They will get there! Studies on educational performance of immigrant youth in the Netherlands

van Welie, E.A.A.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
1 Introduction

A person's true joy and felicity lie solely in his wisdom and knowledge of truth, not in being wiser than others or in others' being without knowledge of truth, since this does not increase his own wisdom which is his true felicity.

Baruch de Spinoza, 1670

1.1 A brief history of educating pupils with an immigrant background

In the last decades of the past century, secondary schools, especially in the larger Dutch cities, experienced substantial changes in the composition of their student population. These changes were induced by the arrival, from the 1960s onwards, of large numbers of labour migrants, who were invited to come and work in the Netherlands. The majority of those labour migrants originated from Turkey and Morocco, and were predominantly employed in low-skilled work. In the years to come, they were, in most cases, followed by their wives and children.

In their countries of origin, many Turkish and Moroccan people did not have the chance to go to good quality schools, or pursue continued education; moreover, substantial numbers of them had lived too far from an elementary school to be able to go to school at all. Their children, among them increasing numbers who were born in the
Netherlands, both literally and figuratively had to come a long way to find their rightful place in the different strata of the Dutch educational system.

In 1987, I was appointed as Principal of a secondary school in Amsterdam-West that was in the midst of such significant changes in its student population. Many people from Morocco and Turkey came to live in this part of the city— and still do— and their children were arriving in secondary school in large numbers. Our students were not only very diverse with respect to the country of origin of their parents, but also in their level of schooling: some were born in the Netherlands, and had acquired a sufficient proficiency in the Dutch language in elementary school, but others still struggled with language— albeit they were born in the Netherlands— for example because another language was spoken at home. However, a substantial number of pupils at that time had been born in their country of origin, and had therefore been enrolled in Dutch elementary schools at a later age than most of their classmates. Obviously, their language proficiency required specialized attention. In order to serve our students well, however, we had to re-consider many other aspects of daily school practice as well.

In retrospect, our attitude was very goal-oriented and practical: we wanted to guide all our students to the highest possible level of secondary education, given their individual intelligence and skills; and when the student body changes, teaching needs to be reconsidered accordingly. In only a few years' time, our school population had changed from being a student body almost exclusively of Dutch descent, to a vast majority of pupils with a migrant background. Therefore, in a relatively short period of time, we had to develop new practices to adapt our school to the needs of our changed student body. Of course, we developed programmes for second language learners, but we also acknowledged the importance of meaningful close cooperation with parents, not only for explaining to them the complex system of tracked secondary education, and its consequences for tertiary schooling and chances on the labour market in the future. Importantly, some of our colleagues were skilled interpreters, who could explain the school system to parents, and discuss the results and prospects of their sons and daughters in their mother tongue. We also had to cope with, as another example, the difficult issue of inventing new practices and procedures that truly assessed a pupil's abilities and that "looked through" the façade of possibly insufficient language proficiency, which may have masked real potential. We acknowledged, furthermore,
that we had to identify other kinds of stakeholders, and reach out to people with an influential position in migrant communities. Together with them we mapped out the route for our pupils towards far higher levels of schooling than had been available to their parents in their country of origin.

Although we certainly had our share of problems with pupils who did not behave as we expected them to do, as in any secondary school, we thought about our students as ambitious young people, willing to learn, and eventually expecting to find a good position on the labour market. Teachers were in general very dedicated; many among them would devote their entire career to teaching migrant pupils and remained loyal to their school until the present day, more than two decades later, even though such experienced teachers may have a lot of job opportunities in other schools to choose from.

Interestingly, American-based studies on educational achievements among migrant students in general report that, almost as something that goes without saying, that migrant students express higher educational aspirations for themselves than is the case among American-born students. In general, these higher ambitions are explained by the assumption that their parents, who took the far-reaching decision to leave their family and home country, may be a select group who are more often ambitious, entrepreneurial, and willing to take substantial risks. Parents may even choose to emigrate specifically for the purpose of finding better schools for their children.

At the time, in our school, we would have recognized these characteristics of migrant pupils: our students performed remarkably well, and many of them were very ambitious, and envisioned a future that would surpass all their families' expectations.

