



**Access Equity  
Diversity and Inclusion  
in Higher Education**

## **THE PATHWAY TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

**A study of lower socioeconomic students achieving access to post-secondary education and striving for academic success in Dutch society**

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**GAPS**

GLOBAL ACCESS TO  
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Connecting the Unconnected

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## 1. Introduction

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From primary school to higher education, ethnic minority youths face serious educational disadvantages compared to their native-Dutch peers. Despite an intergenerational increase in enrollment of ethnic minorities in higher education the gap in educational achievement persists. This disadvantage in the educational system translates into a weaker position in the labor market which is reflected in higher unemployment rates and lower paid positions among ethnic minorities (Crul 2012, Forum 2012).

This gap in educational achievement and the labor market is particularly visible in multicultural disadvantaged neighborhoods such as Amsterdam Southeast. This neighborhood is known for its wealth of cultural diversity and at the same time for its poor performance in educational achievement and employment. A quarter of the citizens and a third of the children of this neighborhood live in relative poverty. Many live in single-parent households and have a non-western cultural background (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2007). These circumstances make it difficult for youths to develop their skills, to realize their full potential and to gain access to post-secondary education. This is reflected in the educational performance of the youths in Amsterdam Southeast. They attain the lowest average CITO-scores in Amsterdam, which is an exam which determines the track they will follow through secondary education. As a consequence only 34 percent of them are tracked into high levels of high school i.e. HAVO and VWO which prepare them for post-secondary education compared to an average 50 percent in the city of Amsterdam (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek, 2012).

Despite unhelpful circumstances some youths still manage to climb their way up the social and educational ladder to reach university, even after their teachers have advised them to attempt only lower levels of education.

Most researches focus on obstacles to educational performance but why not also focus on *what goes right?* We may find factors that stimulate educational performance, school success and access to postsecondary education. Moreover, we can learn from these positive outcomes and turn obstacles into opportunities. The question posed: *How did Black students with a low socioeconomic background who attend a university in the Netherlands develop upward social mobility and how did they navigate the pathway to postsecondary education?*

This report presents the outcomes of a study of 15 Black students who grew up in the social-economically disadvantaged Amsterdam Southeast but who gained access to postsecondary education in The Netherlands. These students were studied through ethnographic fieldwork; in-depth interviews and participant observations. The main topics discussed are the role of parents,

upbringing and the embodiment of the importance of education. Furthermore, this report will describe how these factors were used to overcome barriers in the Dutch educational system in order to achieve academic success.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

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This section provides the theoretical framework to examine obstacles and opportunities in the pathway to postsecondary education for Black students with a disadvantaged social position.

### **Social Mobility and Navigation**

Social stratification and social mobility are one of the oldest debates within sociology. According to Róbert (2010), Sorokin concluded that there has not been any society with complete openness or closure regarding the chances for mobility. Sorokin describes the *intensiveness* and *generality* of social mobility in vertical mobility. Intensiveness refers to the social distance, the number of classes an individual has 'move' upward or downward and the generality are the number of individuals who changed their class position compared to their parents class position (idem: 527). According to Róbert, Sorokin explains that large groups and sections of a population move socially upward owing to a variety of causal factors. But Bertaux and Thompson (1997) state that this pattern is rare. A majority of individuals circulate within the social structure, and only a minority create change in their social position by developing new spaces within the old structure, or by moving (in Benei 2010: 200).

The concept of *navigation* is helpful to understand social mobility. Navigating mostly refers to how people act in uncertain circumstances and describes how people disentangle themselves from confining circumstances, plot their escape and move to better positions (Vigh, 2009). Social navigation can be used to analyze how people act in the world and move towards perceived better position than their current situation. We can then study how people adjust strategies in relation to the way they experience and anticipate the influence of social forces (idem: 432). Social navigation is related to the aspirations to study in higher education; their goal to climb the social hierarchy and create upward social mobility.

### **Education as Vehicle for Social Mobility**

The parents are immigrants from the Caribbean or Africa who searched for a better quality of life in other countries. For many, education is seen as a vehicle for social mobility and was the most secure way of a better life. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) argued that many Black students are more optimistic about the future employment. They see education as a key to getting jobs, and a financially stable life. Minority students are still optimistic regarding education even when they show low school performance. Many Black students see education as a worthy strategy to gaining better social positions in society. Education is still used as vehicle for social mobility by minority families from lower classes (Cole and Omari 2003: 799).

