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The transition to post-secondary vocational education: students' entrance, experiences, and attainment

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Chapter 1

One Foot Out the School Door?

Interpreting the Risk for Dropout upon the Transition to Post-Secondary Vocational Education*

ABSTRACT

Many students drop out in the first year after a school transition. Most commonly used indicators of an increased risk for dropout reveal little of the mechanisms that push or pull students out of school. In this study, we look at the association of a set of common risk indicators with students' supportive resources and school experiences upon the transition to post-secondary vocational education in the Netherlands. Multilevel regression analyses on a diverse sample of 1438 students indicate that most sociodemographic risk indicators relate to less access to supportive resources for school, whereas personal circumstances outside school that are associated with an increased risk for dropout correlate with negative school experiences. Students from lower educated or poor families and students who use drugs, have debts, or are delinquent score negative in both domains, suggesting that those students make the transition with one foot out the school door.

* This chapter is based on:

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INTRODUCTION

School transitions are stressful events that impose difficulty on the school careers of many students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Roderick, 1993). Typically, achievement levels drop and dropout rates increase in the first year after a school transition (Dutch Education Inspectorate, 2002; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Tinto, 1993). In the Netherlands, dropout rates peak after the transition to senior vocational education, or SVE (CBS Statistics Netherlands, 2010). SVE is the senior continuation of the lowest track in Dutch secondary education, and provides specialized vocational programs for students of 16 years and older. Approximately 75% of school dropout in the Netherlands takes place in SVE (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2010). Like in many Western school systems, dropout rates in SVE are stratified according to sociodemographic characteristics. For instance, students from lower socioeconomic or ethnic minority backgrounds drop out more often (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2009). While sociodemographic characteristics are often used as indicators of a student's risk for dropout, they are not the proximal causes of dropout (Alexander et al., 2001), nor do they inform us about the processes underlying the sociodemographic patterns in dropout statistics (Stevens, Clycq, Timmerman, & Van Houtte, 2009). Next to sociodemographic characteristics, difficult personal circumstances in students' lives outside school, such as drug abuse, pregnancy or delinquency, are often classified as risk indicators in dropout statistics (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2009; Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2008). However, both the personal circumstances in students' lives that increase the risk for dropout and the actual decision to drop out may be caused by the same underlying forces (Rumberger, 1987).

To enhance successful school transitions and careers for all students, we need to understand the forces that place certain groups of students at risk for dropout. Earlier research points to social and academic constraints to a successful school transition for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. First, students who grow up in more challenging social or economic circumstances may encounter greater difficulty when making a school transition due to the fewer supportive resources they have access to (Roderick, 1993; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Second, students from such backgrounds appear to be more likely to transfer to a new school with a record of declining school engagement and performance (Marks, 2000; OECD, 2006; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Voelkl, 1995). In such cases, students may enter their new school with one foot out the school door, prone to further disengagement from school (Finn, 1993). In this study, the association of a set of common risk indicators with students' supportive resources and school experiences is tested at the moment of the transition to SVE. We examine whether at-risk students, defined as students who are overrepresented in dropout statistics

according to (1) their sociodemographic characteristics, and (2) their personal circumstances outside school, differ from non-at-risk students with respect to (1) the encouragement and support for school that they encounter in their personal environment, and (2) their school experiences prior to making the transition to SVE. Students who transfer to SVE have spent at least 12 years in school, and SVE serves a diverse student population with a substantial proportion of students from lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority backgrounds. Hence, the transition to SVE is not only a very relevant context to study social and academic constraints to successful transitions, it also provides an excellent opportunity to do so.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Many dropout studies and policy reports distinguish students who are at risk for dropout from students who are not. The label 'at-risk' is usually based on various, separately defined, sociodemographic indicators. While such indicators enable us to successfully identify students with an increased risk for dropout, they are merely a diagnostic tool, as they reveal little of the underlying mechanisms that push or pull students out of school (Alexander et al., 2001; Rumberger, 1987). Another set of commonly used risk indicators pertains to personal circumstances in students' lives that can disturb their school careers. It is likely that, instead of a causal relationship, in many cases both such personal circumstances and the decision to drop out of school are symptoms of the same underlying cause (Rumberger, 1987). To interpret the risk for dropout, we need to explore the interrelatedness of factors associated with an increased risk for dropout. Several scholars have underlined the importance of taking into account multiple sources of influence, such as the family, school, community, and peers, to better explain the dropout process (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). In this study, we examine the association of various common risk indicators with some potential constraints to a successful transition that are embedded in those multiple sources of influence. First, we review the literature on school dropout that was used to define the set of risk indicators included in this study. Next, we outline previous findings about the role of supportive resources and school experiences in school transitions and dropout.

