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## **Educational endeavors: children of immigrants in education in the Netherlands, 1980-2020**

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## Chapter 2 – The Netherlands as a research context

The educational trajectories of children of immigrants in the Netherlands are the focal point of this dissertation. Since the late 1970s, many policy and institutional changes regarding the educational system and its stratification have taken place. The children of immigrants navigated the educational system against the backdrop of these developments. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to (1) understand migration histories to contextualize the position of immigrant families with Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, and Antillean roots in the Netherlands and (2) outline the Dutch education system, its policies, and changes.

### Migrant groups

The research population of this dissertation is defined by children of immigrants of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean background. The Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, and Antillean communities are the largest groups with a non-European migration background in the Netherlands as defined by Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022a). Moreover, these four groups – plus the Moluccans from the former Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia - were the core target groups of integration policies since the late 1970s, due to their perceived cultural and social distance from the mainstream Dutch population.

Like other West-European countries such as France, Germany, and Belgium, since the late 1950s, the Netherlands was suffering from a labor force shortage in manual jobs like mining, textile industry, and assembly line work and started recruiting men from Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, and Greece, and soon followed by Turkey and Morocco (Castles, 1986; Lucassen & Lucassen, 2018). Many guest workers however were not recruited but migrated on their own initiative and found employment in North-Western Europe in these sectors. Family reunification and marriage migration rapidly increased from the mid-1970s onwards when partners and children of these laborers arrived and many families settled permanently in the Netherlands, which was followed by a fierce debate on the rights and residence of these family migrants (Bonjour, 2009; Bonjour & Schrover, 2015). The timing of this subsequent migration by spouses and foreign-born children can be explained by the unexpected effects of the restrictive immigration policies that emerged during the Oil Price Shock of 1973. Specifically, Turkish and Moroccan labor migrants realized that returning to their home countries would jeopardize the social and residency rights they had built and therefore decided to stay and exercise their right to bring family members over. The quintupling of the Turkish and

Moroccan populations in the Netherlands coincided with the beginning of a long recession that put many of the – former – guest workers into long-term unemployment (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015).

The large majority of the Turkish and Moroccan first generation had rural origins. Many Moroccan immigrants originated from Amazigh communities in the North of Moroccan that were politically and economically downtrodden after the Rif Revolution in 1958 and under the rule of king Hassan II from the 1960s onwards. The Turkish first-generation workers were recruited predominantly in regions of Central Anatolia and around the Black Sea shores, both from villages and smaller cities. The immigrants from both countries who were recruited were selected on lower skill levels (Hartog & Zorlu, 2001). In general, Turkish and Moroccan migrant families are intact - i.e., with two parents present in the household - and have held lower socio-economic positions, especially due to the high unemployment that rapidly developed in the late 1970s following the economic recession that especially affected the sectors for which these “guest workers” were recruited (Bouras, 2012; Hartog & Zorlu, 2001). In hindsight, we can conclude that as a result the integration process of the second generation started at a terrible moment: at the beginning of a long recession with most male breadwinners unemployed, with a weak command of the Dutch language, and housed in the cheapest and more socially vulnerable neighborhoods of the larger towns.

The history of migration from Suriname and the Dutch Antilles was determined by a longstanding colonial linkage. Suriname was a Dutch colony whose African-origin (‘Creole’) population was enslaved, officially until the abolition of slavery in 1863 but de facto until 1873, and remained under Dutch rule until independence in 1975, whereas the Dutch Antilles are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Many Surinamese people already migrated to the Netherlands in the period before the independence of Suriname in 1975 (Cottaar, 2003). They have diverse backgrounds as the Surinamese population is a mix of descendants of formerly enslaved Africans, and contract workers from India (the Hindustani community) and Java, and China who arrived in 1873. The lure of the Dutch educational system and better paid work explain the migration of the Surinamese and Antillean first generation, many of whom were educated in the Netherlands (van Amersfoort & van Niekerk, 2006). Given the colonial ties, the Dutch-spoken education was oriented toward the Netherlands, and often tertiary education in the Netherlands among Surinamese and Antilleans. Because of this colonial Dutch-oriented education, many Surinamese and Antillean first-generation parents are expected to have more Dutch context-specific cultural and linguistic capital.

