Spatial order and social position: Neighbourhoods, schools and educational inequality

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SUMMARY

1. Introduction
Intersecting questions about the effects of neighbourhood and school composition, particularly concerning social and ethnic segregation, are important and recurring topics in political and academic discussions. This dissertation sheds light on these questions by examining the educational outcomes of youth in the Netherlands, and educational inequalities more specifically, in relation to youths’ neighbourhood and school contexts. The notion of a ‘neighbourhood effect’ has received significant attention in the academic and policy world. Scholars examining neighbourhood effects investigate the links between place of residence and individual outcomes and trajectories, such as labour market status, health and wellbeing, and school career. This field of research is concerned with how much and in which ways neighbourhoods matter for individual outcomes. The underlying concern of this research is that social inequalities across neighbourhoods have implications for peoples’ social outcomes and chances in life, and thus, for the reproduction of social inequality. With many parallels to the study of neighbourhood effects, ‘school effects’ research investigates the meaning of student body composition, often in concert with other school characteristics, for such outcomes as the achievements, friendships and school careers of young people.

Bringing together bodies of literature on neighbourhood effects, school effects, segregation and youth education, this book contributes to the debate on the role of the neighbourhood in shaping individual outcomes, and particularly to the understanding of the interplay between youth, neighbourhoods and schools. Although the notion of neighbourhood effects appeals to our common sense understanding that places offer different social opportunities, the story is more complex than often assumed, and adapting the concept of neighbourhood effects to policy is a contentious matter.

This book consists of five separate studies that deal with different facets of the broader academic and political debate on the implications of neighbourhood and school composition. The main aims of this book are to assess the extent and nature of neighbourhood effects on youth educational outcomes; to test whether neighbourhood effects on youth are transmitted through the school context; and to work towards integrating the study of neighbourhood and school effects. More broadly, this book also aims to contribute methodologically and conceptually by assessing the usefulness of the neighbourhood effects framework for understanding the relationships between youth, their social outcomes and neighbourhood inequality. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of this book are based on
quantitative analyses and empirically examine the evidence for neighbourhood effects and school effects on youth, while Chapters 5 and 6 deal with conceptual issues in the study of neighbourhood impacts and reflect more critically on the notion of neighbourhood effects.

All data analyses in this book are based on a large-scale study in the Netherlands called the ‘Voortgezet Onderwijs Cohort Leerlingen – Cohort 1999’ (VOCL’99). Beginning in the school year 1999/2000, the VOCL’99 follows a cohort of students from their first year of secondary school (average age 13 years old) until they leave full-time education. From a random sample of 246 schools, 126 schools participated in the study, amounting to 19,391 students. The study presented in this book matched each student in the VOCL’99, using individual youths’ postcodes, to a neighbourhood identifier, which was then matched to neighbourhood characteristics published by Statistics Netherlands. Multilevel and cross-classified modelling techniques were used in the analysis of neighbourhood and school effects.

In addition to the quantitative analyses, in-depth interviews were carried out with 16 youth who grew up in Amsterdam. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of the interactions between youth, school and neighbourhood contexts and to explore some of the conceptual challenges in the study of neighbourhood effects on young people.

2. Neighbourhood effects on education?

In Chapter 2, the educational outcomes of 18,000 youth were analysed in order to address the following research question: Can neighbourhood effects on youth educational outcomes be identified, and if so, what is the nature and extent of these effects? The findings provide support for the existence of neighbourhood effects on youth school outcomes, which operate above and beyond youths’ background characteristics, such as gender, age, parental education, family structure and ethnicity. The results indicate that youth living in economically better-off areas attain higher levels of educational achievement than those in lower-income areas. This relationship, however, is not uniform across all groups of youth; for instance, the achievement outcomes of youth from families with higher levels of socioeconomic resources appear to bear a weaker relationship to their neighbourhood conditions than those of youth with lower levels of socioeconomic resources. Thus, I conclude from these findings that the relationships between neighbourhood conditions and youth outcomes are likely to be obscured in studies that measure average neighbourhood effects across all individuals.
These results need to be viewed in the context of several important caveats, which I discuss briefly here. Importantly, although the word ‘effects’ is used loosely in social science research to refer to statistical effects, the neighbourhood effects I find, as in those found in nearly all non-experimental quantitative analyses, are in fact empirical associations, not estimates of causal effects. Secondly, the variables used in these models (e.g. neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage) are constructs that serve as proxies for the social processes thought to drive effects. The mean neighbourhood income level does not have a direct effect on youth education, but processes associated with neighbourhood socioeconomic status (SES) might. Finding out which social processes drive the neighbourhood effects found in quantitative models requires ongoing work and collaboration between qualitative and quantitative researchers.

