

Inequality of opportunity and selection in primary education

Aims: study (1) pupil selection processes in primary education and (2) the potential of an intervention to enhance teacher beliefs and practices that promote equality of educational opportunities.

Theoretical background:

In the Netherlands, educational differentiation often refers to the sorting of students upon their transition to secondary education. However, selective beliefs and practices may already take shape in the period before the moment of selection. From an early age, primary schools and teachers may anticipate selection by 'mentally' categorizing students (Domina et al. 2019; Geven et al. 2021). In many Dutch schools, students receive (a) preliminary track recommendation(s) one or more years before their final year. Moreover, teachers and schools can assign students into ability groups for specific courses, such as reading or math. Currently, existing research on within-school ability grouping originates from countries that are predominantly characterized by this type of selection. This literature shows that within-school selection practices vary widely between school contexts (Domina et al, 2019) and that more extensive within-school selection is related to higher levels of educational inequality. Surprisingly, much less is known about within-school selection practices in highly selective systems that apply between-school tracking, such as the Netherlands.

In this project, we study how teachers sort pupils into ability groups before the actual selection moment and to what extent these selection practices relate to teachers' growth-affording beliefs about pupils and, eventually, pupils' educational outcomes. In particular, the implementation of ability grouping may relate to teachers' beliefs on whether academic ability and talent are innate (fixed mindset) or can be developed through effort (growth mindset). In the second part of the project, we examine whether an intervention can enhance (growth-affording) beliefs and practices among teachers. Moreover, we wish to examine whether the intervention can enhance equal learning opportunities, by studying if such an intervention affects the educational outcomes among disadvantaged students. To do so, we look at the beliefs and performance (growth) of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Research design:

This PhD project is part of a larger project funded by the NRO, called "Making or breaking the class ceiling: growth-affording teacher beliefs and practices in a selective school system". In the project, one other PhD student will be employed at the Department of Educational Sciences, at the University of Amsterdam and will work on selection in tertiary vocational education. The current project will employ a mixed methods design for which different data sources will be used. First, we will collect interview data to map how teachers in primary education sort students into different ability groups before the actual moment of selection, and what beliefs underlie these practices. Second, we rely on quantitative student data, among other data collected for the PRIMS project. The PRIMS project asked the respondents whether their classes worked with ability groups ("Is your class divided into different ability groups for [language or reading comprehension/mathematics]?") and the self-reported group that students were assigned to. The intervention still must be developed and implemented. Given the Dutch context where the interviews will be done and the intervention will be implemented, there is a very strong preference for a candidate who masters the Dutch language.

Literature:

- Domina, T., McEachin, A., Hanselman, P., Agarwal, P., Hwang, N., & Lewis, R. W. (2019). Beyond tracking and detracking: The dimensions of organizational differentiation in schools. *Sociology of Education*, 92(3), 293–322.
- Geven, S., Wiborg, Ø.N., Fish, R.E. & Werfhorst, H.G. van de (2021). How teachers form educational expectations for students: A comparative factorial survey experiment in three institutional contexts. *Social Science Research* 100.

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