## **Parental Involvement**

Many studies show that parental involvement in school is related to children's school success and even college attendance. Parents who agreed on a home-school partnership were more able to achieve advantages for their children. "These studies suggest that parents who are pro-active and interact with the school on the school's terms have the most successful children" (Hardaway and McLoyd 2008: 249). A skill that parents of academically successful children have is that they are effective at being advocates for their children at school, monitoring their progress throughout the school year and continuously communicating with the school personnel. Parental involvement can be seen as showing interest in the education of their children (idem: 249).

## **The Possible Selves**

Another noticeable positive factor is the *possible self* or future self-image of the student. This possible self can be explained as negative or positive images of the self in future state. The term describes the embodiment of future goals into the self-concept. By having actual future images of positive expectations and negative 'to-be-avoided' attitudes, possible selves personalize aims and ambitions and connect current behavior to future states. As a result, the possible selves become a way of enhancing self-regulation (Oyserman et al. 2007: 479).

"School-focused possible selves describe expectations and concerns regarding one's school success and academic attainment, including images of oneself "passing" or avoiding "failing" as well as more global images such as "being smart" (idem: 482). Possessing school-focused possible selves has a positive effect on academic goals among students. These students have specific school-focused possible selves and strategies to attain them like, being present in class or asking the teacher for help. They also are likely to do better in school than those who do not perform these activities. Black students who possess school-focused possible selves also lower their risk of becoming involved in delinquent activities (idem: 482).

*"Feared offtrack possible selves are possible selves focused on avoiding outcomes like becoming pregnant, hooked on drugs, or involved in crime that can have a derailing effect on school and other future possibilities"* (idem: 482). If a student possesses a feared offtrack possible self, this can reduce absence in class and thus lower the risk of school dropout. In contexts where parents and children live in low-income, high unemployment areas, parental school involvement will give children school-focused and fear offtrack possible selves. This will encourage the belief that school involvement and

effort in school will both increase chances of school success and reduce chances of becoming offtrack (idem: 482).

### 3. The Family Support System and Social Environment

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If one researches the access to postsecondary education for Black academic students from Amsterdam Southeast, commonly students start with elaborating their home environment, family and upbringing. This chapter discusses the family support system in order to understand its essential role for school success and future achievements.

#### **The Crucial Role of Parental Support**

For Black university students, the major factor for school success was their parents. This may seem logical, but the question arises how come these low-educated parents in a disadvantaged environment were able to raise a child with educational success? The students described their family support system and its strong foundation to increase chances to study at university.

Most students were from single-parent households, which meant that fathers were absent. Consequently, the mother became central at home. Within the students' accounts, the role of the mother was crucial in regard to their school success and how they embraced education in their lives. Evidentially, the students did not only derive from a disadvantaged social background but were also raised by single-mothers who also worked to provide for her family. All students referred to being raised in a home environment which stressed the importance of education and the value of schooling. Doing homework, achieving good grades and good school reports were appreciated at home, and were sometimes even rewarded by presents. Furthermore, the mothers would buy educational games, stimulate library visits, help with homework, hire tutors to help with homework and attend parent's nights at school. All in all, she would keep a close eye on grades and school reports in order to ensure school success.

While walking in the market, I met 25-year-old Simon studying Political Science in Amsterdam. When I asked what contributed to his pathway to postsecondary education, he began with the following:

*"My upbringing, I learned much discipline during my childhood. Especially my mother, she tried in her way to stimulate education. Despite the fact she did not possess the cultural capital to stimulate high school performance. She learned me; your diploma is your first woman"*

Simon mentioned his mother took him to plays and made him and his sisters read books at the table. The saying '*your diploma is your first woman*', is derived from the Surinamese proverb: *your diploma*



*is your first man'*, which is mostly pronounced to Surinamese girls by their parents to teach them independence and how education is the most secure way for emancipation.



