything. So, to put that amount of money into what is gonna benefit the kid the rest of their lives. . . I don’t have a problem with that.

Most schools in the county have adopted SfA in the past few years, because they have seen the results of other schools improve since they started with SfA.

SEN teacher Urielle teaches the lowest *Reading Roots* group at Upwood, consisting of 13 students (of whom a few are identified SEN students). First graders Patrick and Henry and second grader Pete are placed in this group. Urielle calls SfA “a terrific program for most students.” She says no program is going to be tailored for every single student and that teachers have to be creative, especially with groups like hers. She feels supported in this by SfA facilitator Ulla and SfA coach Steven. In her current group, the variation is quite large and some students make little

progress. To better meet the needs of struggling readers, Urielle, Ulla, and Steven recently decided to split up the group after 30 minutes of whole-class phonics instruction. Thereafter, the high-performing students stay with Urielle and follow the regular program. The low-performing subgroup is taught by a paraprofessional. They receive extra phonics instruction and read a lower-level shared story. Isabel (Grade 2) is placed in a higher-level group, consisting of 12 students and taught by the SIS (Tier 1). According to her homeroom teacher Uma, only Tier 1 intervention is sufficient for Isabel at this moment. “I wouldn’t say I’m really worried about her.”

In addition to the SfA lessons, a daily 30-minute rev-up block is scheduled in the homerooms. During this block, students receive extra instruction for math and language in small groups. Some students are pulled by a tutor, some students go to the SIS, and some students stay with their homeroom teacher or SEN teacher. Students are instructed about grammar and language structure (e.g. nouns, sentences, synonyms, contractions). Uma says especially the low-performing students need this extra instruction, because it is not covered in their SfA lessons. Furthermore, students practice writing in their homerooms for  $\pm$  30 minutes each day, because teachers feel that the time spent on writing in SfA is not sufficient to prepare students for the state tests.

For tutoring at Upwood, sessions with SfA’s computer-assisted program *Tutoring with Alphie* (Success for All Foundation, 2015) are alternated with activities that are connected to the state-provided *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)* (University of Virginia, 2019), which is mandated by Upwood’s county. Students receive tutoring at least three days a week, depending on their needs, in groups of 3–4 students with a paraprofessional (Tier 2). Henry receives Tier 2 tutoring daily. Patrick was in Tier 2 in the first months of the school year, before he was placed in Tier 3 a few months ago. Now he receives daily one-to-one tutoring from either a paraprofessional or the SIS. The SIS uses an *Orton–Gillingham* approach (Orton Academy, 2018). About the interventions for struggling readers, Ulla says: “I think it’s important that, especially first-grade level, you catch them in, you know. Instead of letting them slip on by. When they’re getting to the upper grades, it’s even harder.”

However, some young struggling readers do not make much progress, despite extra interventions. For example, second grader Pete has received Tier 2 intervention in Grade 1 and Tier 3 intervention in Grade 2 for months, and he is still reading at a first-grade level. After going through special education evaluation, he was identified with a specific learning disability. Since then Pete receives *PALS* tutoring every day for 30–45 minutes (Tier 4). In the classroom, some accommodations are made for Pete: he is seated upfront in the class, facing the teacher; directions are being repeated more often; he is pulled out for tests by the SEN teacher; worksheets and tests are read aloud; and he receives printed notes, so he does not have to write them down. The aide that is in Uma’s classroom all day also supports Pete a lot.

According to Grade 1 teacher Ulrika, an important strength of SfA is regrouping. Now students get 90 minutes of tailored instruction, while before she had to divide her attention between three or four different subgroups. The scriptedness of SfA is mainly seen as an advantage of the program at Upwood. Ulrika and Uma say the detailed manuals set a good standard for every teacher, and it saves time in terms of planning and designing lessons. With regard to the content of the SfA curriculum, Uma especially values the phonics instruction and the repeated reading of the books: students know what to expect and their fluency improves. Ulrika says her students really like the stories they read in SfA. However, both teachers feel that some more flexibility is needed for their most struggling students. This is also mentioned by Urielle: “When they don’t get it, I’m not sure that just going back and redoing it is the solution.” Although Ulla tries to give new books to students who repeat a level, sometimes repeating a book is unavoidable, which can be disappointing for them. What Urielle loves about teaching SfA are the practice of oral language skills and the cooperative learning activities, which are reinforced by the Getting Along Together program. She feels that this contributes to more inclusion. “Just hearing their confidence when they’re standing up. Even if that’s a student that’s one or two grade levels below reading. They’re still able to share

