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

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6 Conclusions and Discussion

I know that I am human and may have erred. However, I have taken great pains not to err, and to ensure above all that whatever I have written should be entirely consistent with the laws of the land, with piety, and with morality.

Baruch de Spinoza, 1670

6.1 Conclusions

This thesis has explored success in secondary education among pupils with a migrant background in the four major cities in the Netherlands. This quest commenced from four different points of departure: ethnic segregation of the pupils' area of residence, the stability of school careers, patterns of school choice, and the transfer of relevant and practicable research outcomes to schools with many migrant pupils.

Local and national data sets, different statistical techniques, and case study research based on in-depth interviews have been used in an effort to investigate the achievements of migrant pupils in a multidisciplinary way. In this last chapter, the findings and conclusions from the previous chapters are combined and discussed as concluding research findings that may imply suggestions for policies at the national,
municipal, and school level aimed at speeding-up the closing of the educational achievements gap between migrant pupils and native Dutch pupils.

The association between the percentage of 16 year-old pupils of Moroccan descent at zip-code level and enrolments in secondary academic tracks is negative.

In this first study, to set the scene, we took a closer look at the widespread, yet not clearly underpinned notion in public parlance and political debate, that neighbourhood segregation hinders migrant pupils to find their way to higher strata of secondary education. The literature on the negative effects of segregation, notably considering large metropolitan areas in the U.S., describes a strong negative effect on educational outcomes. Other literature, however, reports the beneficial effects of closely-knitted migrant communities and neighbourhood schools.

Instead of considering the ethnic composition of the total population at zip-code level, we chose to take a different approach: we measured specifically the share of 16 year-old pupils of Moroccan descent among all 16 year-olds living in the same area. We decided on this option because national statistics point at very large increases in average attainment levels between immigrant generations of grandparents, parents and the current young generation. For this reason, we wanted to observe, as closely as possible, this youngest generation separately. We used bivariate linear (OLS) and LOWESS regressions to consider the percentage of 16 year-old Moroccan second generation youth at zip-code level, and their actual enrolment in academic secondary tracks. Overall, this association is negative: for every 10% increase of Moroccan 16 year-olds, there is a 2% estimated decrease in enrolments in academic tracks. The data set we used for this study did not cover other socio-economic variables besides ethnicity; therefore, we could not interpret further the high dispersion of data points we found that suggested that factors other than ethnic neighbourhood composition and ethnicity affect school success.

Switching between secondary schools burdens pupils; it reduces the odds of obtaining a diploma or move up to a higher track, and increases the odds of later dropout. Moroccan pupils living in three disadvantaged zip areas switch schools most frequently.
We started this second project with an exploration of a very detailed municipal data set (The Amsterdam Social Development Office, DMO), without formulating specific questions in advance, with the objective to detect any patterns that might point to phenomena that may have been overlooked so far. The data set covers the educational history of 16-22 year-olds in three disadvantaged zip areas in Amsterdam. Already, a first visual inspection of the data files raised questions on the remarkably high number of re-enrolments in secondary schools for considerable numbers of pupils.

The literature unequivocally illustrates, and presents causal evidence, that all switching— even for positive reasons— is harmful for pupils, and even more harmful for low SES pupils. This harmful effect is attributed to the disruptive effect of, for example, losing classmates, familiar teachers, and a curriculum the pupil is used to. In the first part of this research we measured switching in straight counts of schools attended per pupil— measured after they had exited secondary school— and the relationship to school success (diploma) or dropout. Our findings point at the same negative effect as the literature predicts: migrant students switch more often, and repeated switching is progressively linked to a considerable decrease in the percentage of pupils who obtain a diploma, and increasing dropout. Motivated by these findings, we repeated our measurements with the national educational data source BRON at a different point in time in the pupils' school career (secondary Year 3) and on the larger scale of Amsterdam. In this second part we looked specifically at the connection between switching and upward or downward track changes. We used a dummy-coded variable for switching here, and did not count the number of schools attended. In the three socio-economically-challenged areas all pupils switch more often, except for native Dutch pupils. We are somewhat puzzled by our findings that in the case of all groups, but more so among Moroccan pupils, a share of switchers move to another school within the same cluster; we do not know whether this type of switching is associated with secondary track change, or that pupils with behavioural problems more often migrate within a cluster. Additionally, the vast majority of switchers continue in another school at the same track level. This raises the same question about the motive for school change. Especially in the case of migrant pupils, upward mobility to a higher secondary track is an important extra opportunity to reach the level that best fits their capacities. Staying enrolled in the same school, is convincingly connected to higher percentages of
upward mobility; considering pupils with a Moroccan background, almost one in every five pupils moves up to a higher track in the same school (in Amsterdam), while this is only 7.6% after switching.