*Simon: 'I wanted to be the president of the world'*

In addition to showing the importance of education through behavior, the mothers would express the importance of education explicitly. Raya lives in Amsterdam Southeast her whole life and never experienced the feeling of living in a disadvantaged neighborhood or felt being financial instable at home, like most students. She was raised by a single-mother, and remembers clearly how her mother would emphasize to do well in school:

*"She would always ask: 'Did you do your homework? Does someone need to help you with homework?' She definitely created an environment where I could do my thing. Like, 'do not make your homework in bed, sit at the table'. Stimulation you need to receive from home. I definitely had that stimulation"*

In the streets of Amsterdam Southeast it is noticeable that a new campaign has started to stimulate fathers to participate in their children's upbringing. On these posters was written: *'Be a D.A.D.: Dedicated Active Dad'*. As mentioned before, in most upbringings the father was absent. However these students did have contact with their fathers. The absent of the biological father in many Afro-Caribbean families is not a new phenomenon. These family structure where children are raised by their mother or other female relatives are referred to as matrifocality. Matrifocality find its origin according to some in West-African culture, whereas others mainly attribute it to disruption of family life during slavery. Today, partly due to unfavorable economic circumstances men are not enabled to fulfill their expected role as breadwinner (Distelbrink, 1998). It is therefore more interesting how dedicated these single-mothers were to raise children who entered university. There were some

students who did come from a two-parents' home. Although the father was present, the mother still had a central role in regard to education.

According to most students, they were aware of their talent in school: they were performing well in school, achieving good grades and receiving outstanding school reports. Raya refers it to this:

*"I knew I was born with a gift"*

With this *gift*, attending university became part of their worldview. Their school performances confirmed their capability, and ambition took its path: passing elementary school, graduating VWO and then attending university. Their school performances acknowledged their *gift*, but it became clear in an interview with the 25-year-old Serge that it takes more to attend postsecondary education than only being talented in school:

*"For a kid to perform its best, a home has to acknowledge its talents to get its full potential. In the neighborhood, they neglect the children's talents"*

As is seen in the student's accounts, it is required to establish a home environment which recognizes, encourages and stimulates talents to grasp a child's full potential and increase its chances in better access to postsecondary education. According to Serge, this particular active form of parenting is also useful in an environment like Amsterdam Southeast which deals with working single-parents, lack of role models and negative peer pressure. This form of positive attention keeps children motivated and is part of preparing them for higher education.

In short, the family support system is crucial in the educational outcomes and on academic success for the respondents of this study. Overall, parental involvement is also significant in the Dutch educational system in regards to access to postsecondary education, which will be more elaborated in the next chapter.

### **Positive Peer Pressure**

Amsterdam Southeast is known for its diversity of cultures but also for its negative image of criminality and other consequences of poverty. But how come certain youths from this neighborhood do study in higher levels of education and why do some not? Do these negative role models have any influence?

Outside of their home in their social environment, it seemed that all students created a balance in to stay on the right path. When the students had to describe themselves (in regard to education), all

gave themselves labels such as '*motivated*' and '*focused*'. It meant they always did homework, made sure they passed classes and worked to accomplish every educational level. They were focused on finishing their education and therefore never experienced any distractions as would be assumed in such environment. They would stay away from negative role models on the street and did not participate in any activities that would risk their educational career or delay their future goals.

Oyserman (2007) explains this type of behavior by the concept of *possible selves* which "has been coined to describe incorporation of future goals into the self-concept" (Markus & Nurius, 1986 in Oyserman et al. 2007). Possible selves can function to personalize goals and associate current behavior to future states. As a result, it improves the capacity of self-regularity and makes the present state meaningful (idem: 479). A form of possible selves is the *feared offtrack possible selves*. The feared offtrack possible selves' focuses on avoiding outcomes that negatively influence a good school reputation. It avoids outcomes "like becoming pregnant, hooked on drugs, or involved in crime that can have a derailing effect on school and other future possibilities" (idem: 481)

Another *possible selves* which can explain the drive, commitment and discipline of the students is called the *school-focused possible selves*. The school-focused possible selves is described as "expectations and concerns regarding one's school success and academic attainment, including images of oneself "passing" or avoiding "failing" as well as more global images such as "being smart" (idem: 481). The students prepare themselves for the future by focusing on school and educational achievements. As their mothers stressed that education is the key to success, they would spend their time and energy in their schoolwork in order to gain control over their future plans. These future educational plans include the aim to finish high school with a VWO-diploma and to attend university afterwards. By making the relationship between the present and future in terms of education, the concept of possible self can be usable for understanding the created attitude in order to do well in school.

One of the strategies of the fear offtracked – and school-focused possible selves is how it creates an environment that stimulates a future goal. According to the students, social contacts were therefore chosen, and decisions are made that would be *not* a distraction to their ambition. In the case of the male students, there was a difference in establishment of social contacts and friendships. It was more difficult for them who *did* have friends of the neighborhood with no ambitions to attend postsecondary education. As a natural gradual process, these friends and male students eventually grew apart as they did not share the same interest and priorities.