Sociodemographic indicators of the risk for dropout

Sociodemographic background characteristics are the most commonly used indicators of the risk for dropout. Not without reason, as clear differences exist between sociodemographic groups with respect to the likelihood of dropping out. Especially a low socioeconomic status (SES) is considered a key indicator of the

risk for dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1987, 1995; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989). A student's SES is usually represented by a composite measure of parental level of education, parental employment, and family financial resources (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Parental level of education seems to assert the most prominent and consistent influence on academic success (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Luyten, Bosker, Dekkers, & Derks, 2003). However, it remains difficult to detect which aspect of a student's socioeconomic background is the main determinant of the risk for dropout, as in many cases socioeconomic characteristics, such as lower educated parents and low financial resources at home, are clustered within the same families (Alexander et al., 2001; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). This difficulty is the reason for conflicting findings on the effect of students' ethnic background on the risk for dropout as well (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Stevens et al., 2009). Ethnic minority students drop out at higher rates than native students (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2009, 2010; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage et al., 1989), but various studies indicate that the differentiating effect of students' ethnic background disappears mostly or entirely when controlling for SES (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Luyten et al., 2003; Rumberger, 1995). A similar issue emerges when examining the effect of growing up in a single parent home. Dropouts come from broken families more often than graduates (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2010), but those families tend to have less financial resources, which may account for the effect (Wehlage et al., 1989). Other sociodemographic variables that have been found to affect a student's risk for dropout are age and gender. Older students and male students have an increased risk for dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2009, 2010; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Personal circumstances indicating a risk for dropout

Next to their sociodemographic characteristics, students carry with them individual characteristics relating to the circumstances in their private lives outside school that may affect their risk for dropout. While such circumstances are not necessarily associated with social class or family background (Wehlage et al., 1989), those circumstances that have been found to affect the risk for dropout seem to occur more often among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. Lee & Staff, 2007; Singh, Darroch, & Frost, 2001). Pregnancy and parenthood increase the likelihood of dropping out, especially among girls (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage et al., 1989). Drugs abuse, marijuana use in particular, is positively associated with school dropout (Roebuck, French, & Dennis, 2004; ter Bogt, van Lieshout, Doornwaard, & Eijkemans, 2009). The use of drugs is often embedded in a social context of general deviance, and regularly co-occurs with increased contact

with the justice system (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; ter Bogt et al., 2009; Weerman & van der Laan, 2006). Juvenile delinquency is strongly related to school dropout, especially when severe offences or official justice interventions are involved (Hirschfield, 2009; Weerman & van der Laan, 2006). In general, dropouts work more hours next to school than graduates (Ekstrom et al., 1986), and working more than 20 hours a week seems particularly detrimental to students' school career (Lee & Staff, 2007). Students who work many hours tend to come from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Lee & Staff, 2007), which likely involves a financial necessity to work more hours next to school. High debts increase the risk for dropout, as they can push students to leave school and find a job to pay off their debts (Verhagen, van Heijst, Jurrius, Calkoen, & Koot, 2010).