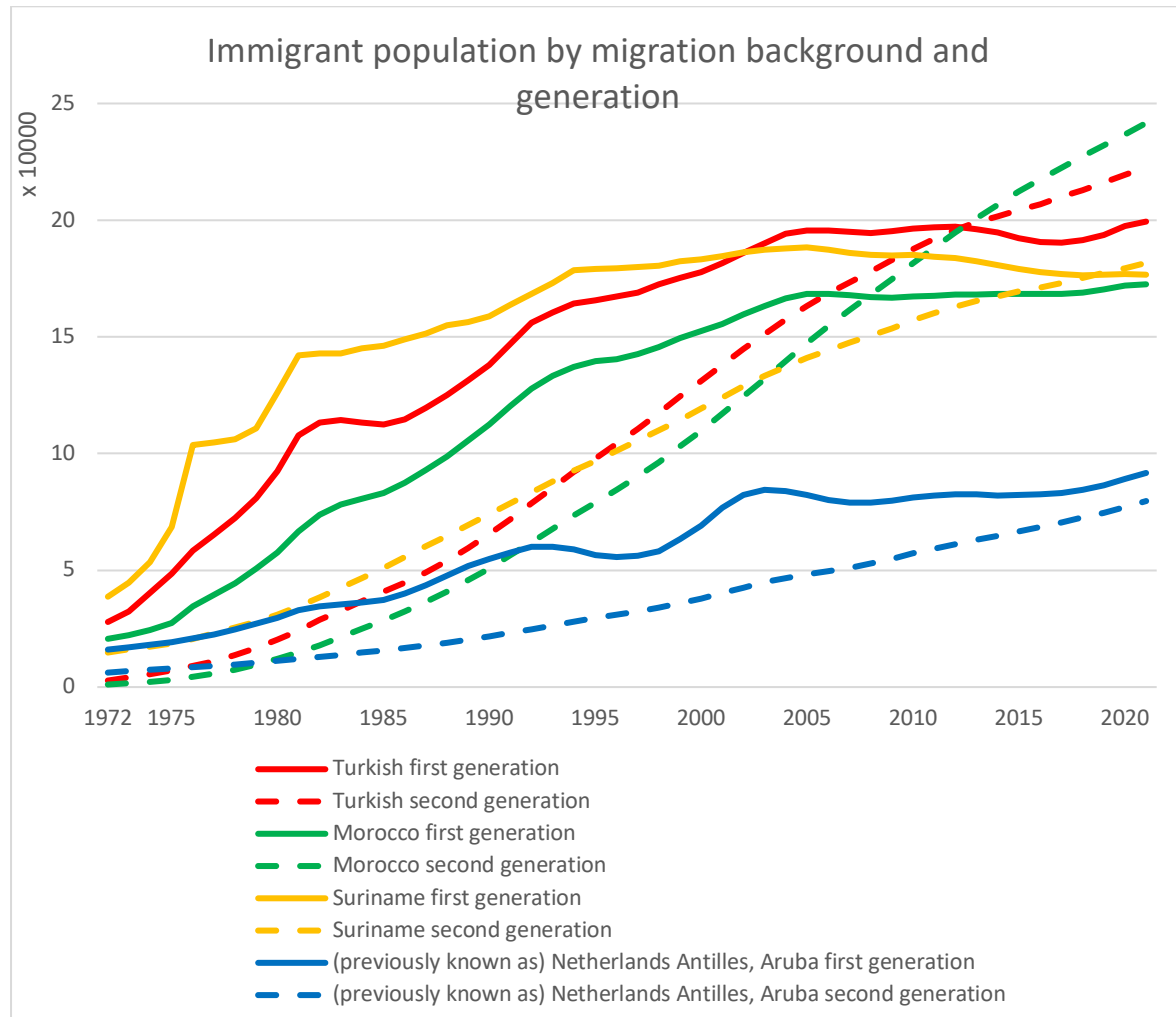
The population with a migration background in the Netherlands has grown substantially since the mid-1970s, starting with the first generation, yet also with their children (i.e. the second generation) as shown in Figure 2.1. The data on the first generation in this figure resembles

immigration developments throughout the years. In 1972, the largest first generation were people from Suriname. This is not surprising given the imminent independence of Suriname in 1975 and the pessimistic outlook due to interethnic tensions, which stimulated many Surinamese to leave their country of birth and set sail to the Netherlands. Since the 'Koninkrijksstatuut' of 1954, people from Suriname, as citizens of the Kingdom, were free to migrate to the Netherlands. After independence, this became increasingly more difficult. Hence, many people from Suriname moved to the Netherlands in the years leading up to independence, as can be seen with the stark increase in 1975 and 1976. Moreover, until the late 1970s people from Suriname could move to the Netherlands and obtain Dutch nationality. This agreement was titled the *Toescheidingsovereenkomst* – and it ended in 1980. This can be seen in Figure 2.1 with the stark increase of people of Surinamese descent living in the Netherlands between 1975 and 1980. People born in the Dutch Antilles have Dutch nationality, which allows for circular migration, i.e. people moving back and forth between the Dutch Antilles and the Netherlands.

