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

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Chapter 7 – Discussion

Educational inequities: context and questions

The debate on the inequity of opportunities – and of educational inequities specifically – has regained attention in the Netherlands. The documentary series *Klassen* (NPO, 2020) portrayed how children and their parents in Amsterdam-Noord navigated the pivotal moment of the transition from the final grade in primary school to the first grade of secondary education. In the slipstream of this successful documentary, the leader of the Amsterdam social-democratic party (PvdA), Marjolein Moorman, won the 2022 municipal elections in the capital with a campaign centered around educational equality. Pondering track placement advice and school choice is not the exclusive prerogative of these families in this Amsterdam borough, nor is the surge of equity of opportunities on the political agenda of various political parties in the Netherlands at the local and national level. These considerations and choices on education and inequality apply to students and their families across the Netherlands, both with and without a migration background.

The central research questions of my dissertation were: (1) how the educational trajectories of children of immigrants developed over the last forty years; (2) how the explanations of these trajectories shifted and (3) how migration background interacted with other student characteristics in affecting these trajectories. To substantiate this, the educational positions of children of immigrants in the Netherlands between 1980 and 2020 are examined in this research. I showed that over time the general trend is that children of immigrants in the Netherlands - and more specifically over subsequent generations and birth cohorts - obtain higher educational levels. In this upward trend, the family context in which a child grows up is of great importance in shaping their educational paths. Specifically for children of immigrants, the interplay between migration background and the socio-economic position of the family plays an important role in their educational trajectories – similar to their peers without a migration background. However, an underlying notion is that socio-economic position works differently for children with and without a migration background. For the latter, education is assumed to be a reproduction of the socio-economic status of the family - i.e., little upward social mobility in education – whereas for children of immigrants socio-economic background potentially interacts with their migration background in striving for upward social mobility in education – i.e., migrant parents with lower SES standing may encourage their children in their educational endeavors to choose ambitiously and to study ardently and ‘make it’ in the land of arrival. Hence, children of immigrants may realize more upward social mobility through education than their non-migrant peers as for them sizeable upward intergenerational mobility through education had

already been realized in the decades preceding the scope of this dissertation and thus limiting further upward mobility.

The Netherlands has had a history of implementing policy for emancipation of disadvantaged groups through education. Before the focus on children of immigrants, the support programs and policies of the Dutch education system in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at raising and emancipating (in Dutch: “*verheffen*”) working-class children through education. Emancipating in this context meant creating equal opportunities and ameliorating the position of disadvantaged groups in society. Hence, the issues and subsequent policies are not new, even if the groups are. Although these were initially aimed at Dutch children from lower social classes, from 1980 onwards the focus shifted to children of immigrants who entered education in these years. This was due to fast rising immigration rates through family reunification, and the substantial immigration of Surinamese just before and during the declaration of independence of this former colony in 1975, whose children entered the Dutch school system upon arrival. The year 1980 is therefore a good starting point to study the educational trajectories of children of immigrants. The data in recent years originate from large-scale population studies – sometimes even national register data, yet the further back to the 1980s the scarcer and more limited the data became. This does not mean – however – that these scattered data are useless for long-term analysis, only that they should be approached more cautiously. Combined, these data provide an overarching picture over time of the educational trajectories and developments of children of immigrants in the Netherlands – as elaborated in Chapter 3 – rather than an in-depth examination of the underlying mechanisms – as elaborated in the subsequent chapters. Although social scientists commonly use shorter time frames, they do provide important insights by comparing birth cohorts and generations as examined strictly – which is important because integration per definition is a long-term intergenerational process (Alba & Nee, 2003). A wealth of studies on the education of children of immigrants in the Netherlands has been conducted across disciplines varying from sociology, economics, and education sciences to social and economic history. The social science research that investigates educational inequality and the educational trajectories of children of immigrants, however, tends to analyze a relatively contemporary scope of a couple of years (see for exceptions the work of van de Werfhorst and van Tubergen for example), and hence a limited time frame. Moreover, studies that trace the trends in educational trajectories of children of immigrants before the early 2000s are scarce. This dissertation is uniquely situated at an intersection between social science and social history by incorporating insights, methods, and time frames from both disciplines.