Encouragement and support for school: students' school-related social capital

Various studies suggest that the effects of sociodemographic characteristics on the propensity to drop out trace back to differences in the amount of parental involvement, monitoring and support for their children's school careers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Alexander et al., 2001; Audas & Willms, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Roderick, 1993). Dropouts have been found to score significantly lower on parental emotional support for education (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006), and they appear to discuss their school experiences less with their parents than graduates (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Students' academic achievement is stimulated if parents express high expectations of their children (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). It is crucial that parents also transform those expectations into actual emotional and practical support (Garas-York, 2010), by talking with their children about their educational experiences, choices, and strategies, and by monitoring their child's progress (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Babeliowsky, Derriks, & Voncken, 1990; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Finn, 1993; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006; Mandara, Varner, Greene, & Richman, 2009; Nettles, Caughy, & O'Campo, 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). We can conceptualize the resources that support students in their school careers as a school-related dimension of social capital, given that students acquire those supportive resources through their social relationships with others (Bourdieu, 1986; Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998; Stevens, Lupton, Mujtaba, & Feinstein, 2007). While a school-oriented home environment is crucial for every student (Mandara et al., 2009; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulus, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990), for many working-class and minority youth the supportive ties that are particularly useful for their school career are mainly found outside the family (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stevens et al., 2009). Students thus build their school-related social capital with ties from the various networks that they participate in. For

instance, Dutch students with a Moroccan or Turkish background report receiving support from their parents in the form of guidance and stimulation, while seeking additional, more practical, forms of support from other family members, peers and teachers, who are more familiar with the educational system (Crul, 2000; Stevens et al., 2009). The employment of different social ties for different goals highlights the notion that students' school-related social capital should not be defined in terms of the mere presence of social ties, but rather in terms of the actual resources that students identify and utilize in their networks (Crul, 2000; Portes, 1998; Stevens et al., 2007). Whereas some social ties contribute substantially to students' school careers, other ties may be less helpful or even detrimental (Portes, 1998). The latter may apply in particular to students with peers engaging in deviant behavior. Students who are the only one in their peer group attending school have difficulty to stay motivated in school (Crul, 2000). Dropouts have been found to have more friends who dropped out themselves or who work instead of going to school (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997), and to have more friends who do not value school (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996).

School experiences

Students transiting to post-secondary education have attended school for many years prior to the transition. Previous school experiences affect students' success after the transition, directly and indirectly, through shaping their attitudes, behavior, and performance in the new institutional environment (Eccles, 1983; Finn, 1993; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Tinto, 1993). School experiences are significant precursors of dropout (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Rumberger, 1995; Tinto, 1993). Especially students' academic engagement, which refers to their behavior and performance in school, is a powerful proximal predictor of school success (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000; Jimerson et al., 2000; Wehlage et al., 1989). Emotional engagement, or a sense of belonging in school, is crucial as well, and is often lacking among dropouts (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Finn, 1989; Hymel et al., 1996). School engagement results from students' interaction with the various social and academic dimensions of the school environment: their teachers; classmates; the institutional climate; and the curriculum (Tinto, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1989). A good relationship with teachers has been found to be particularly important for some at-risk students to feel engaged (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010). Other studies report that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience a weaker sense of belonging in school in general (Marks, 2000; Voelkl, 1995). When past experiences in school have been negative, students may start off in their new school "predisposed to non-participation" (Finn, 1993, p.16). If students have already partially withdrawn, emotionally or physically, from school life, this hinders their engagement and progress after a transition (Alexander et al., 2001;

Finn, 1993; Rumberger, 1995). Dropout, then, is the end point of a process of progressive disengagement that has its roots in earlier school years (Alexander et al., 2001; Jimerson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 1995).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Above, we have outlined which dropout risk indicators have been identified in the literature, and why students' school-related social capital and school experiences could help to explain the risk for dropout they impose. In this study, we assess the relationships between a set of common risk indicators and students' school-related social capital and school experiences. The research question guiding the analysis is: do sociodemographic background characteristics and personal circumstances that are associated with an increased risk for dropout relate to the school-related social capital and school experiences of students upon their transition to post-secondary vocational education?