I do find support for the existence of neighbourhood effects on youth educational outcomes; the next question is, why would this be so? The literature points to a number of processes thought to drive neighbourhood effects, including those tied to institutional resources and structural factors, social-interactional mechanisms and selection effects. The intervening pathway of neighbourhood effects that I focus on in this book, and discuss next, is the school.

3. Neighbourhood and school effects: Considering two contexts

If the neighbourhood setting is important for young peoples’ development and outcomes, schools are arguably one of the most important reasons for this. In the theoretical literature on neighbourhood effect mechanisms, schools are posited to be one of the local institutions that contribute to place-based effects. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the extent and nature of school effects on youths’ school outcomes, and whether the school serves as a pathway of the neighbourhood effect. The results of these chapters provide support for the notion that part of the observed influence of the neighbourhood is transferred through the school context.

Chapter 4 examines whether the observed relationships between neighbourhood conditions and youths’ school outcomes are explained by the schools they attend: Are neighbourhood effects on youth transferred through the school context? The results reveal that once school effects are taken into account, there are no statistically significant neighbourhood effects remaining, suggesting that the school does indeed transfer a large part of the observed neighbourhood effects. Although the original aim of these analyses was to incorporate the school into neighbourhood research by testing whether schools are a pathway of the neighbourhood effect, the story is more complex than schools simply
mediating neighbourhood effects. While it is reasonable to conclude that some of the influence of the neighbourhood is transferred through the school context, implying that the school is a pathway or mechanism of the neighbourhood effect, not all young people attend a school in their home neighbourhood. Although for most children their primary school is located in their home neighbourhood, this is less often the case at the secondary school level. This calls for further analysis, for example, which considers separately those who attend secondary schools in their own neighbourhood versus those who do not.

A broader issue is the complexity of separating out the influence of contexts which we know to be related (e.g. the neighbourhood, school, family). Although analytically and methodologically we can separate ‘neighbourhood effects’ from ‘school effects’ (and from ‘family effects’), in reality these factors are interconnected, and thus, the actual causal pathways of these effects are bound to be intertwined. For example, a family’s residential decisions may be related to their choice of schools for their children, both of which are known to be related to family social class background. This issue has implications for how we understand neighbourhood effects, and is discussed further below.

Chapter 3 examines the relationships between school characteristics and student outcomes, with a special view to the inequalities in educational achievement between ethnic and socioeconomic groups and their potential relationship to school segregation. Levels of school segregation in the Netherlands are comparatively high, for both primary and secondary education. School segregation reflects patterns of residential segregation, but is known to be reinforced by institutional features of the school system, including open school choice, family school choice decisions and academic tracking at the secondary school level. The differences in school performance between different social and ethnic groups raise questions about school conditions that might be unfavourable for students’ educational development; school segregation is seen as potentially being one of these conditions.

Chapter 3 tests the effects of school ethnic and socioeconomic composition on youths’ school outcomes in Year 3 and Year 5, taking youths’ prior achievement in Year 1 into account. The results indicate a negative relationship between school ethnic composition and students’ third year achievement, but not their school position in Year 5; however, this relationship was entirely explained by differences in school socioeconomic status. Thus, as other studies have found, school SES is associated with students’ educational outcomes in the Netherlands, over and above individuals’ prior achievement, SES, and other background characteristics. Because school ethnic segregation is tied to socioeconomic segregation, segregation along both ethnic and socioeconomic lines appears to
be relevant for students’ school outcomes. Importantly, even after taking a key set of individual background and school characteristics into account, including youths’ prior achievement levels, the analyses in Chapter 3 reveal that several minority groups perform worse relative to the native Dutch majority, and that low-SES groups perform worse than their higher-SES counterparts. The social and ethnic composition of the schools these youth attend do not account for this educational disadvantage. These performance differences are, however, more pronounced for the achievement test outcome in Year 3 than for the school position outcome in Year 5; in terms of school position in Year 5, the differences between ethnic groups are smaller and some minority groups perform better than the native Dutch group.