Back to the questions at hand in this dissertation, and the principal research question of this dissertation, as formulated: how did the educational attainment of children of immigrants evolve

between 1980 and 2020 and how did the perspectives on this change? The three sub-questions were (1) how the educational trajectories of children of immigrants developed over the last forty years; (2) how the explanations of these trajectories shifted and (3) how migration background interacted with other student characteristics in affecting these trajectories.

The bottom line: education, family and context

This dissertation takes an aggregated approach by examining trends in education such as track placement and attendance among children of immigrants over time generally and has tried to uncover mechanisms that affect the educational trajectories of children of immigrants in the Netherlands in particular. This has amounted to three main conclusions.

First: overall, with time children of immigrants perform better in school. There is an ongoing upward trend in the educational level of children of immigrants from Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, and the Antilles, with those born more recently, overwhelmingly the second generation, doing better – as shown in the time series in chapter 3 – and drop-out less frequently – as found in chapter 6. This upward trend seems to be driven especially by girls with an immigrant background. They have on average higher educational attainment and lower dropout rates than their male peers. This is not an immigrant-specific trend: in the majority population, girls drop out of school less frequently than boys do, as well as outperform them in general education levels (Traag & van der Velden, 2011). Regarding dropout rates, students with a migration background are overrepresented in dropout rates – as shown in chapter 6. This provides a caveat to an upward trend of education among children of immigrants: this does not apply to everyone, particularly sons of immigrants in VMBO and MBO tracks living in larger cities fall behind, since dropping out of school is shown to have long-term consequences (Beckers & Traag, 2005). This conclusion indicates - as an answer to the first sub question - that a general upward trend in the education of children of immigrants is observed, although a small group of sons of immigrants in particular is at risk of dropping out of school.

Secondly, socio-economic background is seen as a pivotal explanation of the educational trajectories of children of immigrants – as shown in chapter 4. Regarding the impact of economic capital, I can conclude from chapter 5 that this matters for educational attainment at secondary school as well as in adulthood. In particular, the fifth chapter showed how parental income affects the education level of children of immigrants in both the short – i.e., in secondary school - and long run - in adulthood. Yet, this association was found to be slightly weaker among the second generation with a Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese migration background than among Antillean and Indonesian

families. This means that parental income positively influences education in secondary school and adulthood for children of all migration backgrounds, yet more so in Antillean and Indonesian families than in Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese families. Third, the living environment impacts the educational position of children of immigrants considerably. This particularly pertains to youth that is already at risk of a disrupted educational career: boys who grow up in more urbanized neighborhoods are more likely to drop out of school – as shown in chapter 6.

Contextualization of the findings

The conclusion of a general upward trend since the 1980s for the educational position of children of immigrants is a firm rebuke of the pessimistic outlook in public debates on the positions of children of immigrants in the Netherlands as described by Lucassen and Lucassen (2015). Moreover, it defies the “immigrant paradox” in the Dutch context. The immigrant paradox postulates that recent immigrants and less integrated people with a migration background often outperform those who are part of second and further generations, who seem to lose the drive and aspirations of the initial migrants (Garcia Coll et al., 2012). In the United States especially, this would have given way to downward assimilation as one of the paths. Furthermore, the idea of the Dutch educational system as meritocratic seems to be a myth: family background – both regarding migration history and socioeconomic features - affects the educational trajectories of children of immigrants in the Netherlands. One’s talent, achievement, and effort are important but do not automatically prevail over socio-economic standing, as also recently concluded by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (2023).