The female students surrounded themselves with friends from school, mostly from the same educational level. According to these female respondents, all of their friends shared the same vision of importance of education and how it is an asset to develop in society. Because they shared the same norms and values on this matter, the circle of friends was experienced as being stimulating and motivating educational achievements. Raya's quote represents this:

*"When one of my friends or I have exams, we don't call each other to hang out or tempt to visit parties. It is like, when I know my best friend has her exams, I leave her in her 'cocoon'. We all know that socializing is a less priority at that moment. Also my niece calls me up in the morning: 'Raya? Get up! You have to study!' And I do go and study, because if I do not I feel guilty"*

- Raya, 26

In this quote we can see there was a mutual understanding about priorities and boundaries. All female students realized how their social environment influenced their discipline and school commitment. Peer pressure was therefore motivating to keep consistency in good school performances. Raya continues:

*"And you know what? We all attend university, they are doing so great, and I do not want to be left behind!"*

### **The Strive for Upward Social Mobility**

It was obvious that education and school were very important in the students' homes, but the question arises: why would the family support system stress the importance of education? To answer this, we have to start with the migrant background of the parents.

All parents were immigrants from the colonies Suriname or migrants from Ghana. According to the students, their parents left their home country for a better quality of life for themselves and their children, and wanted to live in a society with more opportunities. However, when these parents arrived in the Netherlands they landed in the margins of society again and so did their children. In order to strive for social mobility, education was considered as a secure way to climb the social ladder. They wanted their children to be well qualified for jobs and have financial security in the future. Surinamese parents have a positive attitude toward Dutch education and high aspirations for their children's future. They hope that their children will improve their social position in society through schooling (Eldering 340: 1997).

*“The idea to attend university? Really came from my parents, they ‘bomb’ me with university and education. Because my dad did not attend post-secondary education, he really wanted this dream for his daughter”*

- Billie, 28

When I asked why university? Billie answered with a laugh:

*“I call it the job-triangle. In the Black community, you would either become a doctor, lawyer or judge or an accountant. It seemed the world was all about these occupations. And sometimes you hear engineer. Therefore you must attend university, it is prestige. Being well educated meant status”*

Nowadays the meaning of education has expanded to more than just social mobility and financial security. Attending university was for each student an experience that grabs them out of their comfort zone and helped them to grow. Education is now seen as a way to develop one’s self. Postsecondary education was able to contribute more to their worldview, critical thinking and perspective on life. Unexpectedly, they gained more in life than a good education. The 23-year-old student Vincent studies Econometrics. He experienced university as learning to think-outside-the-box, which distinguishes him from his peers in the neighborhood. Education changed his way of thinking:

*‘Education changed my perspective; I can put more in perspective now’*

The pathway to post-secondary education and attending university was not only a mind-blowing experience; it was also a culture shock and challenging task for these first-generation students. The Dutch educational system seemed also to create barriers for the Black student with ambition to study in postsecondary education. The next chapter will discuss how they experienced barriers and how they navigated the obstacles to fulfill their dreams and ambitions.



## 4. Obstacles in the Education System

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After describing the strong foundation for a school-motivated student to grasp her or his full potential, there is another side to the story in gaining access to postsecondary education in the Netherlands. For many students being talented was not enough to prove their ability in the school system and sometimes high grades were not acknowledged or were questioned. As a result, gaining access to postsecondary education became a challenging pathway. The students and their family had to navigate the Dutch educational system in order to achieve a goal: attending university. Which obstacles did most students have to conquer and how were they able to overcome these successfully?

### **The Ambiguous Role of Teachers**

It was not easy to find respondents from Amsterdam Southeast but each time it was worth hearing their stories about their pathway to postsecondary education. It is noteworthy to mention that all of these individuals experienced that they were one of the few who had a negative confrontation within school walls or society. Especially, they were all not sure how to express themselves about the issues they had encountered. The most interesting finding was the complexity and ambiguous role of the Dutch educational system. On the one hand, the school system was stimulating for the motivated and hard-working students wanting to reach higher education by accumulating diplomas. But on the other hand it had a tricky side to this philosophy of showing your motivation and if hard work would really pay off.