One should keep in mind that although the figures depict the population with migration background, that particularly for the more recent years, the first generation are mainly elderly people whereas the second generation are younger in age. Moreover, these developments in immigrant population should be interpreted against the general backdrop of a growing population, both with and without a migration background in the Netherlands since 1972. In 1972, the total population of the Netherlands was comprised of more than 13.2 million inhabitants (Statistics Netherlands, 2022). The vast majority i.e., over 90 percent, had no migration background. Fifty years later, the total population grew to approximately 17.5 million individuals of whom 25 percent had a migration background of sorts. For the four migrant groups studied here, the second generation grew remarkably and has outnumbered the first generation since around 2010 – except for people from the Dutch Antilles. In big cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, these trends were observed well before that. This distribution is reversed for the total population with a migration background, of whom over 2.3 million had a first-generation migration background in 2021 - 13 percent of the total population - and a little under 2 million people had a second-generation migration background - 11 percent of the total population - in 2021. Out of this 11 percent of people with a second-generation migration background, 11 percent had a Turkish background and 12 percent had a Moroccan background. It should be noted though that as of 2022, the majority of immigrants to the Netherlands in recent years originated from other countries, including Eastern-European countries like Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, which joined the European Union respectively in 2004 and the latter two in 2007, and most recently Ukraine.

**Figure 2.1**

*The population with a migration background by origin country and generation per year, in absolute numbers, 1972-2021*



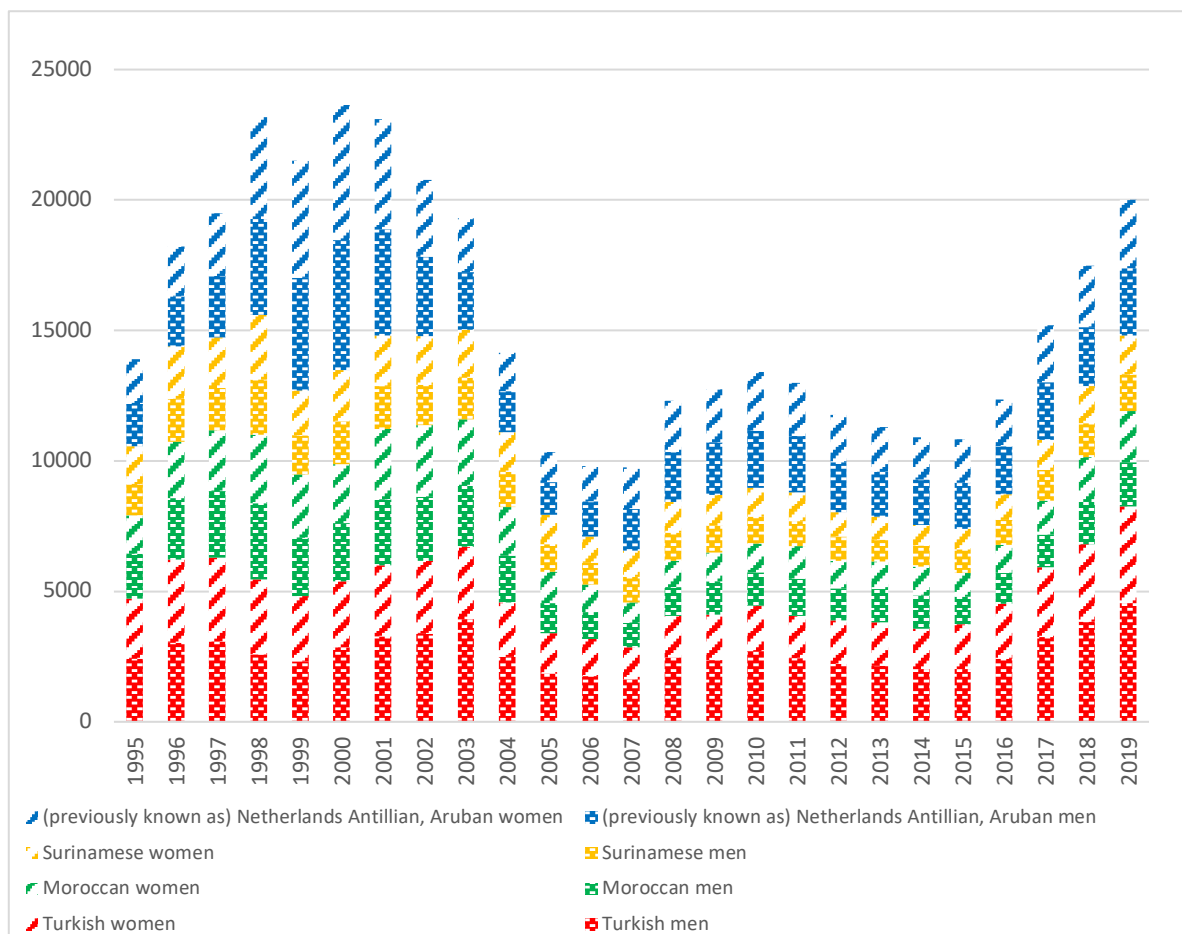
Source: Statline.