Although not explicitly studied here, the slightly optimistic conclusions on the educational positions of children of immigrants cannot be seen separately from discrimination. Discrimination in education can hamper the educational outcomes of children of immigrants, as seen for example in discrimination in track recommendation advice, or school access. However, given that children of immigrants may face discrimination in their educational trajectories, the conclusions in this dissertation are further underpinned. Imagine what their educational positions would look like if these institutional or discriminatory barriers and practices would diminish or no longer exist. The upward trend in the educational positions of children of immigrants discussed here could therefore be an underestimation of their potential. Again, imagine what the educational trajectories of children of immigrants would look like without institutional discriminatory hindrances.

The groups of immigrants and their descendants that are commonly included in migration studies in the Netherlands are of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, and Antillean descent. The children of immigrants from these four countries constitute the main migrant population in this dissertation as well as among the largest migrant groups in the country at large. Two additional groups are included: children of Indonesian immigrants (chapter 5) and children of Chinese immigrants (chapter 6). These two groups are chosen for specific reasons. Children with an Indonesian background constitute a very diverse group; from children with Moluccan roots, mixed heritage (the large majority), *spijtoptanten*, to the offspring of former Dutch bureaucrats, officials and higher skilled staff in the Dutch Indies. Remarkably, Indonesians were long seen as “Westers” (Western) in previous categorizations of Statistics Netherlands, whereas people immigrating from Suriname, or the Dutch Antilles were seen as “niet-Westers” (non-Western). Despite their diverse roots, and the varying timing of their immigration, including children of Indonesian immigrants provides insights through the comparisons with other post-colonial groups such as Surinamese and Antilleans and offers an opportunity to examine whether explanatory mechanisms like the colonial bonus or malus (Oostindie, 2011) hold for multiple post-colonial groups in education. Chapter five offered insights into the comparable impact of income on educational outcomes within both Indonesian migrant families and non-migrant families. This conclusion tentatively indicates the absence of a discernible colonial advantage or disadvantage. The children of Chinese immigrants are included because they perform remarkably well academically (Gijsberts et al., 2011). In the sixth chapter, some bivariate indication substantiated this as considerably fewer children of Indonesian background dropped out of school. Because the academic and occupational successes of East Asian and Southeast Asian immigrants and their children often are attributed to hard work, assumed cultural values such as discipline and determination, are often contrasted to less successful migrant or ethnic groups, notwithstanding harsh criticism on this rather stereotypical concept and its ramifications in the American context (Kiang et al., 2017; Kiang & Chan, 2009; Wong & Halgin, 2006; Yi & Museu, 2016).

The groups studied in this research are based upon a categorization dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, in which parental origin is an influential determinant. In this light, it should be noted that during the period this dissertation was written, these labels and categorizations at Statistics Netherlands changed: from a more parental heritage-based perspective to an emphasis on the country of birth of the individual and their parents. These six groups considered in this dissertation – however – do not represent the totality of children of immigrants in the Netherlands. For further research, it would be interesting to include children of refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Vietnam, who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, especially since earlier research showed that children of Iranian and Iraqi refugee parents perform above average in education (Maliepaard et al., 2017). There are more

recent refugee groups, like those from Syria and Eritrea whose socio-cultural positions show mixed results in the first studies focusing on these groups as shown by (Damen, Huijnk, et al., 2022; Damen, Van der Linden et al., 2022). Research into the educational trajectories of children of these refugees should be structurally compared with educational endeavors of children of other immigrants. Even more recently, refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan are seeking refuge in the Netherlands, although it should be noted that seeking refuge from the latter country is rather renewed or continual than recent. In both primary and secondary education, *schakelklassen* have been reintroduced to swiftly facilitate Dutch language learning of refugee children, most recently Ukrainians, to let them enroll in regular classes and schools as soon as possible. The Ukrainian children in schools are an especially interesting group for impending research as Ukrainian families did not have to go through the asylum procedure.