In the Netherlands the CITO-test and school advice in primary school have a deciding role in which track a student will take in the education system and even maybe in society. Irene did not mind calling herself a nerd. In class she would always receive good grades which showed her eagerness to learn. She would therefore ask the teacher for her grades. According to Irene, this attitude could be interpreted as one of being motivated and taking education seriously. However, her teachers perceived her as being annoying and impatient. Her behavior was observed by teachers further as she was bullied:

*“I was bullied for being a nerd in primary school. And of course, I would not get thrown over by those bullies. Unfortunately, the teachers only focused on that part and would see me as a student with behavioral problems. They were ready to send me to a special school, although I had very good grades”*

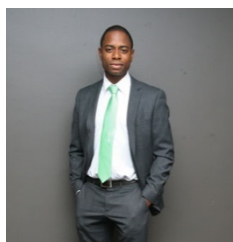
This phenomenon was common within this study - teachers' interpretations of behavior and attitudes had a negative impact on school advise to enter VWO. Another story shows the contradictions in the teachers' role. Eldrina is a 24-year-old student who studies law but remembers how teachers in primary school would classify her behavior:

*"They wanted me to attend HAVO, but I had grades for VWO. The teachers said it was because I was too quiet and calm, and said that they could not see I really wanted to attend VWO"*

Also Raya recounts that the school material was too easy and she finished assignments before most students. As a result, she got easily bored. She could not sit still and would try to talk.

*"On the basis of that, they said I was a too busy kid to actually attend higher levels of education"*

Also the story of Eddy starts at primary school in Amsterdam Southeast when a teacher underestimated his potential to attend higher levels of education. He saw this moment as his primary motivation to strive for educational success and especially to gain access to postsecondary education. According to Eddy, the teachers judged him more on his behavior rather than his good grades. Eddy wanted to attend postsecondary education and would not settle for less. He eventually scored 537 on the CITO-test, which meant he could go to HAVO. But his school wanted to send him to VMBO because of his behavior. They called him too busy. In contrast to earlier predictions of his teachers, Edward is now a graduate university student who studies further at the prestigious business school Nyenrode in the Netherlands. He works in the banking sector on his way to become a CEO.



*"Do not be afraid to adapt, if you want to achieve your goal"*

In the Netherlands there is a great emphasis on having a certain attitude to enter higher levels of education. Your behavior as a student has a deciding role in gaining access postsecondary education. To understand this phenomenon, the concept of cultural capital and social reproduction will be used to gain better insights into this issue. According to Bourdieu (1977) social reproduction of inequality starts with education. At home cultural resources are transmitted by one's milieu, for example



interactional forms, language use, interests, taste for art and culture and social and cultural opinion and preferences. Therefore *cultural capital* cannot be learned at school but can be obtained from homes with parents of the dominant culture. In education a selection occurs where certain cultural capital (of the highbrow culture or dominant culture) is rewarded: *“The stronger the embedding of parents in the dominant class and the more orientated child rearing is toward the dominant culture, the more comfortable their children feel at school and the more they benefit from that which is being taught”* (Driessen 515: 2001). But with a limited economic capital and lower social-economic background, there is a disadvantaged position with fewer resources to possess the required cultural capital for higher levels of education.

In the case of the Netherlands, the issue also arises in an unclear consensus about the proper behavior for a VWO-class. Most students were labeled as being busy, however some were too quiet to obtain a VWO-education. But more interesting is how good grades were not enough to prove to teachers that students were capable of gaining access to higher levels of education, especially a VWO-class. This brings us to the dubious role of the teacher: grades supposed to justify a student’s potential. Does the teacher nowadays need to adjust her or his task because of the development of a multicultural society and its citizens, to not overlook colored children with academic potential? Also is it not a teacher’s task to grasp a child’s full potential by offering challenges? These questions are important as it is evident that many students encountered teachers who were ready to send them a level below their scores and competence but did end up in a VWO-class or with a detour at university. It seems that education plays a role in social reproduction which can be a barrier for Black students with academic ambitions.

Billie, who became a local politician, was advised to attend VMBO after taking the CITO-test. Of course, her father and she were very disappointed as VWO was the aim:



*“I wanted to work hard to attend higher levels of education. I knew which steps to take to get there. I did not wanted to make jokes, no delays! Delays really frustrated me”*

– Billie, 28

Billie eventually accomplished her aim to study at university. It makes one also wonder if CITO and school advisers are good predictors for students’ educational potential? And if teachers really have an objective role in determining students’ pathways to postsecondary education? In short, it seems

that one of the main factors in access to postsecondary education is the teacher - teachers are the gatekeepers to your academic future and can 'make or break' you.

