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Complexities and challenges of learning in Dutch vocational schools

National report for WP6

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1. Introduction

This report presents information gathered from local case studies (WP6), conducted in three schools, in three different cities within the Netherlands. The research questions that are central to WP6 have been partly covered by other work packages, particularly by WP4 and WP5. However, the current report aims at a deeper analysis of transition processes from the perspectives of different actors, including principals, teachers, students, parents, and experts working within and outside of schools.

For the case studies, we have chosen lower secondary schools in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Arnhem, the cities where we conducted the fieldwork related to WP4. Our focus was on VMBO schools, which are vocational schools and represent the lowest track within lower secondary education. Two of the schools we chose are located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Our third school is situated in an average income neighbourhood in a small town close to Arnhem. Students in all the three schools come from lower-socio economic backgrounds as it is often the case for all vocational schools in the country. Immigrant students form the majority in the first two schools (therefore they are often referred to as ‘black schools’), while in the third one, immigrant population is less than ten per cent. A substantial number of students in this school come from Arnhem as they want to avoid ‘black schools’ in the city centrum, a phenomenon called ‘white plight’. The schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam illustrate vocational schools with many educational challenges and problems, which is the case to a lesser, though not insignificant extent, in our third school. The case study schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam participated in WP4; the school in Arnhem did not due to participation in too many other research projects. The fieldwork was conducted between March and December 2011 by five researchers¹. A total of 98 individuals participated in the study, and six focus group discussions and 77 interviews were conducted with them.

In this report, after providing some contextual background information about the Dutch education system and the cities and case study schools, we proceed with describing the sample and the methods (chapter 2 and 3), followed by three exemplary ex-student biographies, each from one city school. The main findings of the study are structured according to the five main themes of GOETE project: *relevance, life course, access, coping* and *governance* (chapter 4-9). We conclude by highlighting the main findings and signalling the policy areas where change is considered imperative (chapter 11).

¹ Anita Duineveld, Lianne van de Veer and Helena Blum worked as assistant researchers.

2. Contextual background

2.1. Brief information about the structure of education system

The mandatory school age is five in the Netherlands, yet the majority of children enter primary school in the year they turn four. Primary education lasts eight years. For students who require specialized care and support, there is special (primary) education (SE) and secondary special education (SSE).

On average, children are 12 years of age when they enter secondary education.

There are three kinds of secondary education: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) which takes four years; senior general secondary education (HAVO) which takes five years; and pre-university education (VWO) which takes six years. Lower secondary education refers to VMBO and the first three years of HAVO and VWO. Additionally, practical training is offered as a new type of education for students who are likely to fail in obtaining a qualification even with learning support. Unlike other pathways, practical training does not lead on to secondary vocational education but prepares pupils for direct entry to the regional labour market. Age of students at VMBO is between 12 and 16, and at lower years of HAVO and VWO, it is between 12 and 15. VMBO is not terminal education, but provides a basis for further vocational training. Within VMBO, pupils may choose from four different learning pathways: the basic vocational programme (BL), the middle-management vocational programme (KL), the combined programme (GL) and the theoretical programme (TL). There are four vocational sectors from which students can choose for further preparation in MBO: health and social care, economics, technology and agriculture. HAVO provides pupils with a basic general education and prepares them for higher professional education (HBO). VWO prepares pupils for university, and there are three types of them: the 'atheneum', the 'gymnasium' (the most elitist type of VWO) and the 'lyceum' (a combination of atheneum and gymnasium).

Since our focus is on VMBO, we would like to provide further information on this type of schools. After two years of basic vocational education, students in VMBO enter the specialization stage. At this stage, students specialize by choosing: 1) a particular sector; 2) a vocational stream within that sector; and 3) a vocationally-oriented programme within the chosen stream. Students receive a certificate at the end of their studies at VMBO. For this purpose, they take a leaving examination which involves a school examination and a national one. The elements to be tested in each are specified in the examination syllabus,

which is approved by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. The subjects Dutch, English and Mathematics are obligatory for each chosen sector.

After VMBO, at an average age of 16, students may transfer to secondary vocational education (MBO). In school year 2009/2010, almost 90 per cent of the VMBO students were transferred to MBO education (CBS, 2011a). Those who have completed the combined or theoretical programme at VMBO can also choose to transfer to the fourth year of HAVO. HAVO provides general education, and is intended as preparation for HBO. The programmes last a maximum of four years. HAVO certificate holders can also opt for VWO or MBO. Likewise, although VWO aims to prepare pupils for university entry, some VWO graduates go on to HBO. The four-year HBO programmes lead to the award of a bachelor's degree. At universities, a bachelor's degree can be obtained in three years. A master's degree programme takes either one or two years (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2009).

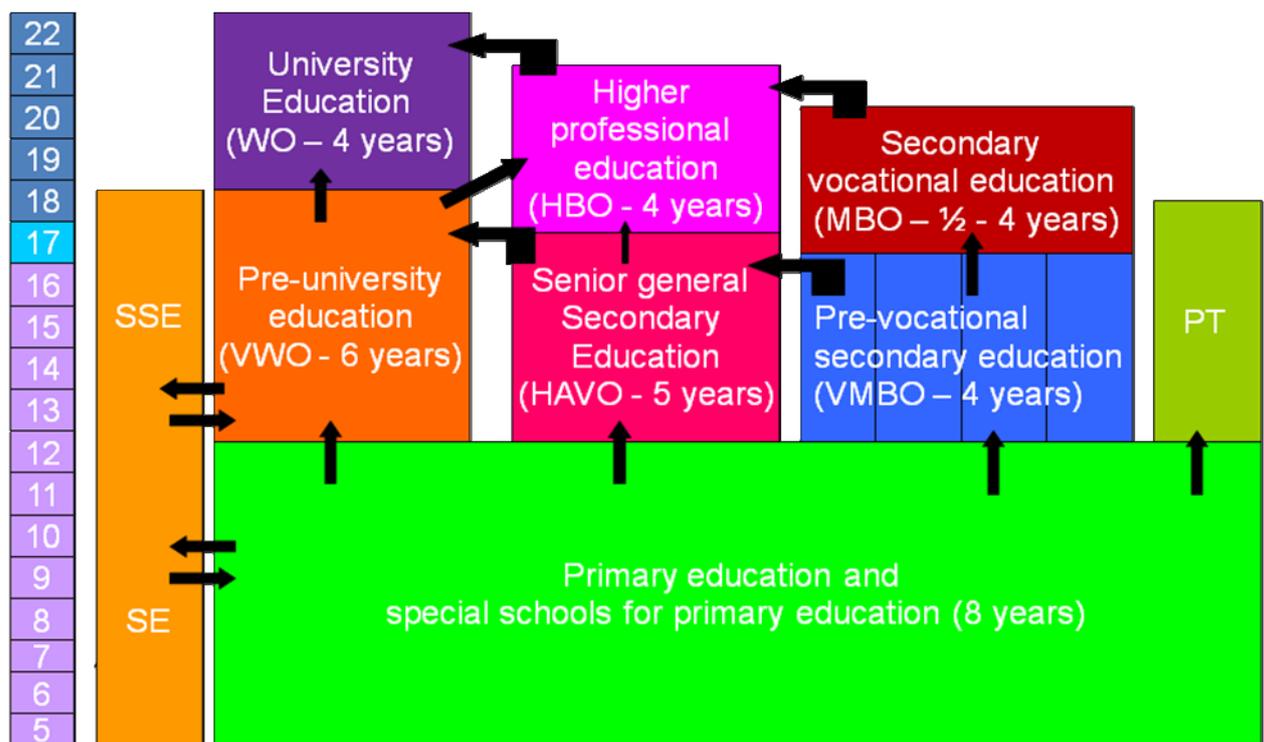


Figure: The structure of the Dutch education system (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2007).

2.2. Description of three cities and three schools

Amsterdam

Amsterdam, the capital of the country, has around 780,559 inhabitants according to 2011 figures (Amsterdam Municipality, 2011). It is one of the world's leading cities with regard to the number of different nationalities – about 175. The percentage of non-western immigrants is 35 per cent and western immigrants is 15,3 per cent according to 2011 figures. The number of western immigrants has been rising in recent years as increasing numbers of East-Europeans, Americans and Western Europeans settle in the city. More than half of the inhabitants (53,7 per cent) live alone. Among immigrant groups, the Turkish and Moroccan inhabitants score very high in residential segregation index. Average disposable household income is 30,600 Euro (2008 figures), which is lower than national average (34, 300 Euro) (Amsterdam Municipality, 2011). The city is the financial as well as the cultural capital of the Netherlands. The main economic sectors are trade, transport and finance. In the last years, commercial services sector has registered the biggest growth.

There are 225 primary schools (including 14 special education schools), with a total of 60, 143 students enrolled. The city has 102 secondary schools (34 of them are special education schools), and there are 39,354 students registered according to 2010/11 figures. Furthermore, there are 3 MBO schools, 3 HBO and 2 universities. The distribution of students who are studying at secondary level according to different school types is as follows: combined classes (16,4 per cent), VMBO (35 per cent), HAVO (16 per cent), VWO (29 per cent), and practical training (3,6 per cent) (Amsterdam Municipality, 2011). About half of all Amsterdam secondary schools has a fair mixture of migrants² and natives (20-80 per cent students with migrant backgrounds); about one third of the schools is regarded as 'black' (more than 80 per cent of pupils are migrants), and 15 per cent is 'white' (less than 20 per cent migrants).

The school

Our case study school is situated in the eastern part of Amsterdam, the so-called Oosterpark neighbourhood, which has a population of 10,251. The percentage of native Dutch is 47 per cent, which is slightly less than the average in Amsterdam (49,7 per cent). Most of the

² It is important to note that many 'migrants' are of Dutch nationality and when using the term migrant, we always mean persons with different ethnic-cultural backgrounds. We sometimes use the term immigrants interchangeably with migrants.

immigrants are of Turkish, Surinamese and Moroccan origin (Amsterdam Municipality, 2011).

The school was founded in 1903. It has a distinct pedagogical approach since it uses Montessori as the teaching and learning approach. The school has previously provided combined education for VWO, HAVO and VMBO. However, due to decreasing numbers of pupils at VWO, that track was closed. At the moment, there is also a limited number of pupils at HAVO track, and there are plans to close down this track next year which would leave the school with the lowest educational level. The school has around 40 teachers (the majority being Dutch) and 500 students with approximately 20 classes of 25 students on average. More than 90 per cent of students are immigrant, so it is often referred to as a 'black school'.

The school management consists of a principal, a vice-principal and two team leaders. Every class has one or two mentors who work closely with the team leaders in order to provide guidance to students. The school has a parent commission which convenes every month. There is also a student commission, but it does not function in reality. This year only 63 per cent of VMBO students passed the final exam and graduated from the school.

Rotterdam

Rotterdam is situated in the Province of Zuid-Holland, in the western part of the country. The city is the second largest city after Amsterdam with 610,386 inhabitants in 2011. The percentage of non-western immigrants is 37 per cent and western immigrants is 10,7 per cent (CBS, 2011b). Immigration due to work has increased, whereas immigration due to family migration has decreased. In Rotterdam, persons from 166 different nationalities live together. The Turks and Moroccans form the biggest immigrant population. However, the number of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants in the city has been decreasing in recent years, while especially the number of Polish immigrants has been increasing (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2011a).

It is part of the so-called 'Randstad' area. Rotterdam is strategically located in close proximity to the North Sea and is Europe's biggest haven, which is one of the reasons why it is often referred to as the 'Gateway' to Europe. Its economy is based on business services (20,3 per cent), trade (15,5 per cent), health sector (12,5 per cent) and industry (10 per cent) is relatively more present compared to Amsterdam (OECD, 2009). The deprived areas differ substantially in ethnic composition and there are more working class inhabitants in

Rotterdam than in Amsterdam. The average disposable household income is 29,200 Euro, which is lower than Amsterdam and the national average (34,300 Euro) (Amsterdam Municipality, 2011). There are about 184 primary schools in Rotterdam and about 32 secondary schools with 122 different locations. In the 2010/2011 school year, 50,039 children were registered at primary and 33, 828 students were registered at secondary education (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2011b). Moreover, Rotterdam has two MBO schools, 6 HBO and one university. Compared to other three biggest municipalities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht), Rotterdam has the highest percentage of early school leavers, which was 5,7 per cent in 2010/2011 school year. Dropout is particularly high in the MBO track: one in eight students leaves school too early (CBS, 2011b).

The school

The school is situated in the southern part of Rotterdam where 66 per cent of inhabitants are immigrants (a much higher percentage compared to the city in general – 48 per cent). The main three immigrant groups are Turkish (19 per cent), Surinamese (11 per cent), and Moroccan (10 per cent). In the media, the area has been called the ‘drainage’ of the Netherlands. The neighbourhood has a high rate of inhabitants with lower education and low household income. It also has the highest unemployment rate in Rotterdam, as well as the highest rate of individuals receiving social benefits. Moreover, the neighbourhood was perceived as one of the most unsafe neighbourhoods in the city. Although the problems in Rotterdam-south are not unique by character, they are unique in terms of their scale and concentration.

Our case study school is a VMBO school offering education at the two lowest levels of VMBO and in the final two grades. Lower grades are taught at another location. The school was built in the 1930’s as a crafts school. Children of dockworkers used to attend the school in the past, now children of immigrants form the majority. The school has changed from a crafts school to a technical school for boys and later to a VMBO for boys and girls. There are about 300 students in the school, 95 per cent of which are immigrant; a much higher rate than in the neighbourhood. There are 20 teachers working at the school, 20 per cent of which have immigrant background. The class size differs: kader classes have around 25 students, and basic level about 15 students. Last year, 95 per cent of students who entered the final exam managed to graduate from VMBO. The school cooperates in a network of local employers to provide learning places in the local service and economy sector.

In addition to the principal, the school has three team-leaders within school management. At the time of the research, two of the team leaders were on sick-leave due to burnout. Absences and burn-out incidences are also high among teachers. The school does not have budget to replace these positions (even temporarily).

Arnhem

Arnhem lies in a more rural area in the eastern part of the country and has about 148.070 inhabitants. It is located between Germany and the Amsterdam/Rotterdam conurbation. It is the capital city of the Province of Gelderland. After the big four cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and Den Hague and Tilburg, Arnhem has the highest percentage of non-western immigrants (around 11 per cent). The rate of total immigrants is 29,5 per cent according to 2011 figures (CBS, 2011b). The largest group of non-Western immigrants is Turks, followed Surinamese and Moroccans. The most important sectors in the economy are Business Services, Health & Welfare and Tourism & Leisure. Five neighbourhoods are identified as so-called 'Vogelaarwijken' in the city, the disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The average disposable household income in Arnhem was 29,000 according to 2007 figures (Arnhem Municipality, 2011).

Our case study school is located in Elst, which is situated around 8 kilometres away from Arnhem. Elst is part of a larger municipality called Overbetuwe. In 2011, Elst had 20.975 inhabitants, accounting for almost half of the total number of inhabitants of Overbetuwe (CBS, 2011c). Important economic sectors in Overbetuwe are the retail industry, business services, and wholesale. Elst is very popular amongst commuters, which has a strong effect on the growth of the town. The average disposable household income in Overbetuwe was 37,000 Euro according to 2008 figures (CBS, 2011c).

Arnhem has 59 primary schools, 14 secondary schools, 5 MBO and 2 HBO. In 2009/2010 school year, 12,230 students were attending primary and 6,821 students were attending secondary education. The distribution of students in the third class of secondary school according to different school types is as follows: VMBO (52 per cent), HAVO (23 per cent), VWO (25 per cent) in 2009/2010 school year (Arnhem Municipality, 2011).

The school

The case study school is located in a new neighbourhood within the town of Elst. The school provides VMBO education at all the four levels and has around 400 students. More than 46 per cent of students are from the bigger city of Arnhem. These students and their families

prefer to come to Elst in order to avoid ‘black schools’ in Arnhem. Only eight per cent of the students have non-western migrant background. Similar to other VMBO schools, the students often have a lower socio-economic background. The school offers a continued learning trajectory by closely cooperating with two MBO and one HAVO school in the area. The new school building (founded in 2004) also has classes for upper secondary education (MBO)

The school mission highlights the importance of learning by doing in vocational training. Hence, practical training is emphasized throughout the curriculum. The school is involved in different projects and networks in order to help students make smooth transitions after VMBO. An important project is VM2, a nation-wide pilot project involving 18 schools. VM2 offers a combined trajectory at VMBO basic level so that students do not have to undertake an examination at the end of VMBO, but are allowed to continue with their education at MBO-level 2. Furthermore, the school has good cooperation with a number of companies and organisations in the area in order to provide sound internship opportunities to their students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection methods and description of fieldwork

The actual fieldwork for WP6 started in March 2011 and was finalized in December 2011. However, the search for schools and the attempts to contact them and guarantee their confirmation for participating in the research project started already in the final months of 2010. The potential schools which would fit our sampling criteria were contacted via different means: personal contact, internet sites, letters, phone calls and visits. Personal connections proved as the most fruitful strategy for getting access to the schools.