1.1.1 "Black" and "white" schools

Increasingly, however, our school and comparable other schools, were classified as "black schools". And although in public discourse many discussants and columnists started with some sort of statement that, of course, "black" was just an indication for schools with many migrant students, and did not mean anything disparaging, the reality was very different. The designation "black school" became almost equivalent with lower results, lower chances for pupils, more disciplinary problems and more dropouts. This dichotomy split the landscape of schools; some schools were even more determined
than before to educate migrant pupils to the best of their potential. Other schools, however, developed strategies to attract mainly native Dutch students, with more affluent parents. As a result, especially in the four major cities Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague, nowadays schools are to a large extent segregated (Ladd, Fiske and Ruijs, 2009).

Considering the ample scientific evidence for the strong correlation between parental levels of schooling and the educational prospects of their children, not surprisingly, average exam results tend to be higher in schools with children from well-educated parents. The question remains, though, whether a higher mean exam score indicates the added value of a school (Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2001), or rather reflects the pupils’ resources at home, including the presence of role models that may lead to a sense of entitlement to high levels of schooling.

1.1.2 Was the integration in Dutch society of youth with a migrant background failing?

In 2000 Paul Scheffer published an essay in a national newspaper (NRC Handelsblad) entitled "The Multicultural Drama" that rapidly became a cause célèbre. Scheffer stated that unemployment, dropout and criminality accumulated among ethnic minorities, and that he was not hopeful for the future: his expectation was that large numbers of minority youths would permanently lag behind, and remain without prospects for a meaningful participation in Dutch society. Importantly, the intent of Scheffer’s essay was to increase opportunities for youth with a migrant background to participate in Dutch society, his critique being that policy makers, and society as a whole, had for too long turned a blind eye towards the failing integration of youth with a migrant background. In his view, this lenient attitude was an ineffective kind of tolerance, and not in the interest of migrant students. However, the following public discourse initiated a second dichotomy: those who agreed with Scheffer were considered to be the new realists, while those who pointed at the continuous educational improvement of migrant pupils were, oddly enough in a pejorative sense, referred to as multiculturalists—people who were considered to be in a state of serious denial. For more than a decade to follow, fundamental shifts in the Dutch political landscape resulted in an almost categorically negative view of young people with a migrant background, notably those of Moroccan descent. As a result, the ever growing
shares of migrant pupils who were successful in higher levels of schooling, and did so at an increasing tempo, were almost ignored because of the strong emphasis on the assumed educational and societal failure of migrant pupils.

Nevertheless, teachers and school leaders in secondary schools with large percentages of migrant pupils invested with increasing success in adapting their teaching to a very diverse student body, and were not at all of the opinion that the education of migrant pupils was failing; on the contrary, they saw increasing numbers of enrolments in the highest secondary tracks, and improving exam results. As the Director of a large secondary school recently shared: "We stopped counting ethnicities and nationalities, we consider this to be irrelevant; we want to serve, as best as we can, all pupils who are living in the district around our school. To that end, we constantly work on improving our programmes, the quality of our assessments, and the final exam results of our pupils."

While diverse schools largely invested in adequate education for students with a multitude of backgrounds, the societal discourse seemed to put desegregation of schools and neighbourhoods centre stage, by implication suggesting that close-knit ethnic communities and neighbourhood schools were the cause of the assumed societal failure of young people with a migrant family history.

1.1.3 Segregation

Among politicians and policy makers, pessimistic views on black schools and on communities of people with a migrant background seemed to be mainly based on research in the context of large metropolitan areas in the U.S. (Dobbie and Fryer, 2009; Payne, 2010; Kerbow, Azcoitia and Buell, 2003). However, some major characteristics of the Dutch educational system, and characteristics of the larger cities (where the majority of pupils with a migrant background live) differ substantially from metropolitan areas in the U.S. First, in the Netherlands, free school choice is universal and no financial considerations restrict free choice, since all schools are funded equally by the government, with additional funding for all low SES (socio-economic situation) pupils and no tuition fees. Second, unlike large metropolitan areas in the U.S., the major Dutch cities do not have large impoverished areas that are at substantial distance from more affluent areas. In most cases, lower SES neighbourhoods may be adjacent to more
affluent areas. Third, Dutch cities have a high number of schools that are, furthermore, all supervised by the Inspectorate of Education. Any seriously underperforming schools (currently two schools in the four major cities) come under intensified supervision by the Inspectorate, and typically manage to improve their results within the space of a year. Fourth, teacher salaries (based on the level of training and teaching) are equal; diverse schools do in general, not report other problems with the hiring of teachers than those related to the shortage of teachers on the labour market in some subjects, and do not report a higher turnover of teachers. In discussions, school leaders of diverse schools express rather the contrary: the majority of their teachers made a deliberate choice to teach pupils who, in most cases, are the first in their family to reach secondary track levels that qualify them for higher education.