Taken together, the results of Chapters 2, 3 and 4 all reveal persistent differences in educational achievement outcomes across individual socioeconomic and ethnic background, even after taking individual socioeconomic status, school characteristics, neighbourhood characteristics, and in some analyses, prior achievement, into account. Such systematic differences in educational outcomes are worrying, especially given that national government measures explicitly aim to redress educational inequalities. This does not necessarily imply that government interventions have been ineffective; moreover, minority ethnic groups have made steady headway in terms of levels of educational attainment and there are no reasons to believe that differences across ethnic groups in educational achievement are permanent. However, the relationships between socioeconomic and ethnic background and educational outcomes vary widely across different national contexts, thus a better understanding of what drives this variation, and how to create a more level playing field, are important and ongoing tasks for those concerned with social justice in education. From this perspective, the results of this book show that many of the standard predictors used in models of educational achievement (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, prior achievement, school SES, school type), in addition to youths’ neighbourhood characteristics, do not fully account for observed differences in educational outcomes. Other factors are at play.

4. Neighbourhoods, their effects and social mix: The policy and research context

Chapter 5 shifts gears and examines the policy context surrounding neighbourhood restructuring and neighbourhood social mixing initiatives. There is a good deal of work that connects the neighbourhood effects framework to government social mixing and poverty deconcentration initiatives, both in North America and Western Europe. It has been argued that the notion of neighbourhood
effects lends support to the current policy focus on promoting ‘socially mixed’
neighbourhoods and ‘cohesive communities’ as part of the answer to the
problems of poverty and social inequality. However, looking more closely at
how social mixing initiatives are implemented, the assumptions underlying these
strategies and the research findings to date, cautions against accepting these
policies uncritically.

One of the key interests of Chapter 5 is the notion that the neighbourhood
effects framework might work to inspire, or legitimize, neighbourhood social
mixing policies. It has been suggested that the emphasis placed on neighbourhood
effects has inadvertently lent theoretical and empirical weight to the idea that
neighbourhoods are (at least in part) responsible for their own social problems,
and hence, that solutions to these problems lie in the neighbourhood and
its population mix. There is a risk that too much responsibility is assigned to
neighbourhood composition, and thus to neighbourhood residents, at the
expense of shifting attention away from the institutional and economic constraints
that individuals face and from more fundamental determinants of poverty and
inequality.

While it goes without saying that researchers should always be specific and
careful in their analyses and specifications, one of the main messages that
emerges from Chapter 5 is that even more can be done to improve this in the
field of neighbourhood effects research. A number of commentators have argued
that there has been an over-reliance in neighbourhood effects research on often
crude proxies, and a tendency to centre attention on behaviour which diverges
most from so-called middle-class standards. There is often an implicit assumption
that growing up or living in a poor neighbourhood must constitute a negative
force in one’s life, even though there is a great diversity of experiences and social
outcomes in even the poorest (and richest) neighbourhoods. Moreover, the
forces that produce and reproduce neighbourhood social structure are given little
attention in most neighbourhood effects frameworks, and thus, there is a risk
of overemphasizing the role of the neighbourhood and its social composition, at
the expense of obscuring wider structural forces. Understanding the effects of
neighbourhoods calls for attention to how these places are produced and how
neighbourhood inequalities are maintained. This would give a more balanced
picture of neighbourhood effects, and would, in my view, oppose the spatial
deconcentration of poverty as an effective means of promoting individual social
mobility.
5. Above and beyond the neighbourhood: Extending the framework

Chapter 6 follows from the previous chapter and explores some of the challenges in researching and understanding the meaning and role of the neighbourhood in young peoples’ everyday lives and longer-term social outcomes. While some of these challenges are the methodological difficulties inherent in trying to measure the influence of complex social contexts, they also include conceptual issues concerning the definition and interpretation of the ‘neighbourhood’ and how we conceptualize the relationships between neighbourhoods and people. I argue that neighbourhood effects research could better link up with the literature on place and space. Linking up with this literature would compel us to ask not only how neighbourhoods influence individuals, but also how individuals influence and interact with neighbourhoods – that is, how individuals come to be in particular neighbourhoods, and how they interpret, shape, draw on and give meaning to these places. The main argument of Chapter 6 is that the neighbourhood effects framework could be enriched by thinking more explicitly in terms of overlapping and reciprocal relationships running between (multiple) neighbourhood places, places of education (e.g. schools) and young people, with these relationships embedded in a wider system of institutions and socio-spatial practices.