Some trends in family reunification migration can be deduced from the population sizes as presented in Figure 2.1. For example, the size of the group of Turkish first-generation immigrants tripled from 1972 to 1980: from 27,887 to 92,568. In the 1980s and 1990s immigration continued and since 2003 the largest first-generation group is of Turkish descent. Generally speaking, a significant increase in group size can be observed for all migration backgrounds up until the mid-1990s and early 2000s. This stark upward trend levels off for the Turkish and Moroccan first generation in the early 2000s. A more restrictive policy with additional demands regarding income and age for marriage migration became effective in 2004. Ever since, partner-choice patterns of Dutch citizens with a Turkish and Moroccan background, from either generation changed (Sterckx et al., 2014). Instead of marrying a partner who migrated from Turkey or Morocco to the Netherlands, Dutch citizens with a Turkish or Moroccan

background increasingly married co-ethnic partners from the Netherlands, i.e., someone with similar migration background, either first-generation or second-generation, who lived in the Netherlands before the marriage (Sterckx et al., 2014). Correspondingly, in Figure 2.2, the years with the lowest immigration figures are 2005, 2006, and 2007, directly following the introduction of stricter marriage migration policies. Moreover, the trends in immigration among these four groups show little to no gender divergence.

**Figure 2.2**

*Immigration to the Netherlands from Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, and the Dutch Antilles, by gender, 1995-2020*



Source: Statline.

In addition, Figure 2.1 shows that the population share with a second-generation background has increased substantially since 1972. From the late 1970s and early 1980s until the present day, these

four second-generation groups have grown increasingly. Until 1995 the largest group was the Surinamese second generation, from 1996 to 2012 the Turkish second generation, and from 2013 onwards the Moroccan second generation has been in the lead.

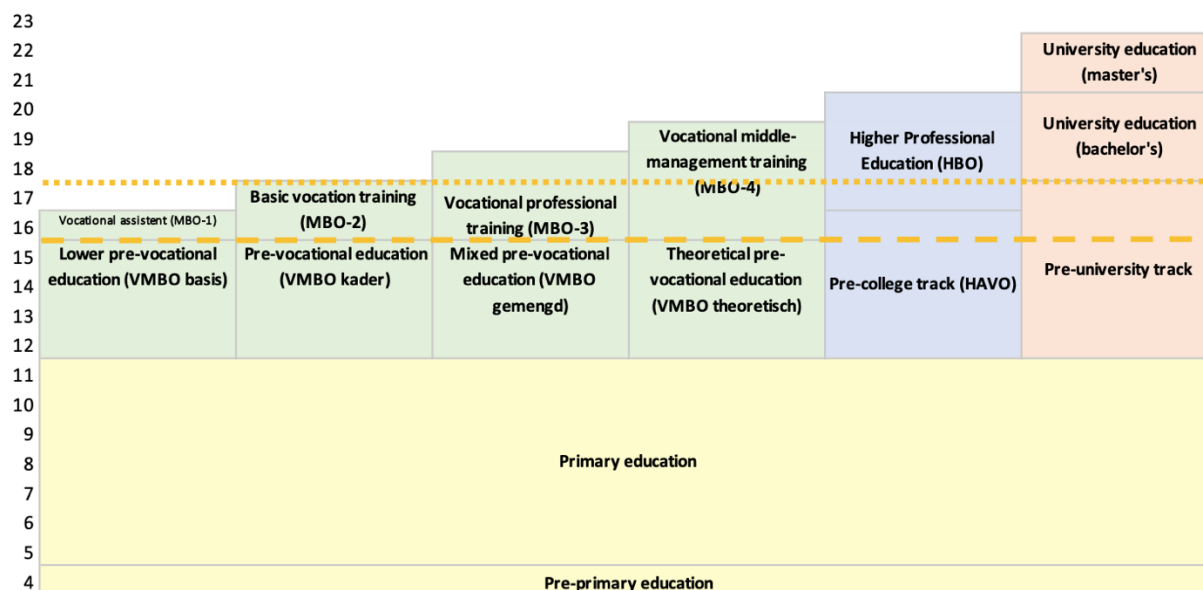
## The educational system in the Netherlands