88.7% of pupils living in the four largest cities exercise the right to free school choice and do not select the nearest school. Migrant pupils on average prefer a school with more migrant students than the nearest school; native Dutch pupils show the opposite preference. Unexpectedly, the odds of moving up to a higher track are slightly lower for Moroccan pupils who select another school than the one closest to their residence. SES, rather than ethnicity, drives school choice.

In the literature about the unequal opportunities for low SES pupils to find access to high quality schools, much is expected of extended options for school choice. In the Netherlands this choice is completely free, there are no financial barriers of any sort, and the Inspectorate assesses the sufficient quality of all schools, although there may be quality differences above this basic quality level. This situation provides interesting opportunities to analyse which factors drive school choice in this freely accessible and transparent school market (all school quality reports by the Inspectorate are on the Internet). We were permitted to use the latest updated version of the rich educational data source BRON, and could merge these data with the socio-economic characteristics of neighbourhoods, and with school quality standards by the Inspectorate. As a proxy for the selectivity of choice, we used two distance measures: the distance from home to school, and the difference in distance between the nearest and the preferred school. We used multi-level regressions analyses (OLS), also in the case of the dummy-coded variable nearest/non-nearest school, and the distance difference (always ≥ 0); we also carried out both a Logit and Tobit regression, but preferred the OLS regression because we found no disturbing differences between the two techniques, and decided against the complex interpretation of odds ratios in the case of the Logit and Tobit regressions.

We found that migrant pupils on average travel smaller distances to school than native Dutch students; this may correspond, however, with the fact that more migrant pupils live in poorer, more densely populated areas, with more schools. Neighbourhood SES has a two-way effect on distance to school: in low SES areas, migrant pupils travel shorter distances, but native Dutch pupils tend to escape the area and travel further to
school. In contrast, in high SES areas, native Dutch pupils tend to travel a small average distance and more often choose the nearest school with a population that mirrors the neighbourhood population. Whereas we found that a higher school average SES attracts native Dutch pupils, somewhat unexpectedly, we found hardly any association between distances travelled and school quality indicators, like the average exam score and the school's percentage of upward mobility to a higher track. We were surprised by our finding that migrant pupils tend to prefer a school further away from their area of residence, which had an even higher percentage of migrant pupils than the nearest school. Moreover, in their case, a more selective choice to a school at a greater distance was only slightly associated with a lower percentage of pupil upward mobility to a higher track. Additionally, our analyses demonstrate that migrant pupils on average attend a school with a higher mean percentage of upward mobility than the schools chosen by native Dutch pupils. However, migrant pupils themselves move up less often to an academic track.

Secondary school Principals have strategic and complex conceptual questions that can be matched with the high-quality practicable outcomes of academic research. Principals express the view that intermediaries who know the reality of schools, and are also academic researchers, could bridge the gap between secondary schools and academe.

Overall, the literature on the applicability of scientific knowledge for school practice demonstrates that this transfer is rather problematic. Complex issues arise, considering for example the different types of knowledge – academics may prefer to isolate features in education, while schools consider the complexity of everyday school life– and the difficulties school leaders may encounter in translating research findings to concrete classroom practice.

We made an attempt to study in detail, together with six participating school leaders of secondary schools with a largely diverse student body, the requirements for an accurate match between existing research and school questions. We used the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews to identify school questions, searched for a match with recent, high-quality, practicable research publications, and carried out
a first evaluation of the actual use of the suggested research in practice, after three months—admittedly a short period of time.

All but three out of 21 questions could be linked to high quality research outcomes; we found that most questions were of a conceptual nature, considering the best strategies for the school amidst its surrounding context of a multi-ethnic society (all involved schools were located in Amsterdam). The Principals emphasized that they repeatedly had repeatedly encountered the problem that scientific research may report conflicting findings related to the same issue, for example on the subject of school segregation: would desegregating schools be the preferred option? Or would schools with a majority of migrant pupils be a better choice, since such school can specialize in curriculum content (e.g. special attention to language proficiency) and the counselling of migrant pupils (e.g. repeated formative assessments to enhance upward mobility to higher tracks)? After three months, five out of the six school leaders expressed the view that they had made use of the suggested research findings, notably considering strategic decisions, and communications with the School Board and external parties (for example, the municipality).

We encountered, however, the rather serious technical problem that only a limited number of research publications are freely accessible via academic search machines: in many cases a licence fee has to be paid to a scientific journal in order to get access to full text reading; such fees can only be paid by universities (or other large research institutions), and not by single schools.

Principals would welcome an intermediate function between schools and academe, carried out by people who are well-experienced in both worlds.