I show, through young people’s descriptive accounts, that neighbourhoods do have meaning for their everyday lives, routine activities, and likely also their longer-term outcomes, but that they are also active in choosing and interacting with the places they encounter, including their secondary schools and places within and beyond their neighbourhood. The relationship between neighbourhood and individual should be thought of as one of mutual interaction, rather than a one-way effect of neighbourhood on individual. Youths’ reports of their residential histories and interpretations of neighbourhood boundaries underscore the multiple neighbourhoods that young people inhabit and the different ways in which they define and view these places. Without taking a more holistic and relational view of the neighbourhood, or by reducing the neighbourhood to a few variables, we will miss many of the characteristics that make it a meaningful place for young people.

6. Overall conclusion

Nearly no neighbourhood effects study begins with the assumption that it will uncover ‘large’ neighbourhood effects on individual outcomes. We know that individual outcomes, like educational attainment, are the result of a combination of many interrelated factors, the most important of which concern individual
and family characteristics. However, individuals and their families are situated in, and react to, wider neighbourhood and social structures. Overall, this study finds support for the existence of neighbourhood effects on youth educational outcomes. More precisely, youths’ educational outcomes were found to be significantly associated with characteristics of their neighbourhoods, over and above important background characteristics. However, neighbourhood characteristics do not play a direct role in youths’ school outcomes. What explains youths’ educational outcomes lies foremost at the individual level and the school level. Insofar as neighbourhoods shape school choices and school populations, which other research shows they do, they can be considered to have an indirect effect through those pathways. Neighbourhood conditions may also affect family functioning, parenting behaviour, and individual interests, which, in turn, may affect individual school outcomes. Thus, neighbourhood effects on young people’s educational outcomes can best be thought of as indirect and incidental.

The extent to which a unique or independent neighbourhood effect can be accurately identified is questionable. Where young people live is related to the friends and peer groups they have while growing up, the schools they attend, and their families’ social class background, and thus, many facets of a young person’s social world are intertwined. This suggests the need to broaden the neighbourhood effects framework to better capture the interactions between youth and the multiple places that they inhabit. The results of this book provide many reasons to look further into the influence of neighbourhoods, and the interaction between neighbourhoods, schools and youth, but ideally this should be conducted with an awareness of the interconnectedness among youth, their current and past neighbourhoods, schools, homes and the other places they encounter.

7. Suggestions for future research

This dissertation has resulted in a number of ideas and suggestions for future research, some of them already mentioned above. Above all, I suggest two ways in which thinking about and researching neighbourhood effects could be complemented and extended. First, I suggest that it is necessary to be more conscious of how neighbourhood space and neighbourhood social structure are produced and maintained. There is a vast geographical literature on the (re)production of uneven geographies; in my view, this literature helps to put the notion of neighbourhood effects into perspective. While inequalities across neighbourhoods have implications for individuals, the production of these spatial inequalities is not an arbitrary matter. Furthermore, the underlying causes of ‘neighbourhood effects’ do not typically lie in the neighbourhood
itself. Thus, one could ask, for example, which social and structural relations underpin neighbourhood segregation? What do socio-spatial inequalities and neighbourhood effects reveal about the political, economic, social and cultural processes in which they are embedded? The production of neighbourhood geographies is also of direct importance to the issue of selection effects (or selection bias) in neighbourhood effects research. It is widely recognized that people do not come to live in neighbourhoods through random processes (and likewise, that children and youth do not come to attend certain schools through random processes). To understand the impact of place, it is important to view this selection as a fundamental social process in itself, and something of substantive interest to neighbourhood effects and to how neighbourhood structure is continuously made and remade.

Secondly, I advocate a better consciousness of the mutuality or reciprocal relations between people and the multiple places they inhabit and spend time in, including the neighbourhood. Although the neighbourhood is seen to affect individuals, how individuals shape the neighbourhood tends to be given little attention in neighbourhood effects research; the issue is widely acknowledged, yet still tends to be underappreciated. While this mutuality does indeed pose a significant challenge to measuring the ‘effects of neighbourhoods’, it suggests that we might look at the question of neighbourhood effects from a different perspective: not only how neighbourhoods affect people, but also how people affect neighbourhoods, including how they choose, are selected into, excluded from, shape, give meaning to, and interact with neighbourhoods. Taken together, these two interrelated points about neighbourhood selection/production and simultaneity/mutuality encourage neighbourhood effects researchers to broaden the lens through which neighbourhoods and their relationships with people are viewed, and to examine both sides of the person–place relationship. Further integrating qualitative and quantitative knowledge and research methods, and adopting a more place-sensitive approach to the study of neighbourhoods and people, will be important steps in moving forward in the field of neighbourhood research.