The Dutch educational system is stratified into several tracks and levels (van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010), and is visualized in Figure 2.3. The decision in which school to enroll is largely up to children and parents themselves, especially in primary education. In enrolling in secondary education, standardized test scores and teachers' advice play a crucial role in determining track and school options. In recent years, in large cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam the distribution of students was regulated to proportionally distribute students over secondary schools. The vast majority of Dutch schools are state funded regardless of whether they are public or have a religious or philosophical foundation. The share of students attending privately funded schools as well as students with privately funded extracurricular education slowly but surely increased over the last decades (Bisschop et al., 2019; de Geus & Bisschop, 2017; Elffers, 2019). In 2019, around 18 percent of the students followed privately funded extracurricular education. However, few children with a migration background are enrolled in private education.

Compulsory primary education starts at the age of five and lasts eight years, as depicted in Figure 2.3. In the last year of primary school, the first moment of stratification takes place. This is approximately at the age of twelve. After compulsory primary education, children are advised to attend a track in secondary education based on their score in a nationwide standardized test in the last year of primary school and based on consultation with the teacher which is also called: "track or school advice". The most commonly used standardized test is named the CITO test. This test has been around since the 1970s for the final grade of primary school and since the 1990s also for earlier grades to keep track of the development of children throughout primary school. Secondary education offers three main tracks with different durations as depicted in Figure 2.3. Generally, the different tracks prepare students for different tertiary educational levels. Pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO: *voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*) has four sub tracks: lower vocational education (VMBO *basis*), vocational education (VMBO *kader*), mixed vocational and theoretical education (VMBO *gemengd*) and theoretical education (VMBO *theoretisch*). This reflects the current day differentiation: until 1990 VMBO did not exist, its predecessors were LBO (*lager beroepsonderwijs*; lower vocational education), VBO (*voorbereidend beroepsonderwijs*; preparatory vocational education) and MAVO (*middelbaar algemeen voortgezet onderwijs*; theoretical vocational education). Each VMBO track in

pre-vocational secondary education prepares the students in four years for vocational tertiary education (MBO: *middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*) which has four hierarchically numbered tracks. The *pre-college track* (HAVO: *hoger algemeen voorbereidend onderwijs*) takes five years and prepares students for higher professional education (HBO: *hoger beroepsonderwijs*). *Pre-university education* (VWO: *voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs*) spans six years and prepares students for university (WO: *wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, academic bachelor and subsequent master). This tracked nature of secondary school stems from the *Mammoetwet* in 1968. Previously scattered and varying options for secondary schooling were joined in a singular framework distinguishing *MAVO* (now *VMBO*), *HAVO*, and *VWO*. Track mobility and stacking as well as schools that offered multiple tracks (*MAVO*, *HAVO* and/or *VWO*) were features of the so-called *Mammoetwet* that aimed to equalize education in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**Figure 2.3**  
*Educational system in the Netherlands*