**Table 3.** Types of support received by the selected students.

Name	Tiers of intervention	Tier 1 intervention(s)	Tier 1 SFA group size	Tier 1 provider(s)	Tier 2 intervention(s)	Tier 2 provider(s)	Tier 3 intervention(s)	Tier 3 provider(s)
Owen	Tier 1, 2, 3	SfA Reading Roots + Veilig Leren Lezen	16	Teacher	Extended instruction + preteaching	Teacher + volunteer	Bouw!	Paraprofessional
Pam	Tier 1, 2	SfA Reading Wings	23	Teacher	Connect Vloeiend Lezen + Taalatelier	Teacher + childcare worker	n.a.	n.a.
Iris	Tier 1, 2	SfA Reading Wings	23	Teacher	Connect Vloeiend Lezen + Taalatelier	Teacher + childcare worker	n.a.	n.a.
Lola	Tier 1, 3	SfA Reading Roots + Veilig Leren Lezen	10	Teacher	n.a.	n.a.	Veilig Leren Lezen	Volunteer
Perry	Tier 1, 3	SfA Reading Roots + Veilig Leren Lezen	10	Teacher	n.a.	n.a.	Veilig Leren Lezen	Volunteer
Luqman	Tier 1, 2	SfA Reading Wings	30	Teacher	Preteaching	Paraprofessional + childcare worker	n.a.	n.a.
Hannah	Tier 1, 2	SfA Reading Wings	30	Teacher	Preteaching	Paraprofessional + childcare worker	n.a.	n.a.
Lauryn	Tier 1	SfA Reading Roots + literacy block	9	Teacher	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Lizzy	Tier 1	SfA Reading Roots + literacy block	9	Teacher	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Oscar	Tier 1, 2	SfA Reading Roots + literacy block	12	Teacher	SfA Lightning Squad + extended instruction	Paraprofessional + teacher	n.a.	n.a.
Henry	Tier 1, 2	SfA Reading Roots + rev-up block + writing	13	Teacher + Paraprofessional	SfA Tutoring with Alphie + PALS	Paraprofessional	n.a.	n.a.
Patrick	Tier 1, 2, 3	SfA Reading Roots + rev-up block + writing	13	Teacher + Paraprofessional	SfA Tutoring with Alphie + PALS	Paraprofessional	Orton-Gillingham	Student intervention specialist + paraprofessional
Pete	Tier 1, 2, 3, 4	SfA Reading Roots + rev-up block + writing	13	Teacher	SfA Tutoring with Alphie + PALS	Paraprofessional	Orton-Gillingham + PALS	Student intervention specialist + paraprofessional
Isabel	Tier 1	SfA Reading Wings + rev-up block + writing	12	Student intervention specialist	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

their ideas.” Ulrika also praises the strong oral language skills of her students, which transfers to other subjects.

### Cross-case analysis

Taking the findings from the different schools together, several similarities and differences between the US schools and the Dutch schools concerning the support of struggling readers emerge. Regarding similarities, we state that:

1. *There is consensus about the benefits of SfA for struggling readers.*

The component of SfA that is most explicitly focused on struggling readers, tutoring (Tier 2/3), was highly valued at all schools. Even though organizing tutoring appeared to be difficult at some schools, the importance of intervening early and intensively was not being called into question. About Iris, Nicole said: “If she did not have that additional practice, I think she would have failed in reading.” Regarding the content of the whole-class SfA lessons (Tier 1), the integrated approach to reading/language, the predictability of the routines, and the use of engaging fiction and nonfiction books were mentioned as strengths of SfA. For all students, but certainly for struggling readers, it is important to read compelling stories that help increase their motivation for reading. Furthermore, even though some teachers experienced difficulties with managing cooperative activities in the early grades, the emphasis on cooperative learning was seen as a positive feature of SfA by most teachers. They observed that struggling readers were helped by their peers and became more confident in expressing themselves orally.