### 6.2 Policy Implications

#### 6.2.1 A different perspective on segregation

The findings presented in this thesis imply considerations for policies at the government, municipal and school level. Considering the societal discourse on the segregation of schools and neighbourhoods, our results show a relatively small, but significantly negative association between the percentage of 16 year-old migrant pupils at zip-code level and their enrolments in the two highest academic secondary tracks (Chapter 2). However, we also found a similarly small, but significant positive association
between upward mobility to a higher track and choosing a school closer to the home address (Chapter 4). In combination, these findings do not convincingly support policies to desegregate schools by centralized school assignments, and suggest instead that investing in increasing the chances for upward mobility in schools located in migrant neighbourhoods, may be worth considering. Interestingly, our analyses of patterns of school choice reveal that migrant parents and pupils prefer to travel further to a school with an even larger percentage of migrant pupils than the school closest to their home. Finally, our investigation of the usability of academic knowledge in the case of six secondary schools with a diverse student body shows that the Principals of these schools are strongly committed to using the best scientific knowledge basis for the specific function of their school vis-à-vis the migrant communities they serve (Chapter 5). Together, the outcomes of the different studies in this thesis seem to make a case for high-quality, specialized schools that are well connected to migrant communities in the surrounding residential areas.

6.2.2 Stable school careers

Although we encountered a rather serious problem concerning school switching, in retrospect we think that our choice to start with a visual observation of the Amsterdam municipal data set, without any research question in advance, turned out to be an interesting strategy. We found that school switching, which according to the literature, is in all cases harmful to students, occurs more often among migrant pupils who live in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Furthermore, we found that switching reduces the odds of upward mobility to a higher track, an important instrument for the narrowing of the educational achievement gap between migrant and native Dutch youth. The reduction of switching, contrary to other factors that are connected to the achievement gap (e.g. the attainment levels of parents) seems a manageable strategy. It may be considered, at the level of the government and the Inspectorate, that school attainment levels should be mentioned more prominently in public reports on the quality of all schools, and inform migrant parents in particular, about the importance of this indicator. At the municipal level, the reduction of switching could be linked to large-scale programmes to prevent dropout, since switching is
strongly related to later dropout. Especially those schools that cooperate in clusters under the same board can relatively easily decide on policies that may reduce switching.

6.2.3 Validation of academic knowledge

A better insight into school questions, making the link to manageable research findings, and considering usability in school practice, resulted in concrete recommendations by school leaders for an intermediate function between schools and academe. Therefore cooperation with an institute for school leadership is already being currently explored. At the same time, at the national level new initiatives are also being developed concerning the knowledge base for educational policies. Both developments may benefit from the mutual exchange of goals and strategies.

6.2.4 The crucial importance of data

Considering that computing power is no longer a limiting factor, we hope that our work based on the national database BRON, as the Amsterdam municipal database, may also bring further aspirations to make national, local, and school data sets compatible. Schools create many interesting data files themselves, but may need (financial) support to further develop the architecture of their database and invest in professional skills to align their data to national data analyses. In this way schools could specifically monitor the performance indicators they consider to be relevant for decision making.

The BRON data set is being developed in the first place, for the analysis of national costs and the outcomes of the educational system. The data set offers, however, enormous new opportunities for academic research that may add to not only measuring but also understanding the complexity of everyday school processes, with the goal to enhance equal opportunities for all pupils.

6.3 Limitations and further research

However much I would have liked to think otherwise during the long and at times almost desperate journey towards a doctorate, finishing a thesis is a mere debut in the world of academic research, not a completion.

There are obvious limitations to the studies that have been described in this thesis, and, more important, this work has generated new questions for further
research. First, the scale of the research carried out may have been a limitation: the study into switching resulted in promising findings that could be scaled up to the four major cities in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the reduction of switching offers possibilities for an experimental research design, which would involve comparing schools with well-defined practices to reduce switching and other schools.

Second, the nature of the explored research questions may require follow-up research: analyses of distance to school as a proxy for the selectivity of school choice, have raised further questions, for example concerning the preference of migrant pupils and their parents for a school with a high percentage of migrant pupils: Do these pupils expect that schools with a vast majority of migrant pupils might offer specialized learning opportunities for migrant pupils, or might it be the case that parents prefer for their children to stay in the same culture as at home, or even avoid stigmatization in a school where their child might belong to a minority?

And third, in the case of the study into the transfer of scientific research outcomes to school practice, time was a limiting factor: we evaluated after only three months whether the Principals had made use of insights from academic research, whereas the search for the effects on school processes of a more solid knowledge base for school practice, requires monitoring over far longer periods of time.