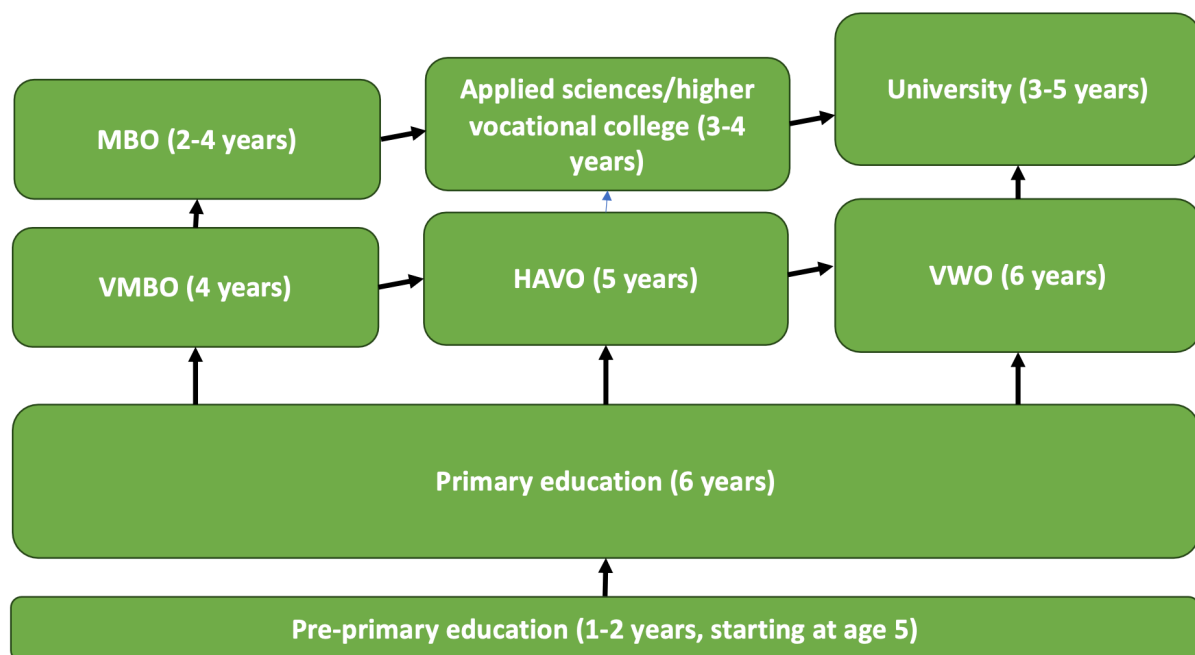
Note. The numbers on the y-axis indicated the age of the student. The official age of starting education is 5 years, although pupils typically enter primary school at age 4. Education in the Netherlands is compulsory up to obtaining at least an MBO2, HAVO, or VWO degree as indicated by the narrow-spaced dotted line or up until the age of sixteen as indicated by the widely spaced dotted line (Rijksoverheid, 2022).



The second moment of stratification takes place after the second year in vocational tracks or the third year in the HAVO and pre-university (VWO) tracks. Based on grades and the school’s guidance, students choose a thematic path within their track (e.g., economics or science). At this point switching between tracks is also possible, for example, a student whose grade point average is insufficient to continue in the pre-university track can switch to the pre-college track. It should be noted that track mobility is available throughout the majority of secondary and tertiary education and is a rather unique feature of the Dutch educational system that allows for the accumulation of educational levels over time, which is called “stacking”. For instance, after students finished the pre-college track (5 years) with a satisfactory grade point average, they can enroll for two years in the pre-university track and subsequently enter university, as depicted in Figure 2.4.

**Figure 2.4**

*Options for track mobility in the educational system in the Netherlands*



Note. Education in the Netherlands is compulsory up to obtaining at least an MBO2, HAVO, or VWO degree or up until the age of sixteen (Rijksoverheid, 2022).