2. *There is a tension between the scriptedness of SfA and the need for flexibility in the support of struggling readers.*

To ensure consistency and replicability, SfA provides detailed manuals/lesson plans to schools working with SfA. Several interviewees mentioned that the scriptedness of the program saves time and gives guidance, which is especially appreciated by beginning teachers. “As a teacher starting out, I felt like that was one less thing I had to worry about”, Udile said. On the other hand, teachers can feel restricted in their autonomy by the scripted lesson plans. While some flexibility is needed when teaching struggling readers, beginning teachers might be hesitant about deviating from the script. Udile: “If you’re getting observed and they come in and see that you are doing something kinda off the book, it might look bad on you.” Experienced teachers seemed to find it easier to make adaptations. For example, Urielle, Nellie, and Nora felt the need to spend more time on phonics with their struggling readers in Grade 1 than was prescribed in the manual, and so they changed the structure of their lessons.

The tension was also visible in the provision of additional Tier 1 language instruction outside of the SfA lessons, which happened at all schools. In the study of Skindrud and Gersten (2006) similar practices were observed. Although in some cases the additional instruction was demanded by authorities (e.g. the district or state), in most cases schools decided to offer something extra on Tier 1 because they felt that certain domains (e.g. writing, vocabulary) were insufficiently covered in SfA. Furthermore, there seemed to be a discrepancy between the tutoring programs (Tier 2/3) offered by SfA (*Tutoring with Alphonie, the Lightning Squad*, and face-to-face tutoring with the tutoring manual) and the needs of the schools, given the variety of programs used during tutoring sessions. Unfortunately, most of the programs used alongside SfA are not evidence-based, with the exception of *Bouw!* (Zijlstra, 2015). To our knowledge, no high-quality effect studies are available

for *Orton-Gillingham*, *Reading Mastery*, *PALS*, *Veilig Leren Lezen*, and *Connect Vloeiend Lezen*. The program *Words Their Way* was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial design, but did not yield significant positive effects on struggling readers (Eddy et al., 2011). The effectiveness of response to intervention would be increased when schools only make use of proven programs (Inns et al., 2019).

Regarding differences between the US schools and the Dutch schools, we observed that:

3. *Contextual factors lead to differences in the support of struggling readers.*

The most noticeable contextual difference between the schools in the two different countries was the amount of support staff available to assist struggling students. While the US schools were used to having several specialized teachers, paraprofessionals, and a librarian, the reality at the Dutch schools was quite different. At both Nicholas and Navigator, a volunteer was responsible for (part of) the tutoring sessions in Grade 1. Making use of well-trained volunteers is commendable because it increases the number of students that can be served, though in general tutoring by (unpaid) volunteers is less stable and thus less effective than tutoring by professionals (Inns et al., 2019; Slavin et al., 2011).

As was briefly outlined in the introduction, multiple factors can explain the difference in teacher–support staff ratio between the two countries: (a) on average, schools in the US receive a (slightly) higher budget per student; (b) general schools in the US include more students with special educational needs; and (c) schools in the US serve more students from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom they can receive additional funding. We observed that students who are not identified as having SEN or as being disadvantaged also benefit from the extra support staff. For example, support staff members teach SfA groups, so more different levels are offered and group sizes are reduced. When Dutch schools want to start regrouping students during SfA, the limited number of available teachers and paraprofessionals can be a constraint. A complicating factor is that many teachers in the Netherlands work part-time and share homeroom classes, which rarely happens at schools in the US. Dutch paraprofessionals also often work part-time, which has consequences for the number of tutoring sessions that are provided per week, or for the number of different tutors that are involved with one student.