### **Important Role of Parental Involvement**

As mentioned before parental support is crucial in the pathway to postsecondary education. Becoming involved in their children's education takes more effort for parents from Amsterdam Southeast. Many of them struggle with cultural differences, experience language barriers and do not fully understand the Dutch educational system:

*"What I do recognize is that immigrant parents do not know how the Dutch educational system works and what it consist. And sometimes do not even know the language. Because of that children could be stimulated from home, but they do not know which educational level they should strive for. Some parents do not know the difference between VMBO, HAVO and VWO and its opportunities"*

- Billie, 28

Also the 25-year-old Irene was raised in Amsterdam Southeast and has now graduated from Business Administration. When I asked her the major factor in gaining access to postsecondary education, she answered:

*"Support from home. We were all very stimulated from home. My mother would not take less for an answer. She would ask without shame how the educational system is constructed"*

Irene's case is similar to most students where their parents were involved in their education by attending parents' nights and report evaluations. Here *social navigation* (Vigh, 2009) lies in the active mothers who act in difficult circumstances and disentangle themselves from unsatisfactory positions. They move to better positions by taking an active role in conversations with teachers and being assertive in discussing conflicting opinions in regard to their child's education. They were not afraid to ask questions, would initiate discussing with the teachers and were confident that their child was able to attend higher levels of education. It shows how people act in the world to move towards a perceived better position with its possibilities than accept the current situation with its constraints. All in all, the parents were empowered and had courage to go against teachers and school authorities.

### **Prejudices**

The complexity continues in how these students could not wrap their head around the confrontations they encountered. They felt that their teachers within the school system projected

negative judgments on them, but was it prejudice? Or discrimination? Maybe even racism? Where one is not acknowledged to have capabilities it is hard to believe there is potential. This can be an interesting subject as all students did eventually enter university, even though they were underestimated during their school career.

When asked why prejudices exist, many claimed that it had also to do with the image of Amsterdam Southeast as being disadvantaged, with no great numbers of students attending higher levels of education. Over 40 percent of Dutch students graduate from HAVO/VWO in comparison with 22 percent who are of Surinamese origin. These numbers affect the attendance to university where only 16 percent of Surinamese students are visible (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2012). This can influence the image of colored children in the school system and among teachers with the consequence of lower enrollment in higher education and lack of positive role models for other Black students.

An interesting finding is how topics like discrimination, prejudice and racism are often discussed within the community and informal life. But it seems as if these topics are taboo in a country that portrays itself as being tolerant and known for its color-blind politics. It leaves Black students unsure of how to identify discrimination. All in all, Black students are still aware of their skin color in The Netherlands, the place where they were born and bred.



## 5. Conclusion

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This study started with the question: How did Black students from a low socioeconomic background who attend a university in the Netherlands develop upward social mobility and how did they navigate the pathway to postsecondary education? It seems that parents are the strong foundation for a Black student to achieve educational success and their upbringing embodies the importance of education. Not only were these students talented, but it was their parents who acknowledged, stimulated and encouraged their talent so that they could develop their full potential. Most students came from single-parent homes which meant that the mother had a central role in the home. As a consequence, the mother played a crucial role in the family support system to raise a child who would be academically successful.

Although these students had a strong foundation for educational success, the Dutch educational system holds unexpected barriers when ambitions to attend postsecondary education arise. The students and their parents encountered the complexity and ambiguous role of the Dutch school system primarily in confrontations with the teachers. Most students were underestimated by teachers and were planned to be sent to lower levels of educations. But because of the active mothers' social navigation during difficult circumstances they disentangle themselves from unsatisfactory positions. Mothers were assertive in discussing conflicting opinions in regards to their child's education. Moreover they were confident in their child's abilities to study postsecondary education and would initiate discussion with teachers. Basically, the mothers were empowered and had courage to go against teachers and school authorities. Many families could not place these experiences which led to question about discrimination. Today the students are still aware of their skin color in Dutch society. They definitely saw a barrier in coming from a disadvantaged neighborhood and ignorance of teachers who are not in touch with a positive image of that environment. But the question is left open whether their skin color played a role in the challenges of Dutch education system.

All in all, it was the mother who had a crucial role in the educational achievements of Black student; in their opportunities and breaking barriers. The combination of parental support, mothers' involvement and encouragement of talent were the strategy to educational ambitions, overcoming challenges in the Dutch educational system and eventually achieving academic success.