METHODS

Variables

The sociodemographic background characteristics included in this study are: year of birth; gender; ethnic identity; household composition; job status parents; highest education parents and financial problems in the family. Measures of personal circumstances comprised: having a child or (partner) being pregnant; personal debts; drug abuse; having been arrested by the police and number of working hours in an extra job outside school. As outcome variables, we took into account three measures of students' school-related social capital and four measures of students' school experiences. Students' school-related social capital was measured with three scales: the encouragement and support that students receive for their educational career from their parents (e.g. *I can talk to my parents/guardians about school matters*, 5 items, $\alpha=.67$), from their peers (e.g. *My friends and I talk about school matters*, 4 items, $\alpha=.68$), and from their community in general (e.g. *Outside school, there are enough people with whom I can discuss school matters*, 2 items, $\alpha=.73$). Students' school experiences prior to transition were measured on four scales: *emotional engagement* (e.g. *I felt at home at my previous school*, 3 items, $\alpha=.88$), *academic engagement* (e.g. *I worked hard at my previous school*, 6 items, $\alpha=.77$), *contact with classmates* (e.g. *I had many friends at my previous school*, 5 items, $\alpha=.81$), and *contact with teachers* (e.g. *I had good contacts with my teachers at my previous school*, 6 items, $\alpha=.87$). All measures are based on students' self-report.

Data collection

To suit the specific context of the transition to SVE, a new self-report questionnaire was developed for the study. The psychometric qualities of the scales regarding students' social capital and school experiences were examined through reliability analyses and principal component analyses. All scale variables were measured with statements: students indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to what extent they agreed with the statement. Questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the academic year 2008/9, in the first week at school. Students completed the questionnaire in the classroom under supervision of their teacher. All teachers received an instructional handout. Additional information about the purpose of the study was included in a short introductory statement on the questionnaire. Students filled in the questionnaire anonymously. A privacy statement on the questionnaire assured respondents that no identifiable personal data would be reported.

Sample

The study was conducted with a sample of 1438 first year students entering SVE in the Netherlands. To ensure sociodemographic diversity of the sample, out of the 40 SVE school boards in the Netherlands, 10 urban school boards were invited to participation in the study, of which 5 agreed to participate. Within each school board, first year classes were selected from all vocational sectors and levels. Classes were selected for participation during the summer break, before individual students were assigned to classes. A total of 61 classes participated in the study, with an average class size of 24 students. Questionnaires were completed under supervision of a teacher. While participation in the study was voluntary for all students, we received no reports of students not willing to participate in the study. The descriptives of the sample in table 1 below correspond to available statistics of vocational education and urban schools in the Netherlands (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2010; Dutch Ministry of Health Welfare and Sport, 2010; Knowledge Centre for Vocational Training and Labour Market, 2010; Kuhry, 1998; Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2008).

Analysis

The data were screened for meeting the assumptions of regression analyses. Few missing values were encountered in the data set, and missing values were considered missing at random. Therefore, the expectation maximization algorithm was used to impute missing values (SPSS Inc., 2010). The intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) indicated that part of the variance could be attributed to between-class differences, with ICC's ranging from .03 to .07 (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). To correct individual level variance for group level variance, we carried out multilevel regression analyses, with class and student included as two levels. We regressed

Table 1:
descriptives of a sample of 1438 students entering senior vocational education