The data was collected simultaneously in the three schools by the involvement of assistant and senior researchers. All the participants were informed about the content, scope and objectives of the research. We guaranteed full anonymity to them. That is why detailed information about school, which might lead to identification of schools and even participants themselves, were not presented in this report. We did not need to get permission from higher political levels (e.g. Ministry of Education) in order to conduct the research. It was sufficient to obtain such permission directly from the schools (e.g. school boards). In all cases, the first contact was established with the school principal and a first interview was

arranged with them. The principals would appoint a teacher or some other staff member as the contact person for the project. They facilitated the research by putting us in contact with teachers, internal and external experts, and providing lists of students and their parents for the interviews. For this work package, we used a number of qualitative research methods: semi-standardized interviews, focus group discussions, unstructured observations in and around the school, student essays, and a video film.

We conducted semi-standardized interviews with a select number of persons in the school: the principal, teachers, students, and parents. In addition, we did expert interviews with other educational actors, including support staff within the school (internal experts) and external experts, such as employers, youth workers, project managers and chairmen of specific organisations. Students were allowed by the principal to skip one or two classes so that we could conduct the interviews.

The individual interviews were mostly conducted on one-to-one basis and their duration ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. In some cases, more than one person participated in the interview, for instances, when both parents were available, they were interviewed together. In two cases, elder sisters of the students were also present. Moreover, three student interviews were conducted via telephone due to difficulties of arranging a face to face meeting. Principal, teacher, internal expert interviews and some of the student interviews took place at school sites, in small conference rooms or empty classrooms. External experts were visited at their offices. We met some of the students at café's, and parents were visited at their homes, often in evening hours due to their working schedules.

Within each school we conducted one teacher and one student focus group interview. Each of these groups had three to five participants, and two researchers attended. Furthermore, after their transition to upper secondary education, we contacted some students for individual in-depth interviews about their transition experiences. These students were often met at café's. In contrast to the former student interviews, those with the ex-students, as we called them after their leaving VMBO, were more extensive and gave room for a more narrative approach. In some cases we managed to select ex-students we had interviewed before, individually and/or who had participated in the survey (WP4).

For all interviews, the GOETE core team leaders prepared protocols and questionnaires. These were then shared with the other GOETE partners. We also organised a specific meeting in Amsterdam in December 2010 in order to discuss the details of the methodology and research design. After finalising the protocols, they were translated into the various national languages of the participating research countries. In our case, most of

the interviews were conducted in Dutch, while some of the parent and student interviews were performed in Turkish.

We collected further biographical information by asking third grade students to write essays in schools in Amsterdam and Arnhem. The central theme of the essay was ‘What does my life will look like in ten years?’ We provided some props that might help students to respond to the topic, probing what they want for their future, the likelihood of realizing these dreams, and how they envisage their lives in general. We collected 75 student essays in total, each with A4 length or shorter. After a general review of the essays, we selected 6 essays, from elaborate to very sketchy, for translation into English and for inclusion in a prospective book.

In Arnhem/ Elst school, we asked the students to make a short film about their in and out school life. They were particularly asked not only to record their life inside the school, but also to make shots of their homes and companies where they did their work placements. Students were free in choosing the format. When the assignment was introduced, an art teacher offered her help to support students with this work and one of the researchers from our team was at the school to provide further guidance. . Students appeared to be highly enthusiastic about making the film. We received a series of brief shots of students talking to each other, sharing their views of the school, and walking in and around the school introducing it to the audience.

3.2. Problems of data collection

Negotiating access to schools has been the greatest difficulty we have encountered during the fieldwork period. Even though we contacted potential schools via different means, we often received negative responses. School officials argued that they had been already participating in different research projects and they felt overwhelmed by such demands. Such responses were in fact received while doing research for previous work packages (WP4 and WP5) as well. Schools in the Netherlands appear to be over-researched, which makes access extremely difficult. Moreover, some schools had negative experiences with previous research projects, such as receiving no feedback from the researchers, which was considered highly disappointing and unethical. Because of these difficulties, we did not succeed in recruiting a school in the city of Arnhem but had to choose one from a town close to it.

In each school we had contact persons facilitating our communication with teachers, students, internal experts and parents. Even though they had been immensely helpful, they

also served as gatekeepers between us and the participants. We explained to them the profiles of students, parents or experts that we would like to talk to. However, they could not always guarantee access to individuals that would fit our ideal sample. In fact, we encountered significant problems in accessing students and parents for individual interview. Whereas all school personnel was very cooperative once they had committed themselves to our project, this was less the case with parents and (some) students. Arnhem/Elst proved to be the school where we encountered least difficulties and could reach the required numbers for all participants. This was not in the last instance due to the enthusiasm of the principal there.

Ex-students were often not only difficult to reach, but once contact was established conducting the actual interview also proved challenging. Too many times, they forgot about the appointment, did not show up, changed their minds, or proposed to postpone the interview because of other commitments. Their unreliability in this respect was striking. In order to attract more students, we offered financial compensation to ex-students. This proved to have limited value. Due to these difficulties, we did not manage to reach the required number of ex-students. Moreover, facilitating focus group discussions among students was difficult as students were not eager to spend time on them and they did not form close peer groups in all cases. They tended to respond with only a few words, rather than discussing the raised issues among themselves extensively. As a result, the group interviews did not meet our intentions in all respects.

3.3. Sample characteristics

The following educational actors participated in our research: principals, teachers, students, parents, intern and extern experts, and ex-students. Selection criteria were developed by the core team in consultation with the country teams. As explained earlier, we could not always access individuals who fit our ideal sample. In total, 98 individuals participated in this study. We organised six focus group discussions and 77 interviews with them (table 1).

Table 1. Sample overview.

	No. of interviews			No. of focus groups (FG)			Total
	AMS	ROT	ARN	AMS	ROT	ARN	
Principals	1	1	1	-	-	-	3
Teachers	4	5	3	1(3T) ³	1(5T)	1(3T)	21 ⁴

³ The information in parenthesis is about the total number of participants in each FG. For instance, in Amsterdam, three teachers participated, and five students.

Experts-internal	4	3	5	-	-	-	12
Experts-external	3	3	5	-	-	-	11
Students	3	3	3	1(5S)	1(4S)	1(3S)	21
Ex-students	4	2	6	-	-	-	12
Parents	6	6	6	-	-	-	18
Total	25	23	29	2	2	2	98

Three principals took part in this research, one from each school. They all had HBO grade one teaching qualification. Two of them are male while one is female, and all the three are native Dutch. A total of 21 teachers participated in our study. Only five of them are female, and the majority of them have HBO grade two qualifications, teaching a variety of subjects including Dutch, Chemistry, Social Studies, Mathematics or German. All teachers are native Dutch, except for three teachers who have Turkish, Moroccan and former Yugoslavian background. We particularly tried to include teachers teaching at the final grades and who had mentoring roles.

There were 21 students involved, the majority from grade four. The only exception is four grade three students who participated in FG in Rotterdam. The age of the students ranged between 15 and 18, the majority of them were 16 at the time of our study. Seven of them were female. Since two of our case study schools had mainly students from immigrant backgrounds, this is also reflected in our sample: only six of them are native-Dutch and the others have different immigrant backgrounds, the Turks being in majority. Turkish immigrants are also the largest immigrant group in the Netherlands. We tried to avoid contacting students who were most well-spoken or otherwise outstanding because we wanted to contact students who encounter challenges in choosing their upper secondary education or who have specific problems in or out of school. In most of the cases, however, we had to include students who were available and willing to volunteer.

The number of parents who participated was 18, ten of them mothers, two elder sisters, and six fathers. The parents' age ranged between 33 and 45. The majority of them are graduates of vocational schools in the Netherlands; those who studied before coming to the Netherlands have general high school diplomas or lower levels. Only two parents have HBO diplomas. Parents have middle to low paid jobs. In terms of background, seven of them are Dutch, six Turkish and the rest come from other immigrant groups. We contacted

⁴ In Rotterdam, there were two teachers who participated in FG and with whom we had individual interviews. Therefore, the total number is 21 instead of 23.

parents whose contact details were provided by the schools. In some cases, we asked students if we could interview their parents too.

A total of 23 experts joined our study (12 internal & 11 external experts). 14 of them were men, and their age ranged between 35 and 60. Experts who are closely involved with the transition of students from lower secondary to upper secondary schools were included in our sample. The internal experts included mentors, school counsellors, section heads, care coordinators and school doctor. External experts involved persons such as youth and community workers, company owners, project managers, head of educational related organisations, and an autism expert. Although some of these experts are not closely involved with students' daily lives, they all had jobs that are closely related to the well-being of students. External experts were mostly contacted in line with the suggestions gathered from internal experts.

The final group of our sample is ex-students. We had a total of 12 ex-students in our sample, half of them from Arnhem. Their age ranges between 16 and 18, and only four of them are boys. Half of these students are native-Dutch, and others come from various migrant backgrounds. Only two of them had transferred to HAVO (fourth grade) while the rest chose to study at MBO, specialising on different occupations, such as fashion design, economics, social work or ICT. We tried to contact students with whom we did interviews while they were studying at grade four VMBO. In fact, five of the ex-students (four from Arnhem and one from Amsterdam) were interviewed during their VMBO studies as well. The schools provided contact details of some additional students. In some instances, we asked students if they could recommend any other students from their former school.

3.4. Data analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and a one-page English summary was written. The data was then categorised according to actors: principals, teachers, students, parents, experts and ex-students. Two researchers were involved in the coding process, one performed coding of the Dutch texts, and the other one the texts in Turkish. Coding was done according to the chapter structure of the national reports which had been cooperatively developed. The structure is organized along the 5 main themes of GOETE (the Big 5) with detailed sub-topics. The texts of the transcripts were marked with the appropriate codes and by using a computer software programme, ATLAS.ti. Coding decisions were checked within a mutual process between the researches until consensus was

reached and a division of work agreed. Overlap of codes was unavoidable because of the contextual proximity of the Big 5's; in such cases they were double-coded.

When all coded text passages were inserted in ATLAS, the respective codes were printed and collected for all interviewed groups and formed the basis for interpretation. To give an example: the code definition of 'disadvantaged students' applied to principal, teachers, intern and extern experts, parents and also the students themselves. They all told in the interviews what they understood by 'disadvantaged students'. The interpretation then had to find out differences and similarities in definitions, according to actor-perspective. Also the code might contain information about coping strategies and would in that case be double-coded and interpreted, not only in a chapter about definitions of disadvantaged students but as well in a chapter dealing with coping. In total we worked with about 49 codes.

The coding process was a highly sensitive and time consuming affair and led to certain adaptations of the chapter structure of the national reports. During the whole process, core members looked to it that the national teams stuck to the commonly agreed coding decisions in order to warrant uniformity of the structure of the national reports which eventually form the basis for the comparative report.

4. Exemplary trajectories of ex-students

4.1. Leonie: If you want something then it's possible⁵

Leonie as we call her here is 16 years old and lives with her parents and two brothers in a small village near Arnhem. Her father works in social work and her mother is a nurse. Mother feels at hindsight that she could have done better than MBO but there was no CITO then and no individual support in her time. Later she followed some specialized courses in psychiatry but stopped working while the children were small. Father began at a low educational level but ended with a degree in social work of higher professional education and did various jobs with pupils with behavioural problems and detained youth, later in sport education. Both parents are very engaged with Leonie's school career which has not been easy because she is dyslectic and has ADHD syndrome (**life course**).

⁵ Based on 1st interview student 17 March 2011, 2nd interview 31 October 2011 and parent interview 22 March 2011.

Primary school

Leonie visited a Jenaplan school which educates children in working together in small groups and applies an individualized curriculum with room for self-organizing the learning process. She liked that school but got behind when it came to reading and writing because of her dyslexia which the school did not diagnose at first though. She was helped during the last form with additional lessons after her mother intervened at school. Her parents were very supportive: her father nailed the arithmetic tables at the ceiling above her bed to memorize (**access; coping**). Leonie was and is a very sociable child, in her primary school she was favoured by her female co-pupils who clapped in their hands when she managed to read a text correctly. She did succeed with CITO test, even better than expected, *that they had not expected and I was very proud, look at me!* (**coping**).

Transition to lower secondary school

Both she and her parents pondered about which secondary school would be best for her. Eventually they chose for a small school and with experience with support which Leonie would need and she and her parents agreed that this would be a good choice (**access**).

Leonie got school advice for second level lower vocational but finished with highest theory level: *yes, that is so ingrained in me, yes, true, I had to work hard, but eventually they allowed me theory (level) because I had that drive*. The school even advised to continue with secondary general (HAVO) – but that was a bridge too far for her own idea: *don't dare, thought then I must walk on my toes again, that was still a little traumatic* and she decides for herself to do it step by step. Also, in second class she becomes trouble with frequent migraine attacks which interfered with learning. But she keeps on going (**coping**).

In second class sector choice had to be made, the school offers only three specializations: economy, care, and agriculture. Leonie chooses for economy and follows some in-service periods to get to know what kind of work is offered in this labour market segment. In the last two years they got lessons in trade and administration in order to learn about account manager or accountant or receptionist or secretary, *or this or that and that you learn what kind of work it means* (**life course**).

She likes it at school, likes the teachers and the class rooms. But she is not all content with how the teachers give lessons; they can't quite discipline the students. But if you are polite with them you will be always helped, get support, is her experience. Whereas if you are rude *then they would say: I'm not going to help you if you are like that*. She gets much help with all her learning problems from inside and outside school. Biggest problem is

that neither the school people nor medical professionals quite know what kind of diagnosis best fits her syndromes. But at school they know how to handle her, for example if she is *all panic*. Then my coach/mentor would say: *Leonie, what's the problem. Because, you know, other people must get me out of it, I cannot yet do that myself. If I tell them: now it's going to be too much and then they would say: you know what? Just relax, I'll be with you in a moment and then we'll put it straight (coping)*.

Also her parents are aware of her state and will help her with planning and not getting panic. *And then my mother would help me finish (homework) from 7 to 11 hours at night (because) my concentration is so low (but) my mother persists and then I'm so happy that she did and I'm thankful to her (coping)*.

She is fully aware how important learning is for your life: *I think that everybody must finish school with a diploma, never mind at which level. And I also think that you must do your best like I did, all my primary school long I had to walk on my toes because I couldn't keep up*. She feels disdain for gym students who came here simply because they were lazy, *then I think: you are not worth your brain*. You yourself are responsible for your school career! (**relevance; life course, coping**). But she has also some critical remarks to make about her school: Shouldn't it be possible to make the lessons more interesting and the school climate more attractive so that students would realize it's worthwhile?

Leonie finishes lower vocational with good marks and leaves for a new start: *Away from here!*

Did school help her with the transition to MBO? *Well, they always say they will help, but come to think of it I did it mostly together with my mother. Sure, the coach/mentor would ask from time to time: so, what do you want to do? (...)* And of course she must fill in forms and in third class they said they would help with further education, and they told the students about websites. But in her case – not really and *in a way it's strange how little they did*. She thinks that she is no exception in that respect (**relevance, life course, coping**). She is glad that her mother helped her so much in figuring out possibilities and alternatives.

Transition to secondary vocational education

Leonie is relieved; she has made it into MBO School at Nijmegen, close enough to her parental home to stay. She will now follow an education of her own choice, *do my thing, finally!* But already in the last year of lower vocational she did not quite know which direction to go on with *because there is so much which attracts me. And I think: so, make choices, what is it really what I want to do? I'm worried for example if I do that education*

(meaning: choose a certain vocational sector) *that after a while I think: oh no, that's not what I want.* Her first idea was to do an education at Arnhem in "fashion support and design". But she decided against it because *I thought then I will have to sit behind a sewing machine all day long and that isn't it, is it? Also I wanted something more commercial* and therefore she signed for sales specialist fashion styling, that way you have both, *the commercial side but the design side as well.* Although: hotel and catering industry would also be nice. Or broker, *I have an inclination for houses,* or perhaps architecture. But now she has decided for fashion, she can always switch... (**relevance, life course, coping, access**).