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### Online resources

- <http://www.os.amsterdam.nl/> (visited on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2012)
- <http://www.forum.nl/Home/Publicatiedetail/NewsListId/20/NewsItemId/2568> (visited on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2012)
- [http://www.trendsbeeld.minocw.nl/grafieken/3\\_1\\_1\\_20.php](http://www.trendsbeeld.minocw.nl/grafieken/3_1_1_20.php) (visited on August 27<sup>st</sup> 2013)
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_the\\_Netherlands#Mbo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_Netherlands#Mbo) (visited on August 27<sup>st</sup> 2013)

# ATTACHMENTS

## Dutch Educational System

In the Netherlands schools are divided in public, private and special schools (with religious, philosophical or educationally orientation), but most pupils attend public schools. The government financially supports both public and special schools if the criteria are met and private schools which are highly uncommon rely on their own funds. Primary and high schools are free of charge but parental contribution is frequently asked. Children in the Netherlands have to attend school full time from the age of five till they reach the age of eighteen.

From the age of five children attend primary school and starts at class one till class eight. When a pupil attends class seven, the educational tracking starts. The *entrée*-test is the pre-test to the CITO-test which will actually track you in the schooling system in high school. Most pupils are 9 or 10 years old when they are examined for the *entrée*-test. The result forms part of the school advice. In class eight, pupils have to take the CITO-test which will track them in high school. On certain school the school advice, the overall observation of grades and behavior weights more than the CITO-test scores. But other schools perceive the CITO-test as the gate tickets to the educational levels. Within the elementary system it is also possible to skip one class or be held back.

CITO scores from elementary schools	Educational track/level in high school	Post-education
501-522	VMBO-Basisberoepgerichte leerweg	Middle-level applied education (MBO)
522-527	VMBO-B+ Kaderberoepgerichte leerweg	
524-528	VMBO Kaderberoepgerichte leerweg	
528 – 532	VMBO Kaderberoepgerichte leerweg/gemengde/theoretische leerweg	
530-535	VMBO Gemengde/theoretische leerweg	
533-536	VMBO Gemengde/theoretische leerweg/HAVO (all 4-years)	
538 – 541	HAVO (5 years)	College for Applied Sciences (HBO)
538 - 545	HAVO/VWO brugklas	
545 - 550	VWO (6 years)	University (WO)

When a student reaches the age of 11 or 12, it attends high school. Certain high schools only teach VMBO, or HAVO/VWO or even all educational levels. A high school with all educational levels sometimes have a first two-year class with mixed educational levels for students to prove themselves to attend certain levels without taking in account the CITO-test scores. These are called *brugklassen*. In these schools teaching all educational levels, it is possible to move up or slide down to other educational levels. It is a system that can work beneficial or not.

VWO education gains access to university. But after HAVO, a student can study applied science or attend one year more to obtain a VWO-diploma, but with acquired grades. This

also counts for a VMBO-student who wants to attend HAVO. After HAVO-applied science track, one can gain access to university depending on which training.