Characteristics	%
Age	
16-17 years	58
18-19 years	30
Older than 19 years	12
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 8</i>	
Gender	
Female	53
Male	47
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 4</i>	
Ethnic identity	
Native Dutch background	51
Moroccan background	15
Turkish background	12
Surinamese background	9
Antillean background	3
Other ethnic background	10
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 4</i>	
Household	
Living with both parents	64
Living with one parent	25
Living on one's own	4
Living with other relatives / friends	7
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 1</i>	
Job status parents	
Both parents have a job	49
One parent has a job	22
Both parents have no job	14
Student doesn't know	15
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 26</i>	
Highest education parents	
Primary education or similar	9
Secondary education or similar	12
SVE or similar	20
Higher education or similar	19
Student doesn't know	40
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 32</i>	
Financial problems in family	18
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 9</i>	
Personal debts student	9
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 37</i>	
Student (or partner) is pregnant / has child(ren)	3
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 22</i>	
Student has been arrested by the police	17
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 20</i>	
Student uses (soft-)drugs	10
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 37</i>	
Extra job student	
no extra job	42
< 8 hours a week	17
8 – 15 hours a week	33
> 15 hours a week	8
<i>Number of missing cases before imputation: 26</i>	

Table 2: school-related social capital and school experiences of students upon the transition to senior vocational education

	<u>School-related social capital</u>			<u>School experiences</u>			
	Support parents	Support peers	Support community	Emotional engagement	Academic engagement	Contact classmates	Contact teachers
	p ^a / β (se) ^b	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)
SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS							
Year of birth	.09 (.03)**	.02 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.12 (.03)***	.04 (.03)	.06 (.03)	.03 (.03)
Male (vs. female)	-.12 (.05)*	-.41 (.06)***	-.23 (.06)***	-.11 (.06)	-.08 (.06)	.21 (.06)***	-.10 (.06)
Ethnic identity (vs. native Dutch)	<i>p=.017</i>	<i>p=.001</i>	<i>p=.015</i>	<i>p=.030</i>	<i>p=.002</i>	<i>p=.000</i>	<i>p=.159</i>
<i>Moroccan background</i>	-.10 (.09)	.26 (.09)**	.14 (.09)	.27 (.09)**	.32 (.09)***	.47 (.09)***	.25 (.09)**
<i>Turkish background</i>	-.04 (.09)	.39 (.09)***	.16 (.09)	.18 (.09)	.03 (.09)	.56 (.09)***	.12 (.09)
<i>Surinamese background</i>	-.02 (.10)	.11 (.10)	-.06 (.10)	.00 (.10)	.29 (.10)**	.45 (.10)***	.05 (.10)
<i>Antillean background</i>	-.33 (.15)*	.00 (.16)	-.31 (.16)	-.13 (.16)	.25 (.16)	.10 (.16)	-.05 (.16)
<i>Other ethnic background</i>	-.28 (.09)**	.17 (.09)	-.16 (.09)	-.04 (.09)	.11 (.09)	.26 (.09)**	.10 (.09)
Household (vs. living with two parents)	<i>p=.000</i>	<i>p=.776</i>	<i>p=.828</i>	<i>p=.124</i>	<i>p=.259</i>	<i>p=.239</i>	<i>p=.166</i>
<i>Living on one's own</i>	-.65 (.15)***	-.11 (.15)	-.04 (.16)	.31 (.16)*	.27 (.15)	.15 (.16)	.24 (.16)
<i>Living with one parent</i>	-.04 (.07)	.04 (.07)	.05 (.07)	.01 (.07)	.00 (.07)	-.04 (.07)	.02 (.07)
<i>Living with other relatives/friends</i>	-.10 (.10)	-.04 (.11)	.06 (.11)	-.10 (.11)	-.06 (.11)	-.16 (.11)	-.14 (.11)
Job status parents (vs. both parents have a job)	<i>p=.962</i>	<i>p=.917</i>	<i>p=.245</i>	<i>p=.713</i>	<i>p=.930</i>	<i>p=.399</i>	<i>p=.177</i>
<i>Both parents have no job</i>	-.02 (.09)	.05 (.09)	-.06 (.09)	.01 (.09)	.03 (.09)	-.09 (.09)	.09 (.09)
<i>One parent has a job</i>	.00 (.07)	.01 (.07)	-.12 (.07)	-.07 (.07)	.03 (.07)	-.08 (.07)	.03 (.07)
<i>Student doesn't know</i>	-.04 (.09)	-.03 (.09)	-.14 (.09)	.01 (.09)	.06 (.09)	-.14 (.09)	.20 (.09)*
Highest education parents (vs. SVE ^c or similar)	<i>p=.001</i>	<i>p=.256</i>	<i>p=.104</i>	<i>p=.065</i>	<i>p=.028</i>	<i>p=.328</i>	<i>p=.055</i>
<i>Primary education</i>	-.36 (.11)***	-.05 (.11)	-.02 (.11)	-.29 (.11)*	-.28 (.11)*	-.13 (.11)	-.20 (.11)
<i>Secondary education</i>	-.09 (.09)	-.07 (.09)	.13 (.09)	-.11 (.10)	-.26 (.09)**	-.05 (.09)	-.13 (.09)
<i>Higher education</i>	.11 (.08)	.12 (.08)	.18 (.08)*	.00 (.08)	-.15 (.08)	.04 (.08)	.04 (.08)
<i>Student doesn't know</i>	-.07 (.07)	-.03 (.07)	.02 (.08)	-.14 (.08)	-.17 (.07)*	.06 (.08)	-.15 (.08)*
Financial problems family (vs. no problems)	-.40 (.07)***	-.16 (.07)*	-.26 (.07)***	-.08 (.07)	-.15 (.07)*	-.13 (.07)	-.10 (.07)