She is quite optimistic that the profession she has chosen will give her enough room and allow for enough (further) choices. *I mean, doing this vocation, you can get experience in a fashion shop in your in-service periods and you get another idea about fashion...* And her credo is: *If you want something then it's possible.* She calculates as follows: the specialization she chose will take two years on level 3 (second best) *and then I have my diploma and I can continue with another two years on level 4 and that is more in the direction of entrepreneur and managing a filial and then you can continue with HBO* (higher professional education), *again one step further... step by step and not one big hap 7 years university study.* Another advantage of that strategy is that she can always stop with education when she is 18 years old and entitled to working. And she can still go back to education if she wants. *Yes, I like that if not everything is fixed* (**life course, relevance, governance**).

How does she like her MBO school? As far as she can see – she attends only since two months – she likes it here. What she also likes is the *anonymity*, the fact that not everybody knows everybody like it was at VMBO School; it's all more grown-up in a way. She prefers the practical lessons, not general education in English and Dutch; those are boring subjects and remind her of previous school. Also there is much repeating of matters she had already done so often at VMBO, like writing solicitation letters. She cannot wait with beginning with her in-service at that little fashion shop which she has already got to know and likes it because it is small and cosy and the sales women there are all young and did the same specialization at the same MBO School which she now attends. It will be two days in-service and three days at school. She makes some critical observations though: the teachers are friendly but distracted, the organization is not well done and there is less attention for the individual student than she was used to at VMBO. But the teachers know about her concentration problems and will help if need be. Also there is a career coach who

can be approached. But apart from that she was advised to look for medical-psychic help outside school – but there they still do not have figured out the right treatment for her.

Learning places outside school

Leonie does not have much energy left for doing sport and earning some money with work aside; instead she goes shopping with her girlfriends in Nijmegen, the city where her MBO School is located and which takes her about two hours per day to go there because the bus-train connection is not good. She does not do much more, sits at home looking TV and work with her PC.

Life plans; vocational wishes

Leonie has a dream: *Somehow, somewhere I want put down my name that people know that is Leonie A. And that they after 10 years perhaps still know: that is Leonie A. (...) I want to set out something, a fashion shop, a café, a hotel, something visible, to put it that way. That in hundred years they will tell: Well, you know...that something remains.* In view of such desire her choice for fashion is no bad choice, she thinks, *because designing and combining.. if people behave self-assured, that I like most; help people with making the best of their appearance. And where will she be in ten years?*

With 26 she expects to be finished with her education, will work with something with fashion, and certainly not be all her life only saleswoman. Also she does not intend to wait until her thirties with becoming a mother, that would be definitely too late. It would be gorgeous to have a posh house somewhere in Amsterdam as she has seen at the Herengracht. Her parents will stay for the rest of their life in their small home in that small village; not she. She is not over-optimistic if everything will work out that way, but she hopes strongly it will (**life course**).

Comment

It seems that Leonie has succeeded in getting the most out of her school career she could taking into account her diffuse psychic syndromes. She would never have come so far without the constant help of her parents, particularly her mother who did everything to support her; that is not only our judgment but Leonie's as well. Leonie's attitude towards learning is quite realistic – with a touch of anxiety: she does aim too high but certainly neither too low. Her above-expectation CITO score has not gone unobserved by her vocational school who even entrusted that she might go to HAVO. But probably her own

feeling was right: she does not like theoretical learning. Therefore her step-by-step strategy seems perfectly alright. And as concerns her future plans, those correspond with what must Dutch young people want and envisage: a well-to-do life with work, partner and parenthood.

4.2. Selin: Girls should study⁶

Selin is a third generation Turkish immigrant student, who was born in Amsterdam 17 years ago. She lives with her parents, her elder sister who studies at a teacher training institute to become a primary school teacher, and her much younger brother who is still enrolled at primary school. Her father finished high school in Turkey before coming to the Netherlands, and has been working for a construction company for many years. Her mother is a primary school graduate. She regrets this and has bitter feelings over not being allowed to study further. She does not work and takes care of her family as well as an elder sister who is mentally handicapped. They live in a nice apartment flat in the eastern part of Amsterdam, which is also very close to our case study school.

Primary school

Selin joined play groups before primary education. She studied at two different primary schools, both located very close to where they lived. She attended the first school for five years. She does not recall positive memories from this school, as she the school atmosphere was not welcoming to her. Furthermore, her mother, who has been the most involved person in her education, was not pleased with the quality of that school. At grade five, she was asked to repeat the class since she lagged behind in reading and writing. In general, she had great difficulties in comprehending Dutch. At that time, her Turkish was much better than her Dutch, and she was mainly exposed to Turkish at home (**coping**). After being asked to repeat a class, her parents decided to enrol her at another nearby school, where Selin felt much happier and more successful. In the final two years, she started receiving private tutoring at an educational centre run by a religious Turkish organisation. She followed classes twice a week in this centre on various subjects. She believes that she owes much of her success at CITO test to the support she received from this centre (**access, life course**).

Lower secondary education

⁶ Based on two interviews with the student (24 June 2011 and 20 October 2011) and an interview with her parents and elder sister (17 July 2011).

Selin was advised to enrol at HAVO level. Her first choice was a school where a cousin finished her studies. It was also well-known for its good quality. When she visited the school, she was told that HAVO classes were already full, but she was allowed to register at a combined class. At the end of the first year, Selin's performance was not good enough, so she had to leave this school, and enrol at a VMBO-TL school in the same neighbourhood. She was allowed to register at grade two. She did well, and finalised her studies in three years.

Selin regrets that she did not manage to stay at the first lower secondary school where she was enrolled, since she believes that education quality and the level of students in general were much higher in that school. She also thinks that the school environment was more stimulating. Therefore, she was rather disappointed and disillusioned after being transferred to a lower level of education, which rated much lower on all the aspects she considered important. For her, the most important element was student quality. She believed that at the VMBO school, most of the students were not even interested in education, particularly the boys. They were aware of the importance of education for their future, yet they seemed obtain the degrees without investing time and energy into it. She often felt appalled by the way her classmates treated their teachers with such disrespect and indifference (**coping**).

Her criticisms were not only directed to her classmates though. She thought most teachers were in general not so concerned about the quality of education but were just doing their job. Selin was also rather puzzled about teachers' 'inability' to manage the class. Most of the classes she attended were noisy, as students were doing all sorts of things while the teacher was lecturing in the front, such as eating, talking, laughing, fighting, listening to music from their I-phones, or checking porn-sites in their blackberries. Such chaos and disorganisation not only undermined her attempts to concentrate and actually learn during the class, but also made her feel rather hopeless about the future generation and value of education that they were receiving. She also thinks that VMBO education was not demanding at all: the expectations and standards were lowered too much in order to ease smooth grade promotion. (**coping**).

One of her biggest regrets is her inability to speak any of the languages fluently. She speaks Turkish, Dutch and English, but she does not feel fluent in any of them. She feels inhibited in her expressions, and does not feel fully confident in any of the languages. She notes, *'not being able to speak any of the languages well makes me very sad, deeply sad. Yet,*

I do not do anything about it'. Studying at a 'black school' does not help her with her Dutch since she has many Turkish friends there, and they mainly speak in Turkish (**coping**).

Transition to upper secondary school

Selin did not want to study at MBO level since she and her family believed that education quality is rather low at MBO schools. Another reason for her choice was not being sure about what to do in the future. She does not know what she wants to do as an occupation. In order to study at MBO level, she has to take certain decisions now, which she dreads. Enrolling at HAVO level gives her two more years to figure out what exactly she likes to do in the future (**access**).

When she asked for a form from the school in order to enrol at HAVO level at another school, the school advised her to go to an upper secondary school with which they had a cooperation agreement. She thought of going back to the secondary school where she was first enrolled after primary, but since she was asked to leave due to low performance, she did not want to go back there. Furthermore, her VMBO school was low in terms of education quality, so she was concerned that she might fail again at this better quality school. Therefore, she followed the advice of the school, and enrolled at this nearby HAVO school. Another important reason for enrolling in this one is the fact that the school is presumably run by a Turkish religious organisation (Fetullah Gulen), has many Turkish teachers teaching there, and enrolls several other Turkish students (**access, relevance**).

Impressions about upper secondary school

After 1.5 half months of experience, Selin is rather pleased with the new school and her choice to study at HAVO level. She thinks that the students are nice, and the teachers are also good in general. She likes the academic subjects she has been studying. Since she made the transition to HAVO after finalising VMBO, she is older than other students, who are mostly 15, two years younger than her. However, she does not mind this, and enjoys it even since she sees herself as someone senior, someone who can guide the others. She was in fact selected as classroom head, and was given certain responsibilities. She is the main person communicating the needs and demands between students and teachers. As in her former school, she has concentration problems in this school as well since their classmates talk during lecture hours. She reminded her closet friends about it with no avail. She also raises her concerns to the teachers, but after some reminders, they often seem to give up and do

their lecturing. As a result, particularly in some subjects, she finds it very difficult to follow the lectures.

This school is also a 'black school' similar to the previous one, with Turks being in majority. There are fewer Moroccan boys in the new school compared to the previous one, and Selin thinks that this simply means less trouble and chaotic situations. She is happy that once again she studies at a 'black school' with students from very different backgrounds. She enjoys such cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and feels at home among them. Since she is a very friendly and warm person, she does not have any difficulties in terms of finding friends and adapting to new environments and situations (**coping**). Furthermore, the new school organises several activities (unlike the previous one) such as visits to museums and libraries, and even trips abroad. Her only regret with the new school is lack of sufficient classroom space and some inadequacies of school infrastructure (such as insufficient daylight in the classroom and hearing all the conversations from the next classroom). Still, she does not consider these as major concerns, and feels very positive about the school. She thinks that her success in this school entirely depend on her own performance and concentration. If she works hard, she will make it. It all seems to depend on her.

Life outside of the school

Since Selin is very sociable, she is rather busy with her friends outside of school. She used to work at a supermarket, but does not work anymore. When she was small, she started going to the Mosque to follow some training in Islam and Quran. She followed this training for some years, and since she finalised it, she does not go anymore. However, from time to time, she joins some 'religious gatherings' where a group of women meet to converse about life issues, morality, and spiritual development from the perspective of Islam (**coping**). These meetings are guided by a religiously trained person, from Fetullan Gulen group or Milli Gorus. After attending these meetings a few times, 1.5 years ago, she decided to have a headscarf.

Future aspirations

Selin is convinced that she wants to work but does not know at the moment what exactly she wants to do. Still, she insists that she wants to do something that would enable her to directly contribute to the well-being of others. In addition, she wants to marry her boyfriend,

have a good life, travel and see many places before having children. She thinks that if she successfully finishes her studies, she will be able to attain such a life. According to her, it will all depend on her efforts, discipline and perseverance (**life course, relevance**).

She considers herself as both Dutch and Turkish, but has difficulties communicating about this to her Turkish friends or to native Dutch persons. *'I was born and grew up here. So I am Dutch, but I also have Turkish blood. But, if a Dutch person would ask me, I would not dare to say that I am Dutch. I would be concerned about his reaction. At the same time, when I say to my Turkish friends that I am Dutch, they criticise me and say "How can you say that? You are Turkish!"'* Identity issues seem to matter to her, and she sadly feels that she does not belong to any of the groups entirely (**coping**).

When asked where she would like to live in the future, she explains that she wants to live in the Netherlands. She likes visiting Turkey for short holidays, but that is sufficient. She is particularly annoyed and troubled by gender discrimination and unequal status of women in rural Turkey. She likes living in the Netherlands. She does not feel discriminated in general and not concerned in general that she might be in the future. Her only concern is that because of her headscarf, she might have difficulties finding a job. Her parents are particularly concerned about this, and warn their daughter (**coping, life course**).

Selin advised other girls that they should not remain preoccupied with boys. Instead, they should focus on their studies. She believes that many girls are focused on marriage, as they want to get away from their homes. *'They tend to think that once they get married, all will be well. Marriage is not a salvation. They think their husbands will look after them. But that is not true. They are fools. There are many Turkish girls who think in this way.'* Selin believes that media, popular culture, and pop songs do not give constructive messages. She wants to perform well at school and realise her dreams.

Comment

Selin's educational career included many transitions at primary and secondary level, so it illustrates the complexities and dilemmas of transitions within the Dutch education system. She is a very resourceful, determined person and considers education indispensable to her future, particularly because she is a girl and an immigrant. Therefore, she is highly conscious that if she wants to have a decent life and be independent in the future, she has to study hard and have a well-paying job. Otherwise, her well-being, independence, self-esteem and even identity are compromised.

Selin also exemplifies many challenges and concerns of an immigrant student in the Netherlands. She was born here and lived all of her life in the Netherlands, but she still hesitates to say 'I am Dutch', particularly to Dutch people. She feels both Dutch and Turkish, but at the same time she does not feel like she has deep roots in any of the countries or cultures. Selin encounters many prejudices, real or perceived, because of being an immigrant, studying at the lowest level of the education system, studying at a 'black school', and having a head scarf. She resents these prejudices and by setting an example with her own life, she aspires to defy them. Her determination, energy and positive attitude towards others would hopefully help Selin to finalise her studies and realise the sort of life that she dreams of.

4.3. Ron: You always want the most for yourself⁷

Ron, as we call him here, lives together with his parents and his sister in Rotterdam. His father has worked his way up from lower vocational to secondary vocational education and works in a hospital as administrative employee. His mother did lower vocational school and was after a short period of work home for children, and still is.

Primary school

The school career of Ron is one of more than usual breaks and turning points, disappointments and new ambitions (**life course**). That also explains his age: at the time of the interview he is already 18 years old.

Looking back at his primary school years, Ron states that this was *quite a dramatic period*; dramatic meaning traumatic because he was mobbed most of the time. Nobody helped him, neither teachers nor the pupils in his class. *Otherwise I would have had a better youth and would I have attended school with much more pleasure.* When he finished primary school he got professional advice to continue on the lowest level of lower vocational education. He never understood why because, according to his own judgment, he was never a bad student (**access; life course**).

Transition to special secondary school

⁷ Based on interview with respondent and interview with his parents (both held apart on 10 November 2011).

Ron was first transferred to a special school for students with learning and psychic problems, probably because of his mobbing-past. We ask: did his primary school prepare him well for this transition? Definitely not he responds emphatically and bemoans that neither primary nor this school had put him to objective tests to find out about his potentials. And at that time neither he nor his parents knew enough about the Dutch education system to oversee the consequences of this transition. In hindsight he is convinced that he could and should have gone directly to (a higher level of) lower vocational (or perhaps, we might interpret his frustration, general) education (**relevance; life course**).⁸

Notwithstanding his disappointment about too low school advice, it is this special school which he gives a high mark of appreciation: there he became another person, *I changed completely. If that had not happened I might not even been able now to have this interview and had never learnt to care for myself.*

What was it that made going to this school so agreeable? It is that here he regained self-efficacy. He chose a seat close to the *best students*, meaning: those who would defend him and would be there if needed— and he for them. In other words, he used the transition from primary to vocational school as an opportunity to present himself as a new, a normal and reliable person (**coping**).

He also liked the teachers and had no problems with them. But they had, they couldn't keep discipline in the class, refused to give lesson if a student was nasty. *They* (vaguely: authorities, them there somewhere) *put teachers in class who were qualified for normal children but not for problem children.* Evidently he does not count himself to that group.

Transition to regular lower vocational school

When Ron passed on to regular lower vocation school (VMBO), he had spent three years at the special school but had to start nevertheless at class 2 on a low level. In that way he lost two years and is after his transition already 15 years old. Again he does not understand why he is classified so low. *I told them that I found it too easy but they found that I did not do well enough and when I got good marks but sometimes a bad mark, they took that as proof* (**access; coping**). Had he had more knowledge about the whole system at that time, he would have gone directly to VMBO level 2 or 3 and could have entered MBO much earlier,

⁸ Also his parents bemoan that delay and felt completely surrendered to what the school told them.

saves you years.⁹ Differently put: school has stolen years from his life (**life course; relevance; governance**).