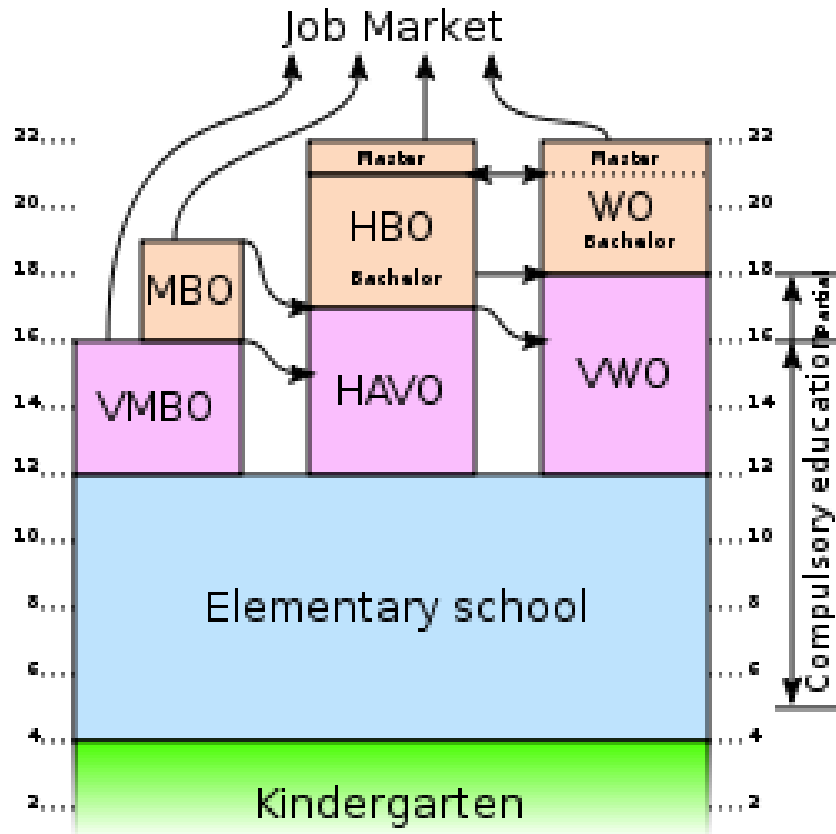


Image: Wikipedia



## Methodology

In this section the methodology will be discussed. This ethnographic research used qualitative research methods to sought information and gathers data. The research methods and their relevance will be made clear.

### Participant observations

During participant observation you are observing as well as taking part of the social context. In participant observation the aim is to further understand the Black students' perspective and point of view within the context of their own lived experience. By using this method you can learn from the group of study by observing them and participating in their daily lives (O'Reilly 2005: 84).

Participating in their daily lives means talking to them, watching them, asking questions, thinking and writing about what they are saying, analyzing what they are doing and being critical about these activities (idem: 59). It involves taking mental and actual notes as you go along (idem: 84).

### Field notes

Field notes are part of field working. *Field note taking* is a process of writing of notes concerning the observation and reflection of the field. It is a form of representation in a reduced version of just-observed events, persons and places in a written account. It reduces the complex social world in words that can be studied, reviewed and thought time and time again. Field notes are intended to make descriptive account of people, scenes and dialogues and also personal experience and response, so theorizing and interpretations (Atkinson et al. 2001: 353). With this method I wrote my data that I have observed and experienced.



ECHO Junior Academy August 2013: 'I want to be a lawyer' and 'Be a hero, or lawyer! Make money, have a good job!'

## Interviews

Another way to obtain answers is by conducting in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are a way of finding meaning in experiences, behavior, feelings, opinions and statements of the students. It is an explicit way of getting to know different topics like why they choose to attend higher education and how they achieve this goal. It is searching for the experiences of the students and understanding their path to postsecondary education in the Netherlands. An interview gives insight of how and why certain cases are what they are and if they are changing. It can also help by shining new light on old problems and understanding complex situations and problems. An interview is semi-structured which means questions are prepared but there is no rigid structure that is need to be held (O'Reilly, 2005). Informal interviews are spontaneous and be done at every moment. It could lead to more information about the participant observation or event. All interviews took an hour and were recorded with permission.

## Respondents

This research focused on the point of view of fifteen Black academic students in the Dutch society and who have been raised in Amsterdam Southeast. Most students are from Suriname and Ghana and were between the age of 18 -30 years old. All students have participated in the Dutch educational system and currently study at Dutch universities or are graduated. Moreover, also four key figures were interviewed to obtain a broader perspective on the issues.

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnic Background	Study/Occupation	Respondent
Simon	25	M	Surinamese	BA Political Science	Student
Vincent	23	M	Ghanaian	BA Econometrics	Student
Serge	24	M	Surinamese	Graduated MA Economics	Graduated Student
Eddy	26	M	Surinamese	Post-doctoral Register Controlling	Graduated Student
Akwasi	24	M	Ghanaian	MA Business Administration	Student
Lemar	26	M		MA Political Science	Student
Virgil	22	M	Antillean	MA Business Administration	Graduated Student
Penny		V	Surinamese/ Ghanaian	BA ***	Student
Irene	25	V	Surinamese	MA Business Administration	Graduated Student

<b>Elvanka</b>	23	V	Surinamese		Student
<b>Raya</b>	26	V	Surinamese	Graduated MA Anthropology	Graduated Student
<b>Billie</b>	28	V	Ghanaian		Student
<b>Sitara</b>		V	Surinamese/Dutch		Student
<b>Romy</b>	26	V	Surinamese		Graduated Student
<b>Omar</b>		M	Surinamese	Teacher	Key figure
<b>Mitchell</b>	25	M	Surinamese	Social Entrepreneur	Key figure
<b>Pravini</b>		V	Surinamese	ECHO Mentorprogramme Coordinator	Key figure
<b>Dalg</b>		V	Surinamese	Local Politician	Key figure