Cluster: Youth and education

Project 1: How positive and negative peer relations affect school well-being, academic achievement, and problem behaviors in secondary education

Aim
To understand why some children manage to make the transition from primary to secondary education successfully whereas other children experience more difficulties.

Theoretical background
The transition from primary education to secondary education is accompanied by two important challenges for children. Socially, children need to fit in a new peer environment in large secondary schools. Academically, children are confronted with higher expectations and demands regarding their schoolwork. It is widely accepted that one important precondition for children's academic success is being socially integrated in the peer context (Ryan & Shin, 2018). Children with positive peer relations, perform academic ally better than children who lack these positive relations. However, it is less well understood whether peer relations have the same impact on academic performance in primary education as in secondary education.

Furthermore, little is known about how peer relations in primary education transfer into secondary education and to what extent children maintain or change their previous peer experiences. For children who experienced negative peer relations (e.g., victimization, rejection) in primary education, the transition from primary to secondary education might be an important opportunity to create a new social stance in the peer group. However, when successfully changing negative peer experiences fails, these children may experience a double-negative-effect on their school-well-being and academic achievement, that is, experiencing negative peer relations *plus* the failure of the anticipated change in these peer relations (Huitsing et al., 2012).

Finally, problem behaviors, such as substance use, delinquency, and bullying, clearly undermine academic performance and success. These problem behaviors typically emerge in the presence of peers. Given the changing peer context from primary to secondary education, we seek to understand to what extent peer experiences in primary education set the stage for problem behaviors in secondary education.

Research design
This project is part of the larger *National Cohort Study Educational Careers* (NCO, Nationaal Cohortonderzoek Onderwijs) on peer relations in the transition from primary to secondary school, a collaboration between the University of Groningen, University of Amsterdam, NCO and CBS (Statistics Netherlands). This project will combine expertise from the fields of sociology, developmental psychology, and educational science. Longitudinal data will be collected over two adjacent school years (the final year of primary and the first year of secondary education). These data will be merged with existing register data on school careers and family background from the NCO. To examine the research questions both complete and ego-centered network data, well-being data (e.g., victimization, loneliness), and problem behavior data (e.g., substance use, bullying) will be collected and linked to academic achievement from the registers. Trajectory analyses will be used to assess patterns of (dis)continuation of positive and negative peer experiences from primary into secondary school.

Literature
Huitsing, G., Veenstra, R., Sainio, M., & Salmivalli, C. (2012). "It must be me" or "It could be them?": The impact of the social network position of bullies and victims on victims' adjustment. *Social Networks, 34*, 379–386.
Ryan, A. M. & Shin, H. (2018). Peers, academics, and teachers. In W.M. Bukowski, B. Laursen, & K.H. Rubin (eds.) *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups, 2nd edition (pp. 637-656)*. New York: Guilford.

Project initiators
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Location
Groningen