In his new VMBO school he operates cautiously, does not want to be associated with bad students, he the only one with good marks *and then you are the nerd*. But he doesn't mind, he wants to learn. He chooses the sector trade and administration and completes this specialization (VMBO basis) after four (?) years.

Transition to secondary vocational school

Did the VMBO school help him with his transition to MBO? *Help is a big word*, there were lectures, open days, *but that was not so relevant*, not for him anyhow because he knew already which MBO school he wanted to attend, he had decided on that school already in his first years of VMBO. He chose for that school because he had heard from friends that it was a social school, nice climate, not big, rather small, and close to his home. So he had a look at it, decided that that was what he wanted and also his parents agreed.

He is disappointed though when he finds out that he is again far too low categorized. The curriculum of first year is in most parts literally identical with what he had learnt in his former school (**access; relevance**). But, says he, that did *not* lower his aspirations and school will probably know what they are doing. Although: *what for have I followed VMBO if I now get the same here?* Didn't he protest? Yes, he did, *right at the beginning so that they might have done something about it* – but they didn't listen to his arguments and told him: you are not the only one (here) (**governance**). They prevent him from entering a higher level (MBO 3) they judge that he is not good enough for that and count on the judgment of his former VMBO school which advised level 2.¹⁰

But he himself has set his mind to finish level 2, not in two years, but if possible in one year, or one and a half year: *as soon as possible get rid of level 2* which he apparently regards (much) too low for himself (**relevance**). He is still busy in his first year of this MBO level 2 track. How does he like his new MBO School?¹¹ He likes it, new start, *that's nice*, new co-students and teachers.

Biggest difference with VMBO is that there are no classes any longer but the students work in small groups. He likes that because now *you really go for a goal, your own*

⁹ His parents too regret this delay and tell about many missing lessons and burnt out teachers which contributed to the school difficulties of their son.

¹⁰ Also his parents tried to get him admitted at a higher level and thus with one year less to go. But the MBO School refused on account of the advice of the VMBO school although formally speaking higher entry had been possible.

¹¹ At the time of the interview he attends this school since 2 months.

work. It is such a difference with VMBO! There the students behaved like children – here they behave as grown-ups, take their own responsibility for their learning process and do not wait until the teacher tells: work, like it was in VMBO. Teachers won't care what you do or not do, they are paid anyhow (**coping; relevance**). He continues his vocational education with the specialization administrative associate.

Learning places outside school

Ron is rather an indoor man, does not spend much of his spare time outside his home and family with friends on the plane in the near surroundings, sometimes he does, but more often they skype although they see each other every day. His hobbies are model constructions, benzene auto's, and fishing with a line. Attached to this last one is his job as volunteer controller sport fishing. But, he hurries to tell, *school is most important*. We don't quite understand why he did not use his interest in fishing for choosing a vocational sector closer to it than trade and administration. No, says he, hobbies must remain hobbies. And also his parents advised him to choose a sector with safe labour market prospects; *first of all you must have a stable basis*, best guarantee against getting unemployed. Apart from that, if he had chosen for a specialization in fishing or something close to that and would have to leave home and live on his own, he would never done that, he cannot imagine living apart from his family who cares for him and would miss him as much as he them (**life course; relevance**).

Life plans; vocational wishes

His parents are his models; according to their life he models his own future life: *nice family, nice woman for whom I can care and she for me; not only look for money or my credits... two children...* Learning, getting high diploma's is important to realize these life plans, not only care for his own family later, but just as important for his parents so that they would not have to go to an elderly home.

He wants to become *a very rich man*, like everybody would want. He will always work, also to give his parents a nice life; when they are old *they come to my land house, villa or bungalow; that is my dream*. Three garages and three cars – not necessary, one for himself and one for his wife will do; and a new fishing line. But most important that he stays healthy and gets *as many diploma's as possible, that you would have one for each sector*. In any case diploma's for fishing, fishing controller, and trade and administration which he wants to finish at level 4 (highest level).

Where would he like to work? Ideally, he says, something with water, water board. And in his spare time he would go on with fishing controller; not so much to police people (although working in the police sector might also be an idea) but more to meet them at the lake, a foreigner for example with whom he would intercourse in English – that would be a nice application of what he has learnt. And? Will he succeed? Ron is realistic, it can always turn out differently from what you wanted, but he is not a pessimist either (**life course, coping, relevance, governance**).

Comment

We find it difficult to give a sound judgment about Ron's educational trajectory. Was he systematically underestimated by his teachers and pedagogical professionals? Or did they give advice to the best of their knowledge about students like Ron? It could be that they relied too much on previous professional judgments and thus putting Ron on a track for less capable students which he could not leave but had to follow according to educational logic. We cannot tell with certainty if Ron overestimates his capacities or if his disappointment about continuously being put in low tracks is justified. What we can say though is that at crucial points of his trajectory he did not get *individualized support* which might have helped him to finish his education with fewer detours, and possibly on a higher level. We are confirmed in that judgment through close reading of the interview with his parents. They seem very reasonable persons; do not think that their son is a learning miracle but felt at the same time let down by all three schools: primary school reacted only in the last form to Ron's learning difficulties – why not much earlier? Then it was perhaps been possible to avoid the special school. And there the same story: they were told that their son would get individualized teaching. Not true, they as parents had to coach Ron just as if he attended regular lower vocational. And finally the transition to the present MBO school: again too low advice. All this although they did everything to keep in close contact with Ron's schools, tried to influence their decisions with sound arguments but had again and again to submit to schools' decisions which always came down, not to: ok, let's try, let's put him one level up, but rather chose for the safe way.

5. Relevance

5.1. Main tasks of education¹²

Teachers and educational professionals regard two capacities essential for their students to make successful transitions. One is knowledge acquisition and the other to master basic social and personal competencies. Both depend on the motivational disposition of the student. Teachers realize that it is their task to develop these three learning essentials in their students equally well and it is the greatest challenge they face in their profession, they feel. They all say they can do so only successfully in cooperation with the parents; a cooperation which they often miss.¹³

As to *knowledge acquisition*, it is of prime importance to improve language management. Adequate language use is the basis for further learning. Language deficiencies are severe not only with migrant students but with many Dutch students in lower vocational as well. Preparing students for their coming transitions, teachers stress how extraordinary important it is that students develop a stable learning and working attitude, develop trust in their own capacities and talents, develop an attitude of looking further than just one day, realize what it means to make plans and stick to them. Teachers stress how important *deliberately* taken choices for further education and specific sectors within vocational education are, therefore they will do their utmost best to bring their students to that insight.

Teachers labour under the tension to find a sound *balance between knowledge and competence* transmission because of crushing working conditions. They say that they simply do not have enough time for the individual student to care for. They feel caught between, first, their own ambition as knowledge professional, secondly, the need to compensate for lacking initial parental education – being on time in school and on praxis courses, not shouting at the teacher, the coach, co-students, not using street language, listening to your interlocutor, not forgetting your pencil *every* day, making your homework, keeping up learning motivation - and, thirdly, the demands of school administration and exam regulations which are more interested in measurable output factors (success rates of exams, decrease of early school leaving percentages) than in optimally developing the potentials of the students, disregarding what teachers really do and need when wanting to help their students succeed.

¹² We did not find it feasible to separate main tasks in general (5.1) from those of particular school (5.4). Some teachers did make that difference, others not. 5.2 is included in 5.1.

¹³ See further chapter 9 on governance.

Lower vocational education suffers under *built-in tension*: growing demand for transmitting more theoretical knowledge versus the praxis-oriented character of this type of education. *Teachers* as well as (some) *labour market experts* hold the opinion: accept that most of these students are “brilliant with their hands, so teach those to become good craftsmen and don’t bother them with too much theory!” (AR-EE: 187-191)¹⁴ Practical work would give those students self-confidence, would instil in them a sense of self-value.

Inside and outside educational professionals are inclined to emphasize the social-psychological and personal competencies which they regard in many ways even more important than knowledge acquisition. Both, they and the teachers, direct attention to the problem that lower education students are forced by the system to choose for a specialization at an age when they are by far too young still for such choices (see further section ‘How schools could become better places’).

Parents as well as *students* emphasize the absolute necessity of gaining a diploma in order to attain a good job and enhance life chances. They often aim at higher educational levels than their teachers think the students will be able to attain, but all teachers will rather encourage than discourage them to go on learning. Especially *Turkish girls* are very ambitious in climbing up the educational ladder and are usually supported by their families, especially their mothers. Students trust that their teachers and other educational professionals will help them in all respects; we did not hear otherwise although both, students and parents have complains about school.

Students, although mostly acknowledging the commitment of their teachers, would be slightly more critical about their attitude towards them and also towards the curriculum. The answer to our question what do they regard the most important thing they learn at school, a student responded only after a long pause: “Yes, so what is it what I learn here?” (AR-S: 131-135)¹⁵ Other students see the main task of the school in allowing for more out of school activities and complain: “We never make a school trip.” (RO-FGS: 17-89) Still others feel that they are forced in a kind of underachievement because teachers do not stimulate them enough; especially but certainly not exclusively migrant students would say that.

“Black schools” are in danger of becoming the waste pit in which low achievers are deposited which other schools want to get rid of. Then one of the main educational targets –

¹⁴ We marked quotes with first letters of town (AM=Amsterdam, RO= Rotterdam, AR=Arnhem/Elst), group of interviewees: T=teacher, P=principal, S=student, ES- ex=student, FGS=focus group students, FGT- focus group teachers, P= parent, EE=extern expert, IE=intern expert, followed by the minutes of the interviews.

integration – cannot be reached. Integration implies: learn to live with diverse cultures, learn to be tolerant for other opinions, in other words, school should serve as an integration machine. And, so experts tell us, one cannot have high enough respect for teachers who manage to teach in classes with “10, 20 or 30 different nationalities, all with their own norms and values”. (AM-IE: 191-196)

5.2. Definitions of disadvantaged students and their life situation

There were basically two responses to our investigation about who our experts regard as disadvantaged; one response singles out traits and living conditions of certain groups of students, the other does not want to speak of “disadvantaged” in the first place but rather refer to the (Dutch) term: “care-students” (*zorgleerlingen*). All interviewees are anxious not to give the impression of indulging in discriminatory opinions. That said, the most often given definition concerns language deficiency, followed by and related to disadvantageous home and living conditions of the students. It is not migrant background per se, teachers keep emphasizing that makes a student disadvantaged and there are well educated migrant students. There are also many others without migrant backgrounds who miss cultural and educational capital in their families. But migrant culture and background often do pose problems: families who are closed up in their own culture and habits, looking only (Turkish) TV; parents not able to communicate with the school because they do not speak Dutch at all or well enough, etc. They regard migrant *girls* in particular as being better equipped to overcome cultural cleavages, older siblings helping as interpreter, looking after younger siblings and sick parents and still achieve good notes at school.

There is another divide in the answers of our experts to our question who they regard as disadvantaged: some allow themselves to think in certain categories, like “migrants”, “those with language deficiencies”, etc. Others would resist such thinking and would rather say: *all* our students are disadvantaged (need care). Still others (or partly the same) would point, not only to disadvantageous family circumstances but more in general to run-down neighbourhoods and lacking financial and personal means of the school. There are also voices who tell about overt discrimination: if for example a student with a Moroccan surname calls for a job, he would not get it.

Included in disadvantage-definitions are further all kinds of mental and physical handicaps, like ADHD and many other such syndromes. In that context very critical voices are heard about the new integration policy of the ministry to include special education students in regular schools (*passend onderwijs*): how can you possibly do educational

justice to a class of up to 30 or, because of sick-leave of teachers even more students of such diversity if no additional means are given? Mission impossible!

The lowest track in lower vocational education is almost devoid of theoretical subjects and will only teach the most basic knowledge and competencies. Students who attend those tracks cannot write a letter, hardly read and often have severe behavioural problems and a low IQ and CITO score. “And yet, we do succeed in having even these students get their (VMBO) diploma, 90-95 per cent of them succeed, that is super for a black school – How do you do that? – By giving them again and again and still again the chance to manage the tasks, never mind how low their grades.”(RO-IE: 44-62). Teachers as well as inside professionals keep stressing the importance of showing *respect* for the students. Respect leads to (more) self-assurance, which is a prerequisite for motivated learning.

Essentially *parents* and *students* do not disagree with above notions of disadvantage. They both know that the future of the student depends on passing exams and that one has no chance in society without at least minimum education and preferably more than minimum social competencies; they both have deeply internalized the requirements of advanced knowledge societies they live in. Parents would tell us that they had much less choices and chances in their educational careers than their children have nowadays.

5.3. The role of different learning fields with special attention to practical courses

It seems that lower educational students do not have extensive experiences with organized leisure activities; very few visit sport or music clubs on a regular basis. And even if such activities are offered and paid for by the school (via municipal programs), students would not take the offer. *Teachers* regret that. One would tell in regret and resignation about migrant students who would react in utter disbelief to such an offer: visiting family is so much more important, isn't it? Teachers realize that “we must work together with the outside much more” (AM-T: 87:91), often they have only a vague idea about the after school life of their students.

What do *students* tell about how they spend their leisure time? Many are engaged in jobs aside – some even to the extent that it interferes with their school commitment, teachers would tell us, not denying though the value of obtaining work experience that way. And the *parents* are content that their children earn their own pocket money.

Students would hang around in the street (Rotterdam and Amsterdam school, not village school Arnhem/Elst) or in their homes, listen to music, play computer, and interact with their face book friends. Boys in particular complained about lacking youth clubs and sport fields in their living quarters. Teachers told us about “street culture” (especially in Rotterdam) with diehard rules about who is the boss and with much corporal violence – interestingly only outside school, not inside; a compliment for succeeding in providing a friendly climate. Some students go to homework classes, some migrant students following such classes in the mosque (which diverts them further from society, as one Amsterdam teacher remarked).

Parents, perhaps feeling obliged to, emphasize that their children do not misbehave in the street, come home in time, and be with (nice) friends. Usually they do not know about the home work of their children and feel that that is the obligation of their children and the school to see to it.

On the whole we did not get the impression that there is much *non-formal learning* outside the classroom which complements formal learning with the exception of the practical courses of the vocational curriculum. Without exception *students* like practical courses more than working in the class and the *teachers* regard these courses essential for the students to get a clearer view on their later work field. Arnhem/Elst school especially has an advanced program of organizing practical courses in cooperation with local enterprises (see chapter on governance). Teachers at that school put enormous efforts in individual career counselling by getting the student in the right work place (see next section). But most teachers admit that there is not enough (or none) integration of the formal and the practical part of the curriculum in vocational education

5.4. How schools could become better places for learning¹⁶

Transition choices too early, too rigid

School experts (and some parents) regard the age of 13, 14 years too early for students – still children in many ways – to make own and deliberately taken transition choices. To make such choices students (and teachers) need more time: they must get the opportunity to make experiences in many different occupational sectors and not be forced to choose (too early)

¹⁶ In this section we deliberately integrate 5.5, 5.7 and 5.8 as all three subchapters deal with educational policy issues. In the interviews it showed that interviewees, while talking about promising developments, they talked at the same time about unfavorable developments, and when telling about their wishes they would at the same time utter criticism. On the whole it shows that these sections overlap with the governance chapter.

for just the next available. And if they do not know which occupation sector to choose, they should get the opportunity to switch from the theoretical track of lower vocational to senior general secondary education (HAVO). In principal they may do that but in practice HAVO schools close off this transition path as far as possible by demanding high average marks which few VMBO students are able to get.

Smooth transition from lower to further (vocational) education

In one of our three case study schools (Arnhem/Elst) an experiment is initiated to close the gap between lower (VMBO) and further vocational education (MBO) by integrating the first two classes of MBO and the last class of VMBO into a so called *VM2 trajectory* (see also chapter on governance). Ultimately this leads to an uninterrupted trajectory from the age of 12 to 16/17, with close cooperation of the teaching teams in both school types.¹⁷

Career coaching

Career coaching has become of prime importance in order to facilitate transitions. This is especially urgent for students of lower vocational education to further vocational. Also within teacher training, career coaching is regarded an essential qualification for teacher students to be made aware of.¹⁸ Career coaching must mitigate two urgent problems in and of vocational education: a) early school leaving, b) indecisive or wrong choices of vocational sector

One of our experts¹⁹ told us that the ideology of early school leaving has been changed in the last years. The problem was supposed to concern mainly so called problem or “risk youth” (among them migrant students). Accordingly tailored projects were designed and directed towards these groups, special coaching projects for example. Yet closer analysis showed that early school leaving has to be put in a much broader perspective. Besides “risk youth” with multiple problems, the majority of early school leavers are youngsters who do not necessarily have very problematic school careers or home situations. “Those kids are simply not interested in school any longer, or don’t like it anymore, or they

¹⁷ It would also make superfluous the exam at the end of VMBO. This exam does not qualify the student for the labour market and only takes away valuable time in the last year of VMBO. The advantages of a VM2 trajectory are so evident that it is supported by the ministry and has good chances to get implemented in the long run.