Obviously, attending a segregated school and living in a segregated community, may raise concerns considering, for example, the preparation of migrant youth for a successful future entry in the labour market. The question remains, however, whether schools specialized in migrant education— with an emphasis on upward mobility to higher tracks (Crul, Schneider and Lelie, 2012)— are the better option, or schools with mixed populations, possibly supported by housing policies.

Remarkably, considering the effect of segregation and desegregation policies, academic publications contain surprisingly contrasting findings: 1) large scale housing policies aimed at desegregating impoverished residential areas did not result in any improvement of educational attainment levels (Oreopoulos, 2007); 2) Desegregating schools can further burden black pupils (Stuart Wells et al., 2009); 3) School investments in cooperation with local segregated communities have beneficial effects on the school results of black children (Dobbie and Fryer, 2009); and 4) neighbourhoods with high percentages of inhabitants from different countries of origin have negative effects on school results (Dronkers, 2010).

1.2 Building upon success

The increasing school success of pupils with a migrant background has inspired this thesis, which is based on the assumption that preventing or repairing failure is not simply the opposite of building upon success— if only because failing students and successful students are different individuals. Interestingly, Crul et al. (2012) find, in a
large scale international comparative survey, that in the Netherlands the school results of migrant pupils are remarkably polarized: being of migrant descent, both considerably raises the odds of pupils successfully completing far higher levels of schooling than their parents did, but, at the same time, raises the odds of dropping out– with about equal percentages. Noguera (2004) describes similarly, that, in the U.S., immigrants are both more likely to succeed and more likely to fail academically. Importantly, the fact that these two sides of the distribution represent different individuals, national average enrolments may not offer an adequate insight into patterns of school success in the case of migrant pupils. Interestingly, van de Werfhorst and van Tubergen (2007) demonstrate that, after controlling for parental education and occupational class, "ethnic differences in achievement vanish, and differences in secondary school type almost disappear. What remains (...) is not an ethnic penalty, but an ethnic advantage: Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese and Antilleans choose higher types of secondary schooling than natives with comparable class backgrounds".

This thesis aims to add to a better understanding of the successful group among immigrant pupils for two main reasons: first, when success is better understood, policies to reinforce success factors may add to cost-effective government policies, since repairing failure in fact comes too late, and may imply considerable costs (e.g. guiding dropout students back to school, often repeatedly). Second, as mentioned earlier, the success of growing shares among migrant students seems almost obscured by the predominant attention to failure. As a result, notably Moroccan students are almost categorically portrayed as underperforming.

This negative image may have consequences for the constantly growing group of high achievers: they currently experience hindrances to find an internship or a job, and unemployment is substantially higher among young people of migrant descent.

Admittedly, the effort to add to equity and justice for all pupils has been a major driving force behind my long career in education; however, the point of departure for the current research is the rational consideration that migrant youth in the larger cities form half of the future labour force. There are, therefore, obvious economic interests in educating them to the best of their potential.
1.2.1 A focus on local contexts and distinct groups

In order to study the school success of migrant pupils, several preliminary choices have been made. First, for the purpose of this thesis, access to the highest levels of secondary education, the academic tracks that grant access to higher education, has been defined as "success". Second, a focus was put on a better understanding of local contexts, individual schools, and separate migrant groups (depending on the country of origin of their parents). To this end, 1) the zip-code level has been used as a local geographical unit; 2) five distinct ethnicities have been taken into consideration separately: pupils of Dutch, Moroccan, Turkish and Antillean/Surinamese descent, as well as the combined group of "other migrants", that may, however, largely vary in their socio-economic characteristics; 3) a special focus was put on the school success of one specific group, pupils with a Moroccan family history; 4) three specific zip-code areas were studied separately; and 5) six secondary schools with a large population of migrant students were investigated in greater detail.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

1.3.1 Segregation at zip-code level

In Chapter 2, a basic question underlying this thesis is explored: Is school success, defined as enrolments in academic secondary tracks, among students of Moroccan descent, associated with the degree of segregation at the zip-code level of their area of residence? Data on the ethnic composition among 16 year-olds at zip-code level in the four major cities have been merged with individual data on enrolments in secondary academic tracks at that same age, in order to analyse the association between the residential area and school success.