Another circumstance that negatively impacted SfA implementation in the Netherlands was the teacher shortage at the time of study (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2019). A homeroom teacher at Nicholas was absent for a long time and was substituted by a number of different teachers. At Navigator, a paraprofessional substituted absent teachers, with canceled tutoring sessions as a side-effect. Although to a lesser extent, staffing issues were also experienced in the US. Like the SfA schools in the Ross et al. (2004) study, Union dealt with a high teacher turnover rate. This is a common problem in high-poverty schools, whereas their student populations are most in need of a stable school environment (Simon and Johnson, 2015). Finding enough tutors was also a problem at Union. For that reason, only very low performers could be tutored, which is not in accordance with SfA's guidelines.

4. *Cultural factors affect the way struggling readers are treated.*

When comparing schools from different countries, the impact of cultural factors should not be underestimated, especially in the field of inclusive education (D'Alessio and Watkins, 2009). The central issue in this study is: how do we treat students who fall behind? One of the core values of SfA is *relentlessness*; not giving up until success is achieved (Slavin et al., 2009). In the US schools,



this message was disseminated widely, for example by displaying the slogan “Work hard, get smart” throughout the building at Union. At both US schools, great emphasis was placed on achieving good results on the state tests, reflected in quite a lot of additional instruction (next to SfA) targeted at grade-specific skills needed to pass these tests. Also, after-school tutoring, sometimes arranged by parents, seemed to be more common in the US schools. These practices point to a more performance-oriented culture, in line with the idea of the American dream that encourages people to pursue success (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003). Although Dutch teachers were positive about the effects of tutoring, we felt that some of them were reluctant to increase the amount of reading/language instruction, because they did not want to put too much pressure on students. Houtveen and Van de Grift (2007: 419) made a similar observation: “Speeding up the learning process of these students by expanding and intensifying learning time is not, to say the least, common practice at Dutch schools.” Moreover, the Grade 2 teacher at Nicholas asserted that “Some children are just not that good in reading,” indicating a defeatist attitude to student performance. The Grade 1 teachers at Nicholas decided to stop tutoring their lowest performers, because they would be retained or referred anyway.

Low optimism of Dutch teachers regarding the opportunities of students who fall behind may stem from the historically segregated system of special education in the Netherlands (Norwich, 2008). We observed that the degree of *inclusiveness* in education still differed between both countries. The students we discussed, in particular those with persistent reading difficulties, can be considered as being at risk of referral to special education services. For American students, a SEN status means more individualized support within the general school, while Dutch SEN students are more likely to be referred to a special elementary school. Many teachers in the Netherlands working in general education feel they cannot adequately support students with SEN, because they lack the competences needed; because their workload is too high; or because the support system within the school is insufficient (Pijl, 2010; Smeets et al., 2019).

## Discussion

In this study, we aimed to provide insight into the topic of expanding an American evidence-based program for struggling readers to a new context: the Netherlands. Firstly, we investigated similarities between two US schools and two Dutch schools that implemented SfA regarding the support of struggling readers. We discovered that the strengths of SfA mentioned by Dutch and US interviewees (such as tutoring, the integrated approach to reading/language, the books, and the cooperative learning activities) were largely comparable. The most prominent challenge in schools in both countries was the scriptedness of the SfA program, while teaching struggling readers requires some flexibility. Schools dealt with this issue by making adaptations to the SfA lessons and by providing additional instruction and/or programs. Secondly, we investigated differences between the two US schools and the two Dutch schools regarding the support of struggling readers and concluded that these differences stemmed from both contextual and cultural factors. While the schools in the US did experience some staffing issues, they could still rely on a considerable number of specialized teachers and paraprofessionals who provided SfA instruction and/or tutoring. The Dutch schools had great difficulty finding enough (substitute) teachers and paraprofessionals. We also noticed that the educational culture in the Netherlands seemed to differ from the American one in terms of relentlessness and inclusiveness. Because we have followed a qualitative approach, involving a small sample, our findings should not be considered generalizable to other Dutch and American SfA schools. Nevertheless, we believe our study provides valuable insights that might apply to other SfA schools.