¹⁸ See report WP3.

¹⁹ Ton Eimers (2006), lector at “Kenniscentrum Arnhem” (a knowledge center which connects various institutes of higher education to generate knowledge which pertains to a region and their problems); see also reference list.

don't know what they would like to do and prefer to go working.” (T.Eimers AR: 48:49). You may call them the “not-problem group of early school leavers”. Those students have *choice problems*, they choose a trajectory/sector which shortly after appears not appropriate to them, does not fit their idea about the chosen trajectory/sector, so they would switch and again would find that their choice did not fit their wishes and drop out eventually.

Therefore the Arnhem region established the so called “Leerdorp Elst” (learning village Elst) which interconnects lower and further vocational education institutes so as to coach students with choice problems so closely from *both* sides that they learn and experience what their capacities are and which trajectory/sector fits best (“warm transitions”). A further initiative of Arnhem/Elst school – not more than a plan yet – is to create a stable triangle (as the principal puts it) between school, parents and local enterprise with the student in the middle of this triangle. So that sub-triangles could be formed, i.e. school – students – parent, or student – local enterprise – school, etc.

A similar project at our Rotterdam school, called “Champs on Stage”, again with the idea behind to interconnect school and practical work experiences. These initiatives make clear that the cleavage which separates lower and further (vocational) education is a main reason for misleading trajectories. Positive experiences and results with better bridging this gulf – not only by more intensive coaching but eventually also by integrating curricula – also call for a much better follow-up system of the further school careers of the students to be communicated between the various educational tracks and sectors; digital techniques make such a system possible.

Counter-productive hierarchies

There is since long an in-built hierarchy between lower and further vocational education (VMBO and MBO). MBO teachers kind of look down on VMBO teachers and are better paid. This inhibits close and collegial cooperation. As in other countries (Hauptschule in Germany) this lowest level of education has survival problems: parents and students know that their chances are less at these schools, especially if the students attend the lowest of the 4 tracks (from more to almost no theoretical curricula). Consequently parents and students (particularly with migrant backgrounds) ambition as high educational (and occupational) levels as possible.

An additional problem is that many lower vocational schools can offer only a limited range of vocational sectors and as a consequence provide only limited occupational choices.

Often students (and their parents) simply do not know how differentiated occupations are for which they might want to qualify.

The system shows a fundamental flaw, again between lower vocational and further (vocational) education: after finishing primary, students are given school advice on the basis of their CITO test results. Vocational students are divided between 4 tracks, from more theoretical to more practical. For their further (vocational) education (MBO), these divisions are relevant, as students may not enter any level they want even if it might prove that they would be able to – with the effect that MBO schools in their entry classes assemble students of very different capacities, including HAVO students who did not manage there and transfer to MBO.

Miscellaneous

All teachers complain, besides lack of financial means, about the *bite snap politics* of the ministry and also municipalities: numerous projects are initiated, without an integrated plan how to safeguard continuation and use synergetic effects. Participants in and outside school (including students and parents) comment on *classes* which are *too big* and lessons which are not given on account of lacking personnel. Also severe critique is uttered by school professionals about the educational policy of integrating special education into regular schools without providing additional means.²⁰

5.5. Summing up

All 3 schools give the impression that the professionals agree on the main issues of relevance. But the social environment of Rotterdam and Amsterdam with “black” neighbourhood schools makes transitions for some students perhaps more difficult than in Arnhem/Elst although our material does not allow for further generalization.

- Big consensus about relevance of education for life chances;
- Tension between knowledge and competence transmission and between theoretical and practical knowledge curriculum;
- Selective educational systems inhibit thorough exploitation of talents and hamper transitions from lower to further education;
- Danger of increasing educational disadvantage through “black” and “white” schools;
- Language deficiencies seen as most influential factor in definitions of disadvantage; teachers and experts anxious not to discriminate students on the basis of deficiencies;

²⁰ See also the survey among principals with the same criticism (WP5).

- Not much structured leisure activities among students; non-formal learning mainly via practical courses;
- Transitions too early and too rigid; experiments with smooth transitions promising.

6. Life-course and education

6.1. General remark

In chapter 5 on relevance we discussed extensively the gap between VMBO and MBO which hinders smooth transitions. The Dutch educational system logic is inclined to channel students into pre-paved vocational and general transitions and although the official policy advocates more general education. The observation of a labour market expert is significant in this respect: on one hand society asks for more broadly educated workforce and that means: longer educational trajectories; on the other hand that implies later entrance in the labour market and thus more expensive labour – an annoying contradiction.(AR-EE: 79-80).

VMBO-students are substantially dependent in their choices on which vocational sectors their present school offers. If they ambition another specialization they have difficulty in getting admitted in an MBO-school with that specialization although formally speaking they have that right; if they want to go on to HAVO, they might encounter difficulties as well because most HAVO schools accept only students with very good credentials.

6.2. Teachers' and other educational experts' perceptions on the transitions and life plans of students²¹

Prime goal to safeguard transition

Principals, teachers, mentors and career coaches regard successful transition to further education one of their prime tasks. When asked what they regard as most important on the side of the students to reach that goal, they respond with essentially calling for the same student attitudes and capacities as already assembled in chapter 5: further school success depends on language proficiency, reading comprehension, be able to reflect and give voice to own opinions, be reliable in all respects. The less the student has command on these qualities, the more in danger his or her transition.

²¹ 6.2 and 6.3 overlap with 6.1 (and partly with 6.5 and 6.6). The reason to include 6.3 is that what is “typical” and “atypical” is less clearly separable from each other than it might seem. 6.8 showed overlap with other sections. Overlap has to do with not clearly separable sections and double coding.

On the whole and in comparison with students, teachers are less optimistic about transitions than are students (and their parents) and are therefore careful not to advise too quickly for higher levels in (general) further education. That does not mean that they would actively demotivate students for such choices but rather stimulate them to develop realistic ambitions. As one of our experts at Rotterdam school observes: although the teachers do their utmost best,

“the students still leave with educational arrears. Here (at present school) we pamper them because most of the team are very dedicated to the students and repeat and repeat tests, come on, try again. But then when they go on to an MBO school (being pampered) stops.” He had two students, “good students here, at their level, polite, everything ok. And they have now entered level 3/4 – God knows how that was possible, enter level 3/4 from level 2. They will not survive that with Dutch language, math, physics, and chemistry. That’s simply through and through sad.” (RO-IE: 44-62).

From a focus group discussion among Amsterdam school teachers:

Teacher 1: “Many parents expect that their children will continue with a HBO education... children must become a lawyer or something with medicine. But that is certainly not for everybody...”

...

Interviewer: “Do you talk with the students about their future?”

Teacher 2: “Yes, we talk a lot with them about it.” (AM-FGT: 2-23; 323-330)

In general teachers are inclined to take the safe side in advising their students thereby perhaps underestimating their potentials (as some students, Dutch and Turkish, complain about) .There are other teachers who are enthusiastic about the ambitions of students and tell them: Do, try by all means!

The mentor is crucial in the process of preparing students for their transition. Students must trust him or her; their door must always stay open and have a low threshold to enter, mentors and counsellors must not only to give advice but also have an open ear for problematic home situations. In short: “A mentor must be as a father.” (RO-T: 362-366).

Mentors and other transition experts regard it as their duty to develop in students an attitude that choosing for following transition steps has to be made with deliberation and involves learning about one’s own personal strengths and weaknesses. In that sense teaching is not only transmitting cognitive knowledge but also and, concerning transition choices even more so, self-insight. Vocational teachers in particular hold the opinion that a successful transition to further vocational education (MBO) depends, not so much on

cognitive capacities but on motivation and devotion to the chosen sector: “So, let’s be clear, there is nothing wrong with a good brick-layer, that is fantastic work and if you can keep it up until your 65th you’ve spent a very nice life.” (AR-IE: 90-95). In former times, many teachers tell, low achieving students did not have transition problems but had good chances to make a decent living even without much qualification – today society asks for better educated persons and that makes the transition of low-achievers precarious.

Teachers and other pedagogues make the same division as students concerning those students who know “from the first day that they want to become an instrument maker and what they must do for that to achieve” (AR-IE: 68-69), and others who are disoriented, have lost motivation and/or are overburdened with care for sick family members. As a teacher from Arnhem/Elst school tells: “In statistic terms, there are in every class four students who must take care of their handicapped parents (or help) a little brother with ADHD syndrome...” (AR-T: 267-268). Still other teachers and pedagogues argue: why push a student into a vocational option he or she does not like but wants badly something else – just let them try and find out themselves!

What we have told so far about teacher and expert attitudes about how to help students make sensible transition choices holds more or less to all our three schools. They all want to find a balance between giving support and stimulating the self-activation of the students, not pampering them too much (“get potential active!” – AR-EE: 114-115). And again: the role of the mentor is crucial in this respect: he or she is the one to encourage the student to choose to his or her liking and at the same time will do everything to prevent the student from making a choice which might end in a failure.

6.3. Delay and detour of transitions; atypical transitions

There are students who choose after primary for a (VMBO) school because they (and their parents) have heard “nice things” about that school. If it then becomes evident that the student does not succeed there, he or she must transfer to the present school and has lost valuable time and, more important, learning motivation which has to be reactivated.

Arnhem/Elst runs a special project for fourth grade HAVO students who did not succeed there. “If you let it go, they will repeat a class twice and then they must leave school – and then what?” They were not at all oriented towards (secondary) vocational education; they wanted HAVO and then go on to higher professional school (HBO). These students must be helped to accept that a MBO trajectory is also valuable. But if such a

student wants to continue with general education by all means – “just as well as long as they have the right insight.” (AR-EE: 22-22).

Special projects

In the context of the integration of special education in regular schools, projects are initiated to have children with autism syndrome follow regular classes in VMBO, like in Arnhem. Also in Amsterdam and Rotterdam there are many other experiments and additional pedagogical facilities and institutes to provide special care for students who are in danger of dropping out of school without getting their minimum qualification certificate²², or who have dropped out and must be reactivated to re-enter school, such as after school centres and special schools with small classes and pedagogues with special know-how who work together with other experts and youth help institutions.

Care teams

Each school has a so-called care team which consists of intern and extern experts, like mentors, school social workers, special educationalists, inspector for school attendance etc., and in serious cases youth care or police officers. There are teachers who are reluctant to take over tasks which do not have to do with strictly teaching, but most teachers in VMBO are perfectly aware that with so many difficult students they need additional support given by care team specialists (see also chapter 5 and 8).

6.4. Students' perspectives on their transitions and future plans

Two basic manners of approaching transition

Asked about their following transition steps, students make the division in those (including themselves) who do not know yet what to choose and those who do. The first group needs the help of teachers and career counsellors; the second group has definite plans for going on with vocational or general education.

For most students finishing present VMBO education and getting a diploma is the nearest goal to achieve: “Just another two months to hold on to and then I can leave!” says 16year old L. with relief (AR-S: 285-292). She had long hesitated between different specializations and eventually decided to do sales fashion styling. She knows to which MBO

²² In NL that is at least finishing 2nd class of MBO

school she will go, an intake interview has been arranged; she and her mother are happy that the difficult process of choosing has come to a good end.

While many students are content with the perspective of an MBO certificate which provides them with an education sufficient for entering the labour market and find work, there are also many students in our three schools who ambition higher professional education, possibly even university.

Turkish female students seem to be particularly ambitious. They make educational choices which clearly divert from the traditional role of mother and house wife, and they want to reach as high as they possibly can, so do their parents (mothers). “I think education is highly important and I’m not someone who would consider finding a rich husband, sit at home and watch daytime TV shows.” (AM-S: 323-324).

6.5. Perceived problems and frustrations on account of wrong subject choices

On the whole we got the impression that most students at our three schools are, at the end of VMBO, well prepared to make the transition to further education. But not all are. There are *Turkish females* who would like to realize an ambitious profession but are kept in their traditional female role, like a student in our Amsterdam school whose teacher told in a focus group discussion that he encouraged her to do a study in architecture because she showed so much interest and capacity in 3-D drawing to which she responded with a bitter laugh: “Do you really think that my father would like that idea?” (AM-T: 328-342).

David from Arnhem/Elst school is another case in point. He told us that he would like to become a surgeon and therefore wanted to continue with HAVO. But then it showed that that was impossible “because I missed physics and chemistry in my curriculum. And also because they (teachers) think that it would be too difficult for me and I might fail. So I will continue with MBO, that is at least something. I do regret that I cannot go on with HAVO, but I understand why.” (AR-S: 31-32).

The same happened to another student at Arnhem/Elst school who wanted to become a pilot but had the wrong subjects in his curriculum. He told us: “I did not know that I missed (physics). They (the teachers) told me: you will follow VMBO-theoretisch and advised me to choose economy because then I would be able to go on with HAVO and I knew I needed HAVO (for realizing his wish to become a pilot - MdBR)” – until he found out that he did not need economy. When he found out, it was too late to change subjects.

How did he find out? “I went to an open day of KLM” he told us. He is firm about his goal: he will go to HAVO in any case. (AR-S: 168-195).

The last two cases show that despite much effort teachers and career counsellors (see below) do not always give the right advice or do not know in time about the professional ambitions of their students. The case of the Turkish student who refrains from her ambition of becoming an architect is even more problematic because it poses the question if something could have been done to influence the father’s veto. Should the teacher have demanded to speak to the father? Would the student have given consent and what would have been the outcome? – We must leave these questions unanswered.

6.6. Perceived help of educational professionals and parents by students

On the whole students are positive about the efforts of their teachers and career counsellors to help them make a good transition choice. Staff members and pedagogical experts are easily to be approached and will always listen to possible choice problems and look for solutions. Only some students, Dutch and Turkish, complain that they are discouraged to opt for higher (general) levels of further education than their teachers advise them to choose.

Most important for nearly all students is the support they get from their *parents*. Students expect and get what they ask for: their parents are open to help if the child asks for it, they are attentive discussion partners at the dinner table, but, so we are told by practically all students, parents would not actively interfere in their wishes and choices but leave that to their own decision.

Turkish (female) students are as ambitious as their parents and internalize parental wishes to aim as high as they can: “*If I do not study further, my parents would simply kill me*”, says S. aged 16. (AM-S: 257).

6.7. Perception of parents of the transition choices and future of their children

Children and their parents do not differ in their opinions about support and transitional choices. Parents confirm that they would leave last decisions to their children as long as they choose at all. The only thing they want to make clear and look to its realization is that their son or daughter must go on with education. Which profession they eventually choose they must decide themselves. *Mothers* seem to be more active than fathers and are close standbys

when it comes to taking concrete steps, like collecting information from internet, contacting further education schools and not missing appointments.

Turkish parents (mothers) have as high aspirations for their children (daughters) as the female students themselves. In some Turkish families getting up the educational ladder seems to be a family project: mother, daughter and possibly older siblings will span together to achieve it. And certainly Turkish mothers will push their daughters to get more education than they themselves were able to collect. Dutch parents would also tell about better educational chances today than when they went to school, but rarely with so much regret as the Turks. Obviously this has to do with the fact that by comparison Dutch parents had better educational opportunities than their Turkish counterparts.

6.8. Students' ideas about their near and far future

Dutch young people are optimistic about their future. In a male focus group discussion with Arnhem/Elst students we asked: Where will you be in 10 years? The boys acknowledged that they would have a fair or well-paid job, would have a house²³ and car by then and found a girl to marry and built a family with. These “standard goals” are to a great extent those of most Dutch students at our three schools. Some might go abroad, but most students picture their future life close to their present town and country.

From a focus group discussion in Amsterdam school:

Interviewer: “What will you do after exam? Go on with study?”

Student: “I’m going to HBO, that I want to have and then America and there (go) to university.”

Others confirm that they also want to go on studying, at least HBO – “I hoop!” And they all tell yes, a good education is extremely important these days. (AM-FGS: 437-475).

From a focus group discussion in Rotterdam school:

Turkish male student: “I want an enterprise on my own”

Interviewer: “Making much money?”