As described above, contrasting outcomes from academic research have been published concerning the effect of segregation at the neighbourhood level: at the same time, existing research points at negative effects of segregated communities and schools, but also demonstrates both positive and negative effects of desegregation policies, and, furthermore, reports positive effects of strong (segregated) migrant communities and neighbourhood schools.
1.3.2 Three socio-economically challenged zip-code areas

The aim of Chapter 3 is to study in more detail the school histories of young people with a migrant background in three residential areas with a largely segregated population, mainly of Moroccan descent, in the district of Amsterdam-West. All three areas have had to cope with serious socio-economic disadvantages, and have been depicted as notoriously problematic in the media over the past decade. This analysis is based on a local data set, covering the school history (all exact exit and entrance dates) of all 16-22 year-olds at the reference date of 31 July 2009. The study starts with the open question: Does the analysis of municipal data on school histories of the youths in this specific area, reveal local aspects of education that probably may foster the success of some pupils, but as yet do not mitigate the problematic school careers of others.

Even at first sight, the database showed a surprisingly high incidence of recurrent departure (without a diploma) and re-enrolment in secondary school among pupils with a migrant background.

The reviewed literature reports disruptive effects of school switching, both for positive and for negative reasons, and finds that switching raises the odds of later dropout. School switching appears to be a relatively under-studied subject in the Netherlands. In order to be able to compare the frequency of switching among Moroccan youth living in the three investigated areas, in this chapter a second analysis is carried out with the use of up-to-date national educational data. With this data set, switching rates for Amsterdam as a whole, and differences among ethnic groups could be demonstrated, measured in Year 3 of secondary schools. The national data set confirms the findings based on the local data.

1.3.3 Distance measures offer new insights into patterns of secondary school choice

Chapter 4 is built around geographical distance measurements, notably the distance to the school concerned and the difference in distance between the nearest and the more distant preferred school, in the search for underlying patterns of school choice between different migrant groups- and native Dutch pupils. Additionally, distance measurements allow for controlling for population density, the number of schools available within 5 km, and "urbanicity" (a measure for economic activity in a given area). Patterns of school choice may reveal the preferences of parents and their children,
notably when a school other than the nearest relevant school is chosen. The underlying idea was that, in terms of travel time and possible travel costs, choosing a more distant school requires an extra effort. Can patterns of school choice reveal the motivation for this extra effort? We considered the extra effort of selecting a more distant school to be a proxy for the selectivity of choice. Importantly, the choice for the nearest school may also be a deliberate choice: parents in affluent neighbourhoods, for example, might prefer the nearest school because the average socio-economic level of the school population may reflect the affluence of the residential area. In this case, however, we cannot know the selectivity of their choice; others may opt for the nearest school to the home-address, without making a deliberate choice. For the purpose of this study, a rich government data set has been used, containing all educational data and many socio-economic data of the cohort that was enrolled in the last grade of elementary education in 2008. The data set has been merged with additional socio-economic data on the neighbourhood level, and qualitative data on school performance provided by the Inspectorate of Education.

1.3.4 Matching relevant research findings with concrete school questions

Chapter 5 presents an in-depth study of the transfer or the lack thereof of applicable outcomes from academic research to actual school questions and practice. Six Principals of diverse schools in Amsterdam actively participated in this project. This study has been inspired by, on the one hand, the abundance of high-quality, recently published studies on migrant education, and, on the other hand, the observation that school leaders experience difficulties in selecting a knowledge base for current school developments and innovative ambitions. Some issues at stake appear to be the timelines and accessibility of research publications by school leaders and teachers, and the often contradictory outcomes concerning the same educational theme.

On the basis of semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, the main school questions were identified. Then, an extensive literature review was carried out to match these questions to up-to-date scientific publications that offered opportunities for an effective translation to school practices.
1.3.5 Scientific and societal contributions

In Chapter 6, general conclusions, based on the four studies in this paper, are presented. Furthermore, possible implications for school practice and municipal and national government policies are considered. Finally, the ways in which this thesis may contribute to the field of scientific knowledge is reflected upon.