## Policy changes in the educational system

Education is an important vehicle for the emancipation of disadvantaged groups. The educational policies in the Netherlands have centered around combating educational disadvantages for decades (Driessen & Dekkers, 2008; Rijkschroeff et al., 2005). These disadvantages are assumed to stem from socioeconomic, migration, and acculturation-related struggles among lower-income and immigrant families resulting in lacking or lower levels of cultural, linguistic, or other capital to succeed in school. To combat these disadvantages additional or differentiated education has been offered to pupils and students. These developments mainly concern primary and secondary education. In the 1960s and 1970s, working-class children were the primary target group of policy in combating educational disadvantages. On municipal levels in larger cities, policies focused on improving cognitive and socio-emotional development through encouraging parental participation, and training teachers (Driessen & Dekkers, 2008) were implemented to support working-class children in their education. Regardless of their underwhelming impact, these local policies gained national traction with the implementation of the educational stimulation policy (*onderwijsstimuleringsbeleid*) in 1974. A year later, the 'Contourennota' as presented by the social-democratic secretary of education Van Kemenade in 1975 should be highlighted. This policy proposal aimed to restructure primary and secondary education in the Netherlands by delaying tracking to the age of 16 – instead of at the age of 12 as designed in the Mammoetwet in 1968 - especially working-class children were expected to benefit from this. Even though these major reforms aimed at equal educational opportunities were never nationally implemented, this proposal can be seen as a shifting point in educational policies in the Netherlands. Another policy was designed for the growing number of children of immigrants in schools in the early 1980s: cultural minority policy (*culturele minderhedenbeleid*). It should be noted that the educational stimulation policy and cultural minority policy had a similar objective: combatting educational disparities among disadvantaged children, yet the implementation targeted different subjects: working-class children in the case of the educational stimulation policy and children of immigrants for cultural minority policy. The cultural minority policy was divided by two conflicting lines of thought: remigration and integration (Driessen & Dekkers, 2008). On the one hand, programs supporting the idea of remigration were offered to students from immigrant families as part of the regular curriculum in schools, such as classes in the parental mother tongue (*onderwijs in eigen taal en cultuur*, OETC). On the other hand, parts of these cultural minority policies aimed at integration into Dutch society through learning the Dutch language for children of immigrants (*Nederlands als tweede taal*) and intercultural education for migrant and non-migrant students alike. The separate policies for children from working-class families and immigrant families were conjoined in 1985 into the educational priority policy (*onderwijsvoorrangsbeleid*). This policy was comprised of two parts. Educational

programs targeted at students in various stages of primary and secondary school, for example, pre-primary education to programs focused on truancy and drop-outs among teenage students. Additionally, schools received financial support to hire extra staff based on the student composition in their school. Student composition was measured by assigning weights to students, for a child of immigrants a weight of 1.9 was assigned, for a working-class child 1.25, and for a non-migrant child without a disadvantaged background 1.00. Again, specific programs were designed for children of immigrants, such as *'schakelklassen'*, classes for children who recently arrived in the Netherlands and thus had to learn Dutch (Braster & del Pozo Andrés, 2001; Rijkschroeff et al., 2005). With the educational priority policy, the scope of educational policies combating disadvantages among students shifted from the national level back to the local and school levels. Subsequently, the national-level allocation of resources to municipalities for supporting disadvantaged students was realized by 1998 in the municipal educational disadvantages policy (*gemeentelijke onderwijsachterstandenbeleid*). In this policy, a remarkable shift away from emphasizing ethnicity can be observed. The policy measure based on weights assigned to children to divide resources was revised, and ethnicity was no longer part of the equation. As such, parental education level took center stage as this was perceived to be at the root of educational disparities as well as targeted disadvantaged non-migrant children appropriately too (Ledoux & Veen 2009). Other policy measures were preschool education and "schakelklassen". Preschool education aimed to close the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children upon entering school. "Schakelklassen" remained a policy measure from earlier policies and was targeted to combat linguistic gaps among pupils of primary schools. Colliding with the political uproar reinforced by the murder of the politician Fortuyn in 2002 and cineast Van Gogh in 2004, pluralism was deemed inappropriate in the early 2000s. Promoting cultural diversity was perceived to hinder integration and policies such as parental mother-tongue instruction were dismissed.

Van de Berg-Eldering (1989) distinguished three phases in educational policies for children of immigrants: the two-track approach juggling assumptions of remigration and integration up until 1980, the focus on educational deficiencies specifically among children of immigrants as policymakers realized immigrant families resided permanently in 1980 and combining the needs of children of immigrants and working-class children in education as their disparities were assumed to stem from equivalent roots of lower socio-economic positions rather than focusing on their cultural differences from 1985 onwards. However, ideas of pluralism and cultural diversity were promoted through programs for children of immigrants specifically as parental mother tongue instruction well into the 1990s. The underlying idea of combatting educational disparities for children of immigrants and the working class alike concluded towards the turn of the century. Against this backdrop of educational

policies and its changes, children of immigrants navigated their school careers. An overview in the trends of the educational positions of children of immigrants can be found in the next chapter.