Student: “Yes”

Interviewer: “And what if we get a recession and the economy collapses?”

²³ “House” in Dutch refers to any living accommodation, from flat to own property.

Student: “Keep on working, working, working. You cannot.. you must stay in the Netherlands. If you want to leave to your own country, Turkey...

(...) Well you might go there but I think it’s even worse there...” (RO-FGS: 609-693).

Turkish girls know that only a high education and qualification will give them (much) better chances than their parents had, but they are less unambiguous than their Dutch peers about their future life. They feel that they have to work out a balance between their Dutch and their Turkish identity. Some of them are worried and expect rising right wing parties and possibly discrimination on the labour market against veil-wearing women. They do not exclude therefore the option of migrating to another European country or going back to Turkey.

6.9. Summing up

While our findings in this chapter show a quite homogeneous picture with not many severe differences between our three case schools concerning attitudes of teachers and other professionals, students and their parents with respect to transitions, this sunny picture is overshadowed when reading the chapter about coping where much more dissatisfaction with classroom management is voiced.

- Most students make their transition choices to further education without much problems; problems come later (Elffers, 2011).
- Transition problems concern wrong subject choices which hinder realization of wanted profession as well as more ambitious plans of students (and their parents) than teachers regard justified (see chapter 4).
- There are many special projects for potential and real school drop-outs.
- Teachers and other professionals are perceived by students as supportive and professionals themselves regard it their main task to give support in such a way that the students make deliberate choices.
- Turkish females seem particular ambitious in their educational and professional choices; only few are hindered by traditional socialization.
- Most students have normal-biographical ideas about their future (good salary, nice family, stay in the country).
- All parents let their children make their own choices as long as they choose at all.

7. Access

7.1. Access issues with regard to this specific school

All the three schools did some marketing activities in order to promote themselves and attract new students. For instance, the school in Arnhem participated in some information evenings at primary schools in order to provide information about their educational vision, teaching, educational programmes and so on. Or, the school in Rotterdam organised individual visits to more than 20 primary schools in the city in order to meet students and parents.

The schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam are ‘black schools’, situated in neighbourhoods with substantial immigrant populations. Therefore, they suffer from a phenomenon called ‘white flight’, native Dutch parents and students avoiding a school on the basis that the share of immigrant student population is too high. ‘Black schools’ have a bad image in general, in terms of education quality and the scale of problems encountered within the school. As a result, they can hardly attract native Dutch students. Attracting adequate number of students is a concern in both schools as well. Therefore, as some teachers commented, they accept any student who applies to their school, even students who apply for transfer from other schools due to behavioural problems.

The school in Arnhem differed from these cases, as it enjoyed a relatively good reputation and had a small percentage of immigrant population. Therefore, ‘white flight’ was not a concern for them. However, this school has suffered from some negative media attention some years ago because of bullying problems in the school. As a result, they have lost some students to other schools.

7.2. Factors affecting school choices

In the Amsterdam case, the school was not the first choice for most of the students and parents we talked with. Some already knew that the school did not have such high reputation, or that the school had some survival problems due to decreasing number of students at levels higher than VMBO. Still, it was preferred by one parent who had some other kids graduating from this school with positive experiences. For some others, it was simply because the school was very close to where they lived. Furthermore, some of these families have tried other schools, but they were full, and they came to this one as a last resort. Some

immigrant parents also mentioned that high percentage of immigrant student population at school positively influenced their decision since they wanted their kids to study at schools where there are students from their own background. Similar reasons were mentioned in the Rotterdam case study, particularly close proximity to places of residence.

Arnhem case differs once again from these two schools, since interview accounts with students and parents point to more conscious and deliberate choices particularly for this school because the school itself had some attractive qualities. In this respect, parents mentioned different aspects: for almost all of them school building, infrastructure and the way classrooms and other learning or recreation spaces were designed were highly appealing. Some parents were impressed by the presentations the school had at some primary schools, and they believed that the school offered good education. Other reasons were: unusually longer lesson hours, enabling students to do their homework while at school; close proximity to homes; being located in a town instead of city (which implied less risk of drug use); offering lessons in the field of agriculture; availability of more support for students with special education needs (such as dyslexia); relative small size of the school.

7.3. How do students (resp. ex-students) perceive their school?

This is explained in the next chapter, 8.1.

7.4. Access to supporting professionals

The most important and frequently referred to supporting professionals at school were mentors and counsellors. All secondary school classes have mentors who support and advise students on their problems. Mentors monitor students' academic achievement, and when needed discuss these issues with them. Mentors also facilitate communication between school and parents, as they inform parents about their children's progress. Counsellors, on the other hand, support students and advise them during their school career. They help students as they take decisions for an education level, a sector or courses. Furthermore, counsellors advise students in their transition to upper secondary. These two professionals often cooperate with each other.

Students also knew that there is a youth worker who talks to students with significant behavioural problems, or when someone has a personal concern. However, students prefer to go to their teachers or peers. As concerns further education, their choices were more often based on information they or their families gathered from other sources, or advice of some significant others in their environment.

7.5. (What) do parents know about supporting professionals?

The parents were also knowledgeable about the presence of mentors and counsellors at school, and some have searched their advice to make informed choices with regard to transition to upper secondary. Some parents in Amsterdam and Rotterdam explained that they knew about the presence of these professionals but did not need to communicate with them since their children did not encounter any significant problems. Only at transition stage, their children had some talks with them. Some immigrant parents highlighted the language issue: even if they wanted to communicate with supporting professionals, they were not able to as they were not fluent in Dutch. This made them hesitant to contact for concerns regarding transition to upper secondary.

Some parents in Arnhem, on the other hand, had positive experiences with supporting professionals. At this school, mentor hours were organised for half an hour in the mornings, during which parental concerns (in relation to school or out of school life) could be discussed. Parents with children who had individual problems (bullying or learning difficulties) mentioned how well the care structure within the school supported their children.

7.6. What do principals, teachers, professionals see as their task with regard to supporting students in their transitions?

The following tasks are highlighted by teachers and experts within the context of helping students in their transitions: 1) having extensive talks with students (individual or in groups) to understand their wishes, dreams, future aspirations, interests, capabilities and plans, 2) helping them reflect on their aspirations and making an assessment on how realistic they are, 3) providing students information about further education possibilities (levels and specialisations at MBO for instance) and which levels they can apply to, 4) providing information on different occupations, the tasks involved in those occupations, income level and so on (talks, websites, films, participation in school fairs, and inviting guests from universities were used for this purpose), 5) teaching students some research skills in order to help them to conduct further research on the internet, 6) facilitating internship positions to enable students to have personal experiences with some jobs and to test if they would really like to do later in their adult life, 7) arranging visits to MBO schools in which the students are interested, 8) raising the awareness of students about the most important capabilities and skills they need for their future educational career and later in labour market, such as good

Dutch language skills, social skills, communication, group work, creativity, and innovative thinking, 9) improving self-confidence of students so that they can make the right choices, 10) arranging some tests like CITO to let students to see how good they are in terms VMBO, HAVO and VWO levels, 11) teaching them how to write application letters and how to do job interviews, 12) facilitating communication with parents and involving them in transition process, and 13) improving cooperation between VMBO and MBO schools.

7.7. (What) do students know about the educational system?

Most students have an old-fashioned way of thinking about their career choices. They think that the choices that they make cannot be changed later. They know something about how companies work but do not know what kind of functions exist in their field of specialisation at MBO level. Students know that after completing HAVO or MBO, they can study further at HBO (higher professional education). However, transition to HBO from MBO would cost them at least one additional year. Some students who were determined to study at HBO level, preferred to make a transition to HAVO, which was also considered more academic compared to MBO. In other words, even though transition to higher professional education was possible from both HAVO and MBO, HAVO graduates would be better prepared for such a transition as they would have had more academic subjects.

7.8. (What) do parents know about the educational system?

The Dutch education system is considered highly complex by all parents. Comprehending its various specialisation levels and transition possibilities is particularly challenging and confusing for immigrant parents, since they did not themselves studied in the Netherlands. They expressed concerns that their children are often advised to study at vocational schools, and even though transition to higher education was possible via longer routes, in reality it was very difficult for their children to study further than MBO level. Native Dutch parents also have limited knowledge or misinformation about the education system. Parents noted that there are too many choices, which differ per school, and even changes on annual basis.

Any discussion on what the Dutch education system withholds because of its design involves questions about early selection. In fact, all actors in our study noted that students have to make important educational choices at a too early age (see also 5.4). Students, who proceed with MBO, have to select among highly specialised occupations. Often, they regret their choices after a year, resulting in high drop-out rates after a year at MBO.

7.9. Reporting about discrimination

Only one immigrant parent from Amsterdam mentioned that when he wanted to enrol his daughters in some schools in areas where native Dutch are concentrated, he was told that he should apply to schools in his own neighbourhood (which had high immigrant concentration). He believes that this is why despite the policy of free school choice in the Netherlands, residential segregation leads to school segregation. Schools must not refuse children on the basis of their background, but some apply additional academic qualifications or claim that their school is full when in fact it is not.

Discrimination came up as an important concern when students or their parents discussed transition to labour market. The majority believed that they will encounter some sort of direct or indirect discrimination, for instance they might have to prove that they have better qualifications for the same job compared to Dutch applicants. A student noted that: “My mother tells me that you should work very hard and be better than your Dutch classmates, so that you can prove that you have better qualifications, then they would not discriminate against you”(AM-S: 187-188).

Some Turkish female students as well as their parents believed that discrimination might be a significant challenge in the future not particularly because of their immigrant background, but because they had head scarfs. Headscarfs indicate conservative and religious lifestyle to employers, even if a person with headscarf can be more progressive than a woman without one. In Arnhem, cyber bullying was brought up. The school adequately responded and solved the incidence. Another student in Arnhem argued that there is discrimination at their school based on gender. He suggested that 80 per cent of their teachers apply the rules more strictly with boys, and they are much more tolerant with girls.

There were no reports on discrimination between teachers and students, or between students. A teacher in Rotterdam suggested that students have respect for other cultures; they eat and spend time together. In fact, immigrant teachers emphasized that the current students are third generation immigrants; they do not feel unaccepted or discriminated anymore. Some teaches warn that migrant students will experience discrimination later on the labour market (see also 5.2).

7.10. Access and barriers to vocational training

Until a few years ago, 60 per cent of all primary school graduates were enrolled at vocational schools, yet the negative image remained strong. Recently increasingly more

students want to study at general secondary schools. In fact, the rate of enrolment at lower secondary schools decreased to 50 per cent last year. It is acknowledged among educators that there is a general tendency among parents and students for general secondary education, and a move away from vocational education.

Access to senior vocational education has been a highly contested issue, and caught much academic and media attention due to high dropout rates after one year at MBO schools (the highest rate within the Dutch education system (Elffers, 2011)). According to teachers and experts, students do not have a clear understanding of what they want to do, or what different occupations entail. It is often assumed that those, who dropout after a year at MBO, are the ones experiencing behavioural and attitudinal problems or those who fail to adequately cope with academic demands. However, a number of recent studies have revealed that it is not only the ‘problematic youth’ who leave school early, but also a larger group of students who feel disillusioned by their occupational choices and still do not know what exactly they want to do (Eimers, 2006).

Making sure that students make successful transitions from lower to upper secondary requires cooperation between VMBO and MBO. Several actors emphasized the importance of such close cooperation, however, they also noted that except for individual schools (such as the Arnhem school with VMBO2 trajectories), such cooperation does not exist.

Another problem with regard to access to upper vocational education is the mismatches between the four levels at VMBO and the four levels at MBO. For instance, students from basic vocational programme (BL) at VMBO can apply to MBO –level 1 and 2; students from the middle management vocational programme (KL) and the combined programme (GL) can apply to MBO level 3 and 4; and students from the theoretical programme (TL) can apply to MBO-level 4. This leads to divergent student populations in MBO classes and constitutes a huge problem within the system, pointing to failing connexions between VMBO and MBO.

Furthermore, VMBO final exam was brought up as an issue and its value was questioned. The principal of Arnhem school: “What is the added value of a VMBO diploma? Nothing! It is a tradition. We are not the final educational track, and what is the purpose of such an exam? [...] It can be a very difficult year, with tests, measurements and stress” (AR-P: 116-117).

Vocational schools appear to be overwhelmed by attempts to mainstream special education. Often, students with special education needs, particularly those with behavioural and attitudinal problems are transferred to vocational schools as they are the lowest track

within the system. However, as these students have considerable deficiencies in language and mathematics, schools find it very hard to compensate for. When they finish VMBO, it is very likely that they are unable to cope with academic level at MBO schools.

7.11. Access and barriers to non-formal learning²⁴

Non-formal education was mentioned during discussions with Turkish immigrant students as four of them followed religious training at Mosque in the weekends. They often started around the age of eight, and continued with their training for several years, in some cases for seven years. They learnt about Islam, Quran, and about how to live a life in line with Islamic principles. Three girls in our sample decided to have a head scarf after these learning experiences. Once they finalised their training, almost all of them joined some religious discussion groups organised by adults. All the students suggested that they greatly benefited from these encounters as it helped them to develop and mature.

7.12 Ideas to improve access

This section is discussed in detail in Governance chapter (9).

7.13. Summing up

Issues related to access to lower and upper secondary education raises a lot of heated discussions about how the Dutch education system is structured. The following aspects emerged as highlights of the discussions:

- ‘Black schools’ in our sample encounter problems with attracting sufficient number of students. Native –Dutch students avoid these schools, a phenomenon called ‘white flight’.
- Students in Amsterdam and Rotterdam perceive the education quality as low, and non-challenging. In all the three schools, the issues of classroom management and discipline emerge as significant problems compromising education quality.
- Mentors and school counsellors are the most important supporting professionals. They provide guidance and support on problems and transition to upper secondary.
- Students and parents do not know much about how education system is structured at higher levels of education. They find the system highly complex and confusing.

²⁴ Non formal education as takes place in in-service is discussed in 5.3

- Almost all actors believe that the Dutch education system forces students to make important educational and occupational choices at an early age. Although the system offers some flexibility, in reality it is more rigid.
- Discrimination is not reported by the majority of students, parents and teachers. However, immigrant students are expected to encounter discrimination once they start looking for jobs. Head scarf was a significant concern for girls.
- There is an urgent need for increased cooperation between parents and schools, and VMBO and MBO schools. Such improved cooperation might help students to make better choices and curb high drop-out rates within MBO.

8. Coping

8.1. Major challenges for coping

Students in all three schools complained about teachers' inability to manage the classrooms effectively. Often, when teachers were lecturing, there were students conversing, shouting, laughing, eating, listening to music, or checking websites from their blackberries. In Arnhem, the incidences of students smoking during lesson hours are also mentioned. Such chaotic atmosphere and disturbances undermined student concentration and motivation. Students also noted that some teachers were actually good in silencing everyone, and keep them alert during the class, but such teachers were in minority. The chaos in classroom was not only attributed to teachers' inability but also to students' unruly behaviours and disrespectful attitudes. One student from Rotterdam, for instance, explained that she had four different teachers for the subject of English within a year, since teachers could not deal with the students effectively, gave up and refused to teach in that class. She recalls teachers leaving the class in tears. Moroccan boys were particularly pointed out as being aggressive and rebellious, and causing most of the problems in classrooms.

Furthermore, particularly in Rotterdam case, students complained about high rates of teacher absences due to sick leave or burnout. These classes were not replaced or compensated later on, so students missed teaching hours. Moreover, teacher turnover was reported high in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Such 'black schools' are not considered popular among teachers, and when they could find jobs in better schools, they often leave. One student from Rotterdam confirmed that she had two teachers this year who worked only six months and left to work at some other schools. Students believed that teachers leave

because they get tired of the school very soon as students do not want to study, they do not want to do homework, or listen in the class, or are very difficult to manage in the classroom. Consequently, teacher motivation was also reported low. What is more, students in different schools argued that teachers lack subject knowledge, and the teaching day is too long, from morning hours till 16.30, which is considered exhausting.

Moreover, language was an important issue for immigrant students as they lacked proficiency in Dutch, negatively affecting their academic achievement, as well as their self-expression as they communicate with others. The fact that in the schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, there were very few Dutch students, and immigrant students befriended peers from their own groups, did not help with their language development. Teachers have confirmed this phenomenon and also noted that the language spoken by these students often was not their native language nor Dutch, but a mix of them, hindering their development in any of the languages.