(table 2 continues on next page)

(table 2 continued)

	<u>School-related social capital</u>			<u>School experiences</u>			
	Support parents	Support peers	Support community	Emotional engagement	Academic engagement	Contact classmates	Contact teachers
	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)	p / β (se)
PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES							
Student (partner) expects / has child(ren) (vs. no)	.03 (.16)	-.11 (.16)	.17 (.16)	.49 (.16)**	.24 (.16)	.10 (.16)	.23 (.17)
Personal debts students (vs. no debts)	-.30 (.10)**	-.13 (.10)	-.27 (.10)**	-.23 (.10)*	-.44 (.10)***	-.23 (.10)	-.22 (.10)*
Student uses (soft-)drugs (vs. no drugs use)	-.26 (.09)**	-.20 (.09)*	-.07 (.09)	-.07 (.09)	-.36 (.09)***	.05 (.09)	-.24 (.09)*
Student has been arrested by the police (vs. not)	-.01 (.07)	-.14 (.07)	.04 (.07)	-.05 (.07)	-.21 (.07)**	.08 (.07)	-.17 (.07)*
Extra job student (vs. no extra job)	<i>p=.112</i>	<i>p=.057</i>	<i>p=.068</i>	<i>p=.359</i>	<i>p=.058</i>	<i>p=.220</i>	<i>p=.144</i>
< 8 hours a week	-.01 (.07)	.19 (.07)**	.14 (.07)	.07 (.08)	-.03 (.07)	.09 (.07)	.05 (.08)
8-15 hours a week	.05 (.06)	.10 (.06)	.09 (.06)	.08 (.06)	.01 (.06)	.13 (.06)	.02 (.06)
> 15 hours a week	-.19 (.09)	.09 (.10)	-.11 (.10)	-.07 (.10)	-.25 (.10)*	.03 (.10)	-.20 (.10)*
Explained variance ^d	R ² = .16	R ² = .09	R ² = .06	R ² = .06	R ² = .09	R ² = .08	R ² = .05
ICC	ICC=.04	ICC=.04	ICC=.07	ICC=.03	ICC=.05	ICC=.05	ICC=.03

Note: n=1438, N=61. Significant coefficients and p-values are printed in bold. * p<.05 **p<.01 *** p<.001.

^a p-values indicate the global significance test of effects for the categorical variables: ethnic identity, household, job status parents, highest education parents, extra job student.

^b β (se): standardized regression coefficients from multilevel regression analyses, with standard error in parentheses. Two-tailed test.

^c SVE: senior vocational education.