Another avenue for further research might be children with one parent born in the Netherlands and one parent born abroad. Next to their parent who is born abroad, these children have a parent without a migration background, or, a parent with a second-generation migration background – born in the Netherlands but with a migration background. Mixed parental heritage plays a role in the educational trajectories of children of immigrants as the parent without a migration background could offer more Dutch context-specific cultural capital, knowledge of the educational system, and the Dutch language than foreign-born parents, which would foster the educational outcomes of these children. Kalmijn (2015) concluded that in the Netherlands children of such mixed marriages – i.e., with one Dutch parent and a migrant parent - are often ‘halfway’ between group-level educational outcomes of immigrant children and children without a migration background. In addition, he explained how intermarriage and socio-economic position are interconnected: the positive effect of intermarriage was even more substantial as the family had a higher socio-economic status.

Although education is an important part of the integration of immigrant families, an upward trend in the educational positions of children of immigrants does not unequivocally equate a successful path of integration as integration is multifarious - it also includes life course outcomes such as employment, health, and family formation. Education can be a predictor or proxy for these other life course outcomes, as shown in non-migrant populations: higher education levels are associated with higher wages, stable employment, and better health. For children of immigrants, two provisos should be considered. First, school-to-work transitions are shown to be complicated among children of immigrants. Stark disparities in labor market outcomes as demonstrated in previous research indicate a gap between education levels and employment for children of immigrants and other ethnic and racial minorities (Alba & Foner, 2015; Drouhot and Nee, 2019; Heath et al. 2008; Van Tubergen et al.

2004). Research into hiring practices by Thijssen (2020) showed that discriminatory tendencies in the labor market vary across countries – in which the Netherlands stands out with higher levels of discrimination than other European countries such as Germany or Spain.

Secondly, research into “the integration paradox” showed that certain people with a migration background who are socio-economically more integrated may socio-psychologically avert from the host society (Verkuyten, 2016). Feelings of relative deprivation and perceived discrimination among higher-educated people with a migration background are suggested as reasons for this integration paradox both for the first and the second generation (Dagevos et al., 2022; de Vroome et al., 2014; Verkuyten, 2016). Hence, the upward trend in the educational trajectories of children of immigrants does not guarantee a smooth transition into a job, and obtaining higher education positions as a part of socio-economic integration does not unequivocally result in integration within multiple domains. This is in stark contrast with classical immigration theories that postulate that structural integration will result in integration in other domains.

Yet, higher education levels do not unequivocally result in integration into mainstream society. When studying educational positions, the conventional wisdom is “the higher, the better” as higher education positions are assumed to be associated with integration in domains outside structural socio-economic components in classical immigration theories. Despite the upward trend in educational positions of children of immigrants in the Netherlands observed in this dissertation, this adage of “higher is better” is ambiguous. On the one hand, higher education is often valued more than vocational education and employment. On the other hand, the assumption that “higher is better” does not imply that those who are lower educated or vocationally trained are not integrated. Vocational training is undoubtedly valued less in Dutch society, yet the skills and labor of the lower or vocationally trained may be more valuable with the growing demand in professions such as caretakers, nurses, public transport staff, and applied technicians.

These conclusions are reason to be mildly optimistic about the educational trajectories of children of immigrants. A steady upward trend since the 1980s is still going strong. Family background still matters: parents provide their children with capital to succeed in education. This is not only the case for children from non-migrant families, but children from immigrant families also benefit. However, the student’s performance and attainment play a key role too. Therefore, the characteristics of immigrant families should not be studied in a vacuum. The rather stratified Dutch education system may hinder students with a migration background employ their potential from an early age onward as they are often attending lower tracks in secondary school. Hence, it is crucial to provide students

who might be disadvantaged in the early stages of their education with additional support and loopholes to obtain higher education.

Despite the pessimistic turn the public debate on immigration and integration took around the turn of the century, it is important to acknowledge that educational attainment levels of children of immigrants have steadily increased over the last forty years. It is imperative that this provides a prospect for the younger generations. Charting a path forward, research and discourse should transcend beyond mere socio-economic or migration background and incorporate structural elements such as the stratified school system and consider agency such as tracking decisions. This way, a comprehensive understanding of educational inequality is fostered.