Parents have raised similar issues. Their main concerns were low student motivation to study (lack of long term goals, too much distraction by pop culture); low quality of education in vocational schools, particularly in 'black schools' (neither curriculum nor the teacher challenge students); large classrooms, and students pre-occupation with other engagements (e.g. internet, friends, temporary jobs). Some parents were also concerned that teachers had lower expectations for immigrant students, negatively affecting their educational aspirations and achievement.

8.2. How did students cope with teacher (parent) demands to perform well?

As outlined in earlier sections, most of the students in Amsterdam and Rotterdam did not consider their education challenging. Therefore, they did not feel much pressure to study harder. In Rotterdam, for instance, they did not receive any homework. According to one student, studying only for 20 minutes before the exam was sufficient, even at final grade. Some interview accounts with students in fact reflect bitterness on this issue. They believed that the school was only interested in smooth grade promotion and increasing the number of graduates as these directly relates to school funding. Similar sentiments were mentioned in Arnhem as well. A teacher from Rotterdam pointed to the other side of the coin, suggesting that academic expectations are probably lowered at these schools because students themselves are not motivated.

Another argument that might explain students' frustrations with the academic level is this: When students enter CITO tests at the end of primary (when they are 12), students from non-native Dutch backgrounds are disadvantaged, since they get lower results because of their deficiencies in Dutch, not because of insufficient academic knowledge in Mathematics or some other subject. As a result, students with immigrant backgrounds are advised in disproportional higher rates to vocational schools which do not in fact match with their academic level.

Although most students we talked to did not experience much pressure, some of them received help from their parents or elder siblings with their homework, and some others took private lessons.

8.3. Supporting strategies/approaches for teaching of disadvantaged students

Teachers in all schools emphasized the importance of communicating well with students. They argued they provided individual help to students to help them with their homework and reading. Help is often lacking at home, so teachers would organise competency training, homework guidance and trainings in order to help students cope with fear of failure.

Teachers who also have mentoring roles find it highly useful to have extended talks with students. Such encounters help teachers to follow students' school progress and home situation. Mentoring hours were also used to deal with practical issues such as sick leave, or organising additional lectures. Mentors also try to help students in resolving their problems through such consultations, but in some cases they rapidly refer the cases to social workers, for instance when issues of sexual abuse are involved. Teachers feel that they are not qualified to help in such complicated cases.

A teacher mentioned a practice he observed in another school. In order to help students to reflect on their behaviours, this school arranged a specific location where students had to go if they were sent out of the class because of misbehaviour. There they discussed with a pedagogue what had just happened and afterwards were sent to a silent room to work for the rest of the hour. This was useful since they discussed the issue with someone other than the teacher with whom they had the problem. The teacher regretted that his school did not have such a practice.

Moreover, some teachers bring specific student-related issues up for discussion in the teachers' chamber and listen to the advice of their fellow teachers. If that does not work

then they go to the team leader and a solution is sought. If that also fails then the parents are involved. One school also organises meetings every two weeks to discuss main challenges and the results. The experts believe that mentors and care coordinators are the two most important figures in terms of helping disadvantaged students. Some teachers in Rotterdam organise acting, poetry and painting workshops and invite acting groups to school.

8.4. Strategies of parents to cope with schooling demands

All parents appeared to give much importance to education and they tried to support their children through different means. In Arnhem, in order to help their children to pass VMBO final exam, three parents arranged professional help for their children. Some parents paid for private homework classes, and one girl even went to Cambridge Summer School to improve her English. In addition, parents supported their children by helping them with their homework, or providing educational tools, such as a laptop, mobile phone or agenda. In some other cases in other schools, parents did not provide such active help with homework as they were tired in the evening, their children did not need or ask for help, or the parents were simply not informed about the subjects. But, they regularly supervised if the homework was done, or they pushed or warned that homework needed to be done.

Parents also indicated that they provided support to their children in making right choices for their future education by searching on the Internet and visiting open days at schools. Parents believed that they themselves were not sufficiently informed about career opportunities after lower secondary, so their help had some limitations. The parents supported their children, even though the education would be expensive, it may not offer good job opportunities and may not provide them with a good salary. According to parents, all these issues are subordinate to enjoying school. Parents show this appraisal support – supporting their children's choice under any condition- in order to motivate their children and to keep them interested in education. Some parents also noted that they tried to keep regular contact with the mentors via phone calls, emails or visits to school in order to help their children cope with educational demands and made good choices in their educational career.

8.5. Support experiences of students in and out of school

In school, peers are important in terms of support. In Amsterdam and Rotterdam schools, students tend to be friends with persons from their own ethnic background. So Turks formed

a group, as well as Moroccans and Surinamese. The Turkish students noted that they provided emotional support to each other, conversed about their daily life, and made coming to school more appealing than it would be otherwise. Some favoured teachers were also important in terms of support. Students conversed with them, and consulted them on educational issues. On the whole students mentioned that they had great respect for their mentors as they received help from them. Counsellors were instrumental when students needed to make transition choices. In Arnhem for instance, counsellors provided information on different jobs, and showed several websites from which students could gather further information (see also 7.4 & 7.5).

Outside of school, family is an important source of support, in terms of helping with the homework (if required), psychological and emotional support, and simply sharing daily schooling experiences. Elder siblings, particularly of the same sex siblings, were significant. Mothers, rather than fathers, were viewed as an important source of support by students. Among immigrant students, mothers' involvement was much more pronounced. Fathers were more enquiring if all was going well, if their children performed well, or if they encountered any problems. Another source of support for some Turkish immigrant students was participation in 'religious conversations' organised by some Islamic groups on Islamic philosophy and teachings, and on how to handle day to day problems. Religion appears to be an important element in the lives of Turkish immigrants. Some argued that participation in such religious conversations or being part of such support groups helped with the upbringing of youngsters. Those who participated in such meetings were viewed as more balanced in their lives, more grounded compared to those who did not.

8.6. Ideas and concepts for strengthening young people's coping facilities²⁵

Interview accounts point to lack of structure and discipline at school as one of the biggest concerns undermining education quality. In this regard, several students and parents suggested that teachers can take certain measures to eliminate the problem and support students' coping at school. In Arnhem and Amsterdam, students suggested that teachers should set clear boundaries and enforce them consistently. They are often considered too laid back, too permissive and demonstrating a high level of tolerance to unacceptable

²⁵ See also 5.4. and 9.6.

behaviour. They mentioned one of their teachers is very good at setting sound boundaries and maintaining them.

The importance of parental involvement was underscored by different actors, and frustrations with their infrequent school visits were mentioned (see 9.6). Some actors suggested that many parents do not come to meetings thinking that they do not have much to say anyhow. However, for students such visits even symbolically indicate that their parents care about their education. Many proposed that increased communication between parents and teachers would improve students' coping with academic demands.

8.7. Summing up

Our case schools appear to deal with a variety of challenges and problems. These seem to be more concentrated in Amsterdam and Rotterdam schools. The highlights of the chapter are as follows:

- Students encounter a multitude of problems at school, mostly relating to education quality. Their main complaints include lack of classroom management and discipline, low levels of motivation among students and teachers, and academically non-challenging programmes.
- Students often cope with their problems by resorting to significant others, such as peers, family and teachers. Mentors and counsellors are important in terms of institutional support, mentors helping with daily problems, and counsellors with choices related to educational career.
- Parents consider education important and they try to offer help by actively helping with homework, supervising their studies, and arranging private lessons. Yet, teachers often complain that help is insufficient at home.
- For strengthening young people's facilities, the importance of cooperation between school and parents, and between VMBO and MBO schools is emphasized.
- School segregation is an important topic that generates heated discussions in the Netherlands. Its relation to students' coping and support is valuable to consider.

9. Governance

9.1. Cooperation within and between educational institutions

The *teaching personnel* of our schools consent in their opinion that cooperation with intern experts is necessary to guarantee sufficient support for the students. They agree to a division of tasks with the teachers to teach their subjects and the intern experts, like pedagogical specialists, social and family workers, youth help and inspection, to take care of the needs of students which have not directly to do with the teaching-learning process but are essential prerequisites to it. This said teachers of VMBO schools realize that there is no clear-cut division between these two domains. The *mentor* is the main functionary who forms a bridge between those domains. S/he mediates between all parties engaged: student, parent, teacher and care-team.

The *intern experts* agree to this division of tasks but lay the emphasis even more than the teachers do on the importance of supporting students in their social and emotional needs and see their tasks as preventing problems by signalling them as early as possible.

By and large both parties, teaching and supporting personnel, are in general content about their mutual cooperation, but many of them, and from both sides, complain about excessive consultation and coordination meetings resulting from dense and multi-layered teaching and support structures inherent in the separate youth and educational policy structure (see national report NL WP2). Complainants are concerned about too long in-between periods for students (and families) to get the help they need and about the urgency for quick help; there may be just too many authorities involved to come to effective solutions and there is a danger of *over-bureaucratization*.

Example Rotterdam:

Permanent group at school: regular meetings of care coordinator, official for controlling absenteeism, school social worker, and student supervisor²⁶;

Further functionaries: school nurse (attends bi-weekly), youth rehabilitation (in case of absenteeism; small criminal acts), youth help who calls in psychologist or other specialists, school career coach, career coach for adjacent MBO schools who interconnects VMBO and MBO schools and helps with smoothing transitions. All these functionaries must meet, keep in touch, inform each other and, big complain because of excessive time it takes, document every step taken.

²⁶ Teacher with additional lesson-hours who forms a bridge between mentor and care coordinator.

A teacher of our Rotterdam school illustrates this with the following case of two “problem students”:

“I have contact with youth rehabilitation for two of my students, a girl and a boy. I visited the office of rehabilitation two times, had it about them with father, mother, interpreter. And the girl, Alexis she is called, she now begins to conform to what is really expected of her, after two years (! MdBRR) she begins to realize. She gets home guidance, she is accompanied to girlfriend club and sport club because she had sleeping problems and had to be made tired.”

Interviewer: “Who started this trajectory, you?”

Teacher: “No, no, the school.”

Interviewer: “You *are* the school, isn’t it?”

Teacher: “I am the school...yes simply, via official absenteeism. They noticed there are too many absentees and brought it before the court. And the court gives its judgment what must be done and then you enter a trajectory.” (RO-T:652-674).

Guaranteeing smooth transitions and combating absenteeism are the two main aims of all functionaries involved, teachers as well as other care persons and institutions. Most effective are networks of VMBO schools among each other, for example to exchange special subject areas as not every school can offer the whole range of specializations, and networks between VMBO and MBO schools to cooperate with the transitions of students when they leave VMBO and enter MBO. There is, besides regular cooperation, a host of projects to serve those aims, within and outside school.

Amsterdam municipalities offer homework-classes and sport courses, they run programs like “Boppie” and “STOP” for students with behavioural problems, “SPIRIT” which offers anti-aggression courses, “Transferium”, an institute for students a school cannot handle any longer but is not allowed to remove until another school is found to accept that student, or “Bascule”, an academic centre for psychiatric cases.

Arnhem/Elst, our most innovative school, participates actively in “Quadram”, which is a regional cluster of schools with special programs for language courses and ICT development. Teacher R. refers to a long list of partners, not only regular cooperation with primary schools and adjacent VMBO and MBO schools, but also regional knowledge centres, municipality and local economy (see next part).

“There are so extremely many groups and persons you are involved with and with whom you work closely together and on whom you are dependent – that is inherent of our school. If the motto of our school is *learning is experiencing and experiencing is learning*, and you go outside school, then you meet all these people. And we are also dependent on them, without them we cannot do it.” (AR-T-: 165-166).

With the principal of Arnhem/Elst school, an extraordinary innovative and enthusiast man, we discussed governance structures for all plans he has with his school. He summarizes his experiences:

“If you enter a process of change, I would do it another time partly more top-down, but for certain domains more from (the perspective of) the team, (issues) which concern them directly.” (AR-P-23).

9.2. Cooperation between schools and local actors

Two of our schools, Rotterdam and Arnhem/Elst have set up, or participate in, local and regional programs which are designed to give students a broader view on what the labour market looks like and will expect from them. Both these programs are concerned with the neuralgic transition link between learning at school and learning in practice. Both programs are meant to make career counselling (more) relevant.

Champs on Stage in Rotterdam: Champs is an initiative of some big enterprises in the NL. It is, we are told, a career orientation program for 3rd and 4th year VMBO, initiated by a chairman of McKinsey. Big enterprises commented on the distance of Dutch vocational school from labour market. Young workers enter their jobs often with lacking social competencies and lacking start qualification. A program was set up to support students in making adequate vocational choices by providing them with more concrete insight in the (local) labour market. This goal should be reached by offering courses to students making them actively deliberate about their choices and abilities. The program started in Rotterdam in 2007 with 60 students; in 2011, 14 schools in three cities and 1.200 students are involved. Our external expert explains:

“What we notice in disadvantaged areas like in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Den Haag where we run the program that is that a lot of students do not know what will be expected from them when they go to work – if they go to work at all. (...) A certificate is not enough (...) there is one way or the other, I don’t know why, a big gap between school and labour market (...) first see what the student *really* wants and before they know that it is a good thing that they know about their abilities and what else they want to learn and later work (...) (during that preparatory phase) we conduct some workshops: who am I, what am I able to do, what do I want – and then look where you can find what you would like to do.” (RO-EE- 34-36; 68-70).

After that introduction, excursions to local enterprises, institutions and shop centres are planned the students would like to see and experience. Preferably the students organize the excursions themselves. If they are too shy or don’t dare, they are accompanied by the expert,

preferably together with somebody from school. And then comes a two week practice period where the students can gain work experience and find out if the place and specialty fits their ideas (or not and why not) and try something else. Such concrete experiences prevent wrong vocational choices and negative work attitudes, is the idea behind the program.

Our extern expert is not unambiguously positive about the cooperation with the school: the organization there is chaotic; some parts of the program do not take part which puts her in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis her funders.

Learning Region Arnhem and Learning Village Elst: Our school in Arnhem/Elst participates in cooperation between schools as well as local enterprises. A foundation of members of local enterprises and school professionals was established which organizes open days for students to get acquainted with local enterprises and workshops. Main goal is to build up a firm network of interested local enterprises that are willing to permanently engage in the initiative and keep close contact with the responsible educational functionaries in order to guarantee enough internship places in a variety as broad as possible of enterprises and trade organizations for the students.

Learning Village Elst started about 7 years ago as a cooperation between a couple of VMBO and MBO schools in order to renew the educational program so as to provide students with more labour market-relevant knowledge and experience (“career-learning”). The initiators regarded it also fruitful to pull the parents closer into the process because they are the first their children turn to when discussing their further vocational careers.

One of the main initiators, Ton Eimers, tells us:

“There were ideas how to transform the organization of (vocational) education into an organization which would be able to offer education in a more flexible way, in tailored arrangements with the idea behind that it should not so much be the school to determine what a student should do during in-service learning but rather the enterprise and that the school curriculum should take that as starting point.” (AR-EE: 21-22; 24-28).

Both initiatives are parallel in their effort to ease the transitions of VMBO students by providing work-relevant information and experience thereby also stimulating learning motivation in general.

During the last years, educational climate (and policy) changed from emphasis on competencies (back) to subject knowledge (literacy, math, English). But career counselling including (more) labour market experience has become a permanent and important part in the VMBO curriculum.

9.3. The role of teacher training in the work of VMBO teachers²⁷

Statements about their former education at teacher colleges point in the direction of:

- transmission of subject knowledge at the teacher colleges was (mostly) sufficient or even better;
- no adequate preparation though for working with VMBO students; in your daily work in class you need not so much theoretical knowledge but “handles” to work with this “type” of students and eventually you can only learn that in and through praxis. As a teacher in Rotterdam puts it:

“In my opinion not sufficient. And I think that we were all trained to teach a certain type of student (but) that our student population has changed so much that we are not experts any longer for the students we get... I mean, we have here children with behavioural problems... what does that child have? Aggression-control of such thing. All of a sudden she begins to rage, infuriated, or tears bunch of hair from the head of another girl – that sort of thing. I don’t know how to approach that in a scientific manner, let’s say. (...) Pedagogy did not help so much in practice.” (RO-T: 185-186; 194-201).

9.4. The role of school boards and other (pressure) groups on autonomy of schools 28

The individual school is increasingly dependent on the policy of the school board to which it belongs, and the bigger the number of schools under a board, the more general the policy lines. These lines regard mainly financial issues (“we began as amateur board; now it is a million-organization” – AR-T: 95-105). There is a tension in school policy: autonomy of the school means being autonomous from direct state intervention, but being dependent on the policy of powerful school boards that are on their part players in national educational policies through their associations.