^d shown: student-level variance

students' school-related social capital and school experiences on indicators of their sociodemographic background and personal circumstances. To enhance interpretation of the scores, we standardized variables to zero mean and unity variance.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the results of the multilevel regression analyses. Substantial associations occur between students' sociodemographic background and personal circumstances on the one hand, and their school-related social capital and school experiences on the other. Younger students enter SVE with more parental support, which is probably related to the closer attachment of younger adolescents to their parents. Younger students felt more at home at their previous school as well. Male students report less school-related social capital, from parents, peers, and their community in general. They report substantially less peer support for school, while they are more positive about the contact with their classmates at their former school. Students with an ethnic minority background generally report lower levels of parental support for school, and Moroccan and Turkish students, the two largest ethnic minority groups, report higher levels of peer support. Ethnic minority students are remarkably more positive about their school experiences, especially with respect to their contact with fellow students. Students living on their own report substantially less parental support for school, but they do not seem to compensate this deficiency with other social ties, as some ethnic minority students seem to do. Students with lower educated parents report less parental support, as well as less emotional and academic engagement. Students with higher educated parents report more access to supportive resources in their community. Students who don't know if their parents have a job report more connectedness to teachers. Those students probably have little or no contact with their parents, which they might compensate with more intensive contacts with their teachers. Not knowing the educational level of parents could be a proxy for having lower educated parents, which would explain the alignment of the scores on school experiences from this group with the scores of students with lower educated parents. Students living in poor families score lower on most outcome variables. They report less access to supportive resources, from parents, peers and the broader community, and less academic engagement. Being pregnant or being a parent does not relate to differences in school-related social capital, but those students felt more at home at their previous school than students without children. Having personal debts is negatively related to all outcome variables: students with debts report less supportive ties with parents and their broader community and more negative school experiences in general. Students using soft drugs also report less school-related social capital, as well as less academic engagement and less satisfactory contacts with teachers. Their results look remarkably similar to the scores of

students who have been arrested by the police. Last, students who work less than eight hours a week perceive their peer group as more supportive, while students working more than 15 hours a week report less academic engagement and less connectedness to teachers.

DISCUSSION

To promote school success for all, we need to identify the difficulties that students face in their school careers. The pre-entry characteristics with which students enter post-secondary education have far-reaching consequences for their success in school (Tinto, 1993). Assessing the risk for dropout of all incoming students enhances timely intervention and prevention of dropout. However, many common predictors of dropout are mere indicators of risk, concealing the underlying forces that account for the risk they impose. Whereas such risk factors are useful for easy identification of at-risk students, they are less helpful for the development of effective strategies to counter the risk they signify. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the association of a set of commonly used risk indicators to some pre-entry characteristics that are more directly related to students' school careers, and that consequently may be more susceptible to school-based interventions: the school-related social capital and school experiences with which students enter post-secondary vocational education. Our findings indicate that sociodemographic indicators of the risk for dropout tend to relate to lower levels of school-related social capital, whereas personal circumstances associated with an increased risk for dropout correlate with negative school experiences. Some students score negative on both social capital and school experiences measures at the moment of transition to post-secondary vocational education. Those students may be particularly at risk for dropout.

Interpreting the risk for dropout from the perspective of supportive resources

Our results confirm that sociodemographic dropout patterns align with differences in access to supportive resources in students' social networks outside school. Ethnic minority students, boys, student who do not live with both parents, students with unemployed parents, students with lower educated parents, and students living in poor families report lower levels of parental support for their education, although not all of those results are significant in our study. Students with higher educated parents report better access to supportive resources in their communities. Turkish and Moroccan students appear to discuss school-related matters with their peers more often, which confirms earlier findings as well (Crul, 2000; Stevens et al., 2009). Boys report substantially lower levels of school-related support in their peer group. Whereas male students report more positive social

contacts with classmates than female students, discussing school life or helping each other out with school-related matters is apparently not a frequent activity in male peer groups. This finding may reflect adolescent boy culture, in which school is not a shared focus and where asking for help is considered *uncool* (Stevens et al., 2007). As there is no reason to believe that the number of actual resources is lower in boys' than in girls' environments, the findings suggest that boys do less well in identifying and utilizing potential resources in their social networks.