We want to discuss two differences between the schools in the two different countries more thoroughly, namely regrouping by reading level and the amount of staff available to support struggling readers. Regrouping students during the Tier 1 SfA lessons is one of the key features of SfA, and probably also the one that is most criticized (e.g. Klingner et al., 2006). The advantages of regrouping, according to the US teachers in our study, are clear: their workload is reduced because they have to differentiate less, and students have 90 minutes of tailored instruction and practice. In Dutch schools implementing SfA, regrouping was not yet realized. We believe there are some important lessons to be learned from the experiences with regrouping in the US schools. First of all, regrouping is an organizational challenge. Assessing all students and assigning them to different groups multiple times a year is a time-consuming task for SfA facilitators. In small schools, the within-group variation can still be quite large because of the limited amount of teaching staff available to teach groups. For homeroom teachers, monitoring the reading progress of their students can be difficult if they do not meet with other teachers on a regular basis. Besides these practical challenges, there may also be more fundamental objections to regrouping students based on their performance level. A problem that is particularly relevant when teaching struggling readers is the repetition of materials, which can have detrimental effects on students' motivation. Even when students do not repeat levels, there is a risk of becoming bored with the books, because the same books are read in class, at home, and during tutoring sessions. Furthermore, teachers might lower their expectations of students in low-performing subgroups, resulting in a negative spiral (Houtveen and Van de Grift, 2007). Schools implementing SfA should be aware of the risks associated with regrouping and should ensure that all students can experience successes, regardless of reading level.

Regarding Tier 2 and 3 interventions, staffing issues were the most prominent area of concern, in particular at the Dutch schools. As a consequence, tutoring could not be offered to all students who would benefit from it. This raises questions about the cost and feasibility of SfA. Is it just a matter of priorities, like one of our interviewees said? From previous research on school reform programs, we know that sustainable implementation requires a long-term vision that is supported on different levels within and beyond the school (Desimone, 2002; Durlak and DuPre, 2008). Slavin and Madden (2013) admit that implementing SfA requires considerable investment, but also argue that it should be affordable for high-poverty schools that have additional resources (i.e. Title 1 funding). Similar conclusions were drawn by Quint et al. (2015), who conducted a cost analysis at US schools implementing SfA. When expanding SfA to other countries, it should be borne in mind that the US educational system is exceptional in terms of the amount of support staff (Richmond, 2014). Schools with limited personnel resources, such as those in the Netherlands, could consider using computer-assisted tutoring programs and using well-trained, committed volunteers for tutoring (Inns et al., 2019; Slavin et al., 2011; Slavin and Madden, 2013). A recommendation for future research is to further investigate the costs of implementing SfA in the Netherlands as well, so that schools can decide to what extent the implementation of SfA is feasible for them.

Although we acknowledge that implementing multi-tiered programs like SfA is challenging (Balu et al., 2015), we want to encourage educators and policymakers to make every effort to support struggling readers early and intensively, to prevent them from falling behind even further. Research has shown that effective Tier 1 instruction combined with timely intervention at Tier 2 and/or 3 is in the best interest of children with early reading difficulties (Balu et al., 2015; Reschly, 2010). Our case studies demonstrated that SfA, as a well-designed and well-evaluated program, can be of great help in setting up an effective multi-tiered support system in schools, which was also found in the studies of Ross et al. (2004) and Quint et al. (2015). Although we focused on the Netherlands being "the new context," the way SfA fosters inclusion can also inspire educators in other countries that still have highly segregated systems, like Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium (NESSE, 2012). The use of evidence-based whole-school approaches can boost inclusive

development internationally (Ainscow, 2020). When implementing SfA, some adaptations might be desired to ensure a good fit between the program as designed, the local context, the needs of the school, and/or the needs of individual students. Given the heterogeneity of the student population in general, it is unlikely that a prescribed program will be equally effective for all students, under all circumstances. When teachers make well-considered adaptations, the effectiveness of the program is not being undermined, but being enhanced (Harn et al., 2013; Klingner et al., 2006). In SfA, this is called moving to a refined level of implementation (e.g. Success for All Foundation, 2019). In agreement with Harn et al. (2013), we argue that discussions about fidelity should always be focused on how practices can positively impact the learning of the students being targeted. As one of our interviewees stated: “It’s the difference between teaching the lessons and teaching the students.”

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