9.5. Student participation

Students do not make use of student councils to represent their interests in the school organization, often they don’t even know that such institutions exist. They do not feel that they have any substantial influence on school issues which are relevant for them, like time tables, length of a lesson (50 or 70 min., big issue in Arnhem/Elst school), get more

²⁷ See also WP3 NL-report

²⁸ We have not much material gathered about school boards. Generalizations in this par. are based on general discussions and media coverage.

excursions or skipping a teacher they regard unfair or incompetent, have a better canteen, let alone get a more modern school building. In a focus group discussion:

“We asked ourselves sometimes why we cannot change a teacher if we all agree that we want another teacher of a certain subject.” (AR-FGS: 433-434).

Students feel frustrated about their non-existent influence but have resigned. Teachers do not seem to worry because they have the (right) feeling that students can approach them individually if they have problems.

9.6. Relationship between home and school; parent participation

All teachers (and principals and intern experts) are deeply convinced of absolute necessity of close cooperation between school and home. Teachers as well as parents discern two groups: active and passive parents, and they agree that the first group is (very) small and the latter (very) large.

Teachers complain and regret that parents are inclined to leave much socializing education to the school while they as teachers cannot exercise their profession properly if there is no regular and wanted contact from the side of the parents and parental control on the behaviour of their child. If they feel they must take over too many tasks which belong to family education, for the student being on time, being polite, making homework, not missing appointments with in-service places etc., they get frustrated; after all their main task is teaching, not compensating for lacking home education.

Parents from their side often feel that the school is the first responsible to react to (bad) behaviour of the student, not they, or they feel they do their education job as best as they can. The more active the parents, the less tension there is between them and the teachers in educational questions and responsibilities.

Teachers do not go to visit the homes of the parents to intensify (or initiate) contact and most would not want to do so, even if there was time for it (which it is not). They feel that home visits are the responsibility of social school workers and other experts (and only in case of problems), not theirs. There are some teachers though who ardently plea for home visits, among them school principals.

The principal of our Arnhem/Elst school is particularly convinced about the fruitfulness of closer contact with the parents and is busy to organize parental participation in the context of the cooperative network between schools and local enterprises: why not

include parents as experts in preparing students for the labour market, for example send students to work places of parents? – These initiatives are still in the phase of preparation.

The contact between home and school, teachers and parents largely takes place, not face-to-face but via cell phone (many teachers are ready to always being called, even in their spare time and in the evening), email and letters from school or information on school-websites. The only regular contact *all* parents have to attend is the half year school report of the student which is delivered only directly to them during a 10 min. contact.

Migrant parents might have language and literacy problems in the communication.

“I deeply regret that only few parents are engaged in their child here op school. You must move heaven and earth to get them come to school. But then, I can understand why. If we have an information evening and you don’t understand 70 per cent of is told there – why come? We have asked ourselves to translate what we have to say in a couple of languages. But where should you start and end? At our school we have some 30 different nationalities. How do you do that? Take the biggest group, the smallest?” (RO-IE: 11-14).

Like with the students, parents hardly use *formal bodies of participation* and like the students they do not feel that they can influence school decisions.

“And if you want to discuss something, then... all kinds of excuses... No, I do not think that is alright. But it is as it is.” (AR-P: 28).

We got the impression that neither they nor the school believe much in the viability of this body. If parents have problems they want to discuss with the teacher, they will directly contact them and the teachers will do everything to lower the threshold as far as they possibly can to invite a parent to speak to them.

Parents are well aware that the responsibility for the school career of their child lies largely with them and the engagement of their child to perform well, certainly if the child is old enough to take own responsibility. If parents feel something goes wrong in this respect they would contact the school. Otherwise: no message is a good message.

9.7. Summing up

Biggest difference between our 3 schools with respect to cooperation with local actors (9.2)lies in the special programs between school and local enterprises which Arnhem/Elst and Rotterdam school have and Amsterdam school not.

- By and large the *cooperation* between school- and care team people functions well.

- There is the problem though of *overbureaucratization*: too many persons and institutions work on problem solving and may not succeed because help trajectories take too long and cost too much time and are therefore inefficient.
- There is a host of intern and extern *projects* to combat absenteeism and guaranteeing smooth trajectories.
- Projects in which *school and local enterprises* cooperate to make learning more labour market-relevant are a promising governance strategy in easing transitions.
- *Teacher training* did not prepare present teachers adequately for their job in VMBO schools.
- *Neither students nor parents* have the feeling that they can exert *influence* on *school issues* through formal bodies.
- Teachers complain about *lacking parent participation*; interaction with parents is almost exclusively by way of media, not face-to-face. But teachers are always open to talk to parents if they apply for it.
- *Parents* on their side feel that teachers want the best for their child but feel at the same time that they have no influence on school affairs.
- *Migrant parents* often suffer from distance from school.

10. Emerging Issues

10.1. Life course and education

It could be argued that VMBO schools with dedicated teaching and supporting personnel ease the transition of students to further education and thus enhance their life chances. This all the more so as Dutch school politics is extremely strict in preventing and combating absenteeism. And indeed most students of lower vocational education make the first transition step to general (HAVO) or secondary vocational schools (MBO) with little problems. Problems come later, i.e. when it shows that the choice may not have been a good one because of a restricted range of vocational sectors of former VMBO school which limits their choice for an MBO sector which they would have liked and which might be more relevant for the labour market.

This has large implications for both, students as well as educational levels. As we learned from ex-students' interviews, they told about too little insight in the *range of possible vocations* they could have chosen for their MBO education. The VMBO schools on

the other hand want to get their students as safely as possible into MBO – and that means prepare them to continue in the vocation sector they had attended in VMBO.

For a *knowledge society* it is not the best strategy to restrict vocational choices only for safety reasons. But to change that state of affairs VMBO and MBO would have to work much more in an integrated manner whereas now they are almost totally separated educations. The *formally* granted right of the student to enter any MBO sector they want, can often in reality not be taken. Also MBO schools restrict entry choices by demanding a certain average of points per subject. MBO schools have 4 levels, from low to high. This is another restriction to free educational choice: they decide at which level they accept a VMBO student, even if the students themselves think they are able to enter a higher level. It seems that it is very difficult for a student to reverse entry level decisions.

As concerns transitions from VMBO to secondary general education (HAVO), critical notes must be made on similar grounds: VMBO students who want to enter HAVO often have difficulties in doing so, certainly if they want to transfer from vocational tracks into general tracks. HAVO schools will only accept students with high achievement credits. These issues of restricted choices impact on the life chances of students, and certainly of those with migrant backgrounds.

10.2. Access to education and coping with educational demands

Having completed primary school, Dutch students are rigidly tracked into general or vocational education although the original idea of VMBO was to keep choices for either general or vocational education open. In reality post primary school students with high credentials enter directly HAVO/VWO schools and the rest goes to VMBO schools. Access to education in such a system is therefore from the beginning limited with far reaching further limitations, as told in the above section 10.1.

Within VMBO there is very much support from all education professionals to help students achieve as best as they can and solve possible problems in close cooperation with all relevant actors. There is even so much support that one might talk of a “pamper culture”. When the students enter further education they are suddenly and often unexpectedly confronted with an opposite culture: now you have to do it alone, we expect a high degree of self-sufficiency from you, they are told.

Thus while support in VMBO is based on a *discourse of dependency*, support in further education is based on a *discourse of individualism*.²⁹ Being “pampered” does not mean necessarily though good teaching and authoritative classroom management.

For *migrant students* and their parents transition and access to further education is especially challenging as there is an *educational ideology of quasi positive discrimination*, quasi meaning: these students have much disadvantages, we (teachers) must therefore not ask too much of them. That attitude might result in an underestimation of the learning potentials of migrant students; we learnt about that prejudice also from (ex-) students’ interviews.

These issues have to be taken perhaps more critically into account than the schools themselves do when it comes to *career counselling*. Schools are proud about their efforts to help students choose an appropriate further education and prevent early school leaving, and in a way they may be proud indeed. But in the long run we think that career counselling must become an integrated part of the curriculum of VMBO as well as MAVO/HAVO.

Also we think it of the greatest possible urgency that schools learn to work closer together with the parents. It is impressive how much effort teachers make to contact parents – but it does not work in the way it should to optimize school life, career counselling and transitions. Face-to-face communication, including regular visits of teachers (not only social workers) in the homes of their students, would be necessary to instil in the parents a belief that they really count in the educational process. At present, schools are organized and, most important, financed in such a way that such demands make no chance. Yet we are convinced that a more substantial contribution of parents to school affairs would solve many problems which are now delegated to other professionals and institutions.

10.3. Relevance of education

Asking our different reference groups – teaching personnel, students, and parents – about the relevance of education is largely asking for known answers. Of course education is important these days! The question is then: how much education is necessary for living in contemporary knowledge society? Here one might discern two main streams, cross-running through all reference groups and which we might call “the moderates” and “the ambitious”.

The *moderates* maintain that not the highest possible education is the most important thing but a decent one. Teachers belonging to that group would argue that most of their

²⁹ We are indebted to Slovenian team for their notion of discourse of individualism in Slovenian (comprehensive!) schools.

VMBO (migrant) students should choose their transition to further education with deliberation but need not reach to the top. Why, becoming a good craftsman is no bad perspective or making step-by-step and with caution your way up the educational ladder might be better than aim at once too high. There are also moderately ambitious parents and students: main thing is getting a basic certificate; after that one will see further.

At some distance the *ambitious*, fewer in number. Teachers belonging to that faction would push their students to go for their professional dreams by all means; reach as high as you can, keep on trying! So also the parents and students with the noticeable examples of highly ambitious Turkish families where mothers stimulate their daughters, and their daughters who do not think with one hair on their head of following the traditional cultural paths flattened for females.

It seems that selective educational systems like the Dutch are not able, despite (or even because of?) all lately introduced support structures, special projects etc. to exploit existing talents of students to the full. That has to do with inherent properties of such systems: early tracking veils potential talent and rigid tracking inhibits smooth transitions to other/higher (general) tracks (see above). Also selective systems seem double disadvantageous for those groups of migrant students whose families close themselves from their Dutch surroundings, language acquisition in the first place.

10.4. Governance

It is impressive to realize to what large extent Dutch lower vocational education is not only an affair between teaching personnel and students, but is dependent on a large number of additional experts, inside and outside the school who support the teaching-learning process. One gets the impression that presently teachers would not be able any longer to work without such a support structure. An often voiced argument of teachers is that in as much as parents do not educate and socialize their children as they did in former times, the school must take over those tasks and need help to do so.

The student population has become so diverse in terms of migration background, language variety, behavioural, social and psychological problems that experts are needed for diagnosis and therapy plans. Recent government policy to integrate special education into regular (vocational) schools adds to the problems. In that way a once homogeneous student population is ever more divided into clinical and other categories, a development which runs counter to a commonly felt desire of “class spirit” of students and their teachers.

We got the impression that the attitude of principals, teachers, students and parents towards pedagogical and other supporting functionaries is rather positive; but not without critical notes on the side of teachers. Although none of them would allege that they could do without such professional support, they may feel caught in a circuit of specialists with all their own expertise and organizational loyalties. Clear delimitation of tasks and responsibilities is all the more necessary – but is often not effectively achieved; too many hands in the soup.

Not only, but also, teachers suffer under constant time shortage because of the extensive and time consuming coordination meetings and having to spend valuable teaching time on writing reports and documenting the taken steps in complicated procedures. This development leads to the question if the *teacher has lost his traditional central place in (VMBO) school* in favour of having become one of many functionaries who steer and manage the learning process of students.

Changing teacher role has implications for *teacher training*. It seems that teacher training institutes are still ajar from the daily school life and are therefore not yet mentally equipped to tailor their curricula in such a way that teacher students are well prepared for their future tasks in (VMBO) schools. This certainly holds for VMBO schools in big cities with multi-coloured and multi-cultured populations.

For schools of lower vocational education, the cooperation between school and in-service places in local enterprises, shops and other learning places is of vital interest. Experiments to build more permanent cooperation structures are successful in as much as they provide a better integration of the theoretical and practical curriculum. Therefore the quoted Dutch experiments of Arnhem/Elst and Rotterdam school are more than worthwhile introducing nationwide, and particularly with the intention of bringing VMBO and MBO closer together.

For school governance our finding is of worrisome interest that neither parents nor students seem to have the feeling that their collective voice has any chance of influencing school affairs. Formally speaking they have such a voice in *representative student- and parent bodies*. Such bodies exist, but are not used. Instead parents as well as students resort to individual strategies to get what they want: approach mentor or dean or other intern or extern personnel who would listen to their sorrows or problems. For the individual in question this strategy is effective (partly not for migrant parents with deficits in Dutch language proficiency and ignorance of the Dutch school system though) but for embedding

the school in their physical and social surroundings it is not. Governance structures in school must become an integral part of governance structures around and outside school.

11. Conclusion

The mind map³⁰ is meant to sensitize us for the complexity of educational transitions. You can discuss them from various angles, the individual as well as school and society. In these different perspectives our Big 5 play a different role. At *context* level we found the Dutch selective school system together with family background of tremendous influence for the educational opportunities of students while national and local labour markets as separate forces do not play as big a role as in other countries because in vocational education contact with the work sphere is integrated in the curriculum. The most promising developments at context level are the two reported experiments which create a better fit between the theoretical and the practical curriculum and a smoother transition from lower to secondary vocational education and the labour market. Both these experiments are so successful that it is very likely that they will be inserted one way or the other in the regular vocational trajectories as both ease **access** and **coping** and help bring down early school leaving, the latter being one of the most prominent discourses governing educational policy and politics at the moment in this country; more so than the (earlier) discourses on the integration of migrant students which has been put off the political agenda of the sitting right-liberal government (**governance**).

Context variables influence interpersonal relationships and support structures and therefore the life of the individual student. As concerns *direct influences*, again parents have to be mentioned as one of the most influential supporters – also in negative way if such resources are limited or contra-productive; we found language deficiencies of students mentioned mostly by teachers. Peers seem of less direct influence concerning educational trajectories; students regard their achievements not as part of a class or group work but as an individual performance (or failing). In our 3 case study schools we did not find much of collective learning and class spirit. Within lower vocational schools there are well established support structures (care teams; career coaches) to help students with their transitions, although these structures suffer from over-bureaucratization and insufficiently clear task definition (**coping**).

³⁰ See p. 10/11 of Draft National Report Outline

Access from lower vocational to secondary general education, although formally granted (and for better exploitation of human capital politically wanted, also with eye to EC policy lines – **governance**) is severely restricted through a “withhold policy” of general education schools who are afraid of low achievers (**relevance**).

Actions and decision making are the other side of direct influences. The way of teaching and supporting as well as general educational policy influence the action space and the agency of students (and teachers). To give some examples: if it is governmental policy to force integration of special education into regular schools without adequate physical and financial facilities, that means more behavioural problems in the classroom and less chances for productive learning and teaching. Students as well as teachers voiced their frustration with this course of affairs in the interviews. Or, to take another example: if there exist “black schools” with disproportionally numbers of students with all kinds of cultural migrant backgrounds, that is counter to social integration and therefore may restrict the life opportunities of minority students. We found that all students (and their parents) are imbued with the relevance of learning for their further life but at the same time it is doubtful that they will be able to use all their talents to the full in the present school system (**access, coping, relevance, governance, life course**).

If we now look at the level of the *individual biography*, we find all above mentioned influences flow together and contribute to the educational biography of a person and, more specifically, to *transition outcomes*. In highly selective educational systems, like the Dutch one, there is less flexibility for the individual to change tracks. That is not only an institutional restriction but consecutively also a mental one for the students and their parents. We found that most students and parents got the feeling (and acted accordingly) that they cannot influence the decisions of the school. If the student is categorized as a low achiever, s/he is helped with all available resources, the members of the care teams are sincerely engaged with their clientele, and we hardly heard of any form of discrimination. But particularly from the ex-student interviews, also parents, we got the impression that some opportunities have been missed. We do want to emphasize the importance of the strategy of building an educational career step-by-step (“stapelen”) – a policy which was abolished but stands to be re-introduced. The second qualifying comment concerns growing percentages of students who follow general educational tracks – a development which does not show in our research but is confirmed by statistics as mentioned in Chapter 2.

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