Interpreting the risk for dropout from the perspective of school experiences

Differences in school experiences do not seem to explain the risk for dropout imposed by most sociodemographic characteristics. For instance, while ethnic minority students have a higher propensity to drop out, they report more positive school experiences, as is the case for boys and students living on their own. An important exception is the group of students with lower educated parents, who are overrepresented in dropout statistics and who score significantly lower on academic engagement. The most prominent differences in school experiences are found for students who have debts, who work more than 15 hours a week, who use drugs, and who have been arrested by the police. They all report more negative school experiences than classmates who do not engage in any of those activities.

A double drawback

Some students deal with constraints in both the social and academic realm. Students with lower educated parents report less parental support and more negative school experiences. The same counts for students growing up in poor families, who score negative on almost all outcomes in our study. They report significantly less access to support from parents, peers, and their community in general, as well as less academic engagement. These findings indicate that students from poor families and students with lower educated parents, who may often be the same students, are confronted with significant social and academic constraints when making the transition to post-secondary vocational education. Students with debts and students who use drugs are also more likely to encounter difficulties in both domains. Both groups of students, which may overlap to some extent as well, discuss school matters less with their parents, while school does not seem to play a prominent role in the peer group of students using drugs either. Moreover, they report more negative school experiences. With a history of more truancy, lower performance, poorer contact with teachers, and less encouragement and support for school in their social networks, students with a record of debts or drugs seem to make the transition to post-secondary vocational education with one foot out the school door.

Enhancing access to supportive resources

The value of students' social capital is not determined by the number of ties in their network, but by their possibility, whether in terms of practical access or social skills, to utilize the resources available in their environment (Portes, 1998; Stevens et al., 2007). Some students simply have limited access to primary supportive resources in their environment. Little parental support can be the result of limited or absent contact with parents, which is likely the reason for lower scores on parental support among students living on their own, older students, and immigrant students who have migrated to the Netherlands without their parents, as is frequently the case with Antillean and refugee students. In other cases, students may have social networks that largely consist of ties that are not particularly supportive to their school careers. This applies to students associating with peer groups with explicit anti-school attitudes, but may also be the case for students growing up in communities with limited experience in the educational system. In other cases, students have ample access to helpful resources, but they fail to identify and utilize those. Our findings suggest that this applies to boys in particular. Schools and youth organizations can provide students with additional supportive ties in the form of counsellors or tutors, who can compensate for a lack of supportive ties. Schools can also coach parents to get more actively involved with their children's school careers. Last, schools can train students to use their network more effectively by teaching them how to identify and utilize the available resources in their environment. Peer tutors at school can constitute a favorable additional source of support for students engaged in less school-oriented peer groups. Intake interviews at school facilitate the identification of students who are in need of additional forms of support.

Enhancing the school careers of at-risk students

A school transition is not an isolated event, but is embedded in students' educational life course (Elder Jr., Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Pallas, 2003). Disengagement from school may have its origins in the early school years, and it is difficult for schools to counter an advanced stage of disengagement. However, adopting a life course perspective acknowledges the continuity in students' school careers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000) and the impact of previous school experiences on subsequent stages in students' educational trajectories (Gorard, Rees, Fevre, & Welland, 2001). Intake interviews enable schools to learn about students' educational history, and to identify students who enter their new school with one foot out the school door. Prior school experiences cannot be changed, but transitions can offer students the opportunity to break out of a spiral of disengagement (Elder Jr. et al., 2003; Langenkamp, 2010). Schools need to talk with prospective students about their school experiences thus far, and discuss with them the strategies needed to successfully proceed their school careers. By

creating the opportunity for students to redirect their educational pathways in a positive direction, and by securing access to sufficient supportive resources, the transition to post-secondary vocational education enables at-risk students to throw off some important social and academic constraints to their successive school careers.