MERITOCRACY OR PLUTOCRACY?
Finding Explanations for the Educational Disadvantages of Moroccan Immigrants Living in the Netherlands
Jonathan Mijs

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, the Netherlands, like many other western European countries, has seen a vast increase in immigration. In the 1950s and 1960s, due to a shortage in the (manual) labour supply, the Netherlands recruited great numbers of immigrants, first from Southern Europe and later from Turkey and Morocco (in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively). These so-called ‘guest workers’ were joined by a large stream of immigration from the former Dutch colonies: Surinam (independent since 1975), the Dutch East Indies (‘Republic of Indonesia’, independent since 1949) and the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba (autonomous countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands). While the majority of the first wave of ‘guest workers’ returned home, many later immigrants eventually brought their families or started new ones in the Netherlands (Nicolaas and Sprangers 2002). Consequently, many children of non-Dutch descent now live in the Netherlands. The most abundant ethnic minority populations in the Netherlands today are those of Surinamese (331.900), Antillean (129.700),

* Jonathan Mijs studied at the University of California, Berkeley and at the University of Amsterdam, where he obtained his BSc degree in Sociology in 2007. He is currently enrolled in the Research Master Social Sciences at the International School for Humanities and Social Sciences and is a research assistant at the Institute for Ethnic and Migration Studies (IMES).
Moroccan (323.200), and Turkish (364.300) descent. Of these, slightly over 40% are second-generation immigrants (Jennissen and Oudhof 2007).

The Netherlands, in the last two decades, has been facing many problems with delinquency, disproportionately (almost exclusively, in the public perception) associated with male Moroccan youth. These young men tend to be from low-income families, raised by low-educated parents, and are disproportionally concentrated in relatively poor urban areas (Dagevos 2006; Andriessen et al. 2007; Dagevos and Gijsberts 2007; Jungbluth 2007). While they often do (much) better than their parents when it comes to attained education and occupation level, they are lagging behind both native Dutch and other main minority groups (those from Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles) – while they are in many respects comparable to Turkish immigrants. Their minority status alone, thus, cannot account for their socially pathological behaviour patterns.

In public debates, explanations for their behaviour have been sought in Moroccan immigrants’ ‘Berber culture’: their ‘primitive and violent cultural heritage’ from rural northern Africa. Such cultural explanations have however found little empirical support. Here we are primarily interested in education as it plays a large role in perpetuating (or even strengthening) the Moroccan immigrants’ relative disadvantages in the labour market. It has been shown that educational failure and success are tightly linked to labour market opportunities as well as, and perhaps more importantly, political participation and (socio-emotional) wellbeing (Marmot et al. 1991; Bills 2004; Becker 2007; Dagevos and Dagevos 2008). It is this relation, which makes education a very important dimension to explore.

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2 Total population of the Netherlands is 16.334.200, of which 1.720.100 are of non-Western origin (2008; CBS Statline).

3 While my concern with regard to juvenile delinquency excludes Moroccan girls, in terms of educational opportunities gender does indeed matter a lot (e.g. see De Vries 1988; Coenen 2001; Bouw et al. 2003). Although it is important not to overlook this dimension in empirical research, I am confident that my theoretical section does not suffer from treating boys and girls as part of one group.
In this paper I integrate two competing theoretical explanations that have been offered to elucidate inequality of educational opportunity into a theoretical framework that is suitable to guide empirical inquiries into the Moroccan minority’s educational disadvantages in the Netherlands.

REWARDING MERIT OR RESOURCES?

Contemporary norms for educational opportunity and educational success generally go back to Young’s conception of merit. In his classic essay, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870 – 2033. An Essay on Education and Equality*, Young (1958) portrays a society that is ruled by the principle of Meritocracy: power and success are awarded to those who have deserved it by merit. In his book, merit is equated by a simple formula: M(eric) = I(Q) + E(ffort). While both IQ and effort are certainly contested concepts, this ‘meritocratic ideal’ is, in most Western countries, accepted as the standard by which the educational system ought to reward successes.

Many scholars from the interconnected fields of psychology, sociology, and economics, however, argue that our modern society falls short of this ideal; they argue that all modern societies, to some extent, suffer from an inequality of educational opportunity. That is to say: IQ and Effort, for some, do not lead to their reward of Merit. The main groups within this categorical ‘some’ have been identified through their differences from privileged groups in terms of race, gender and/or class. Contemporary criticism has led to the depiction of society as more plutocratic than meritocratic. In other words, one in which wealth rather than merit determines your position in society and your chances for success. While researchers tend to expand their scope of accountability beyond wealth, they do emphasize the role of resources in the generational transfer of educational opportunity. The field that addresses these inequalities of educational opportunity seems to be rigidly divided into two competing camps: Human Capital Theory on the one side and Cultural Reproduction Theory on the other. While I have no intention

4 See Karabel (2005) for an insightful analysis of how the concept of meritocracy came to be used as a political instrument in American higher education admission processes.
of reconciling these traditions, I do believe that empirical research is to gain by taking elements of both into account. I will, first, give a short introduction to the main tenets of both theories before I propose a synthesis.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND SOCIAL LOCATIONS

Human Capital Theory (HCT) is a tradition firmly rooted in rational-choice theory and dominant in neo-classical economics. While its origin traces back to Adam Smith, the major contributors are identified to be Jacob Mincer (1958, 1974) and Gary Becker (1962; 1992; 1993; Becker and Tomes 1986). HCT’s starting point, with regard to education, is its role in increasing students’ productivity on the labour market. Becker (2002) offers a short description, which clarifies what ought to be understood by the term ‘human capital’:

“Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures of medical care, and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty [are] capital. That is because they raise earnings, improve health, or add to a person’s good habits over much of his lifetime. Therefore, economists regard expenditures on education, training, medical care, and so on as investments in human capital. They are called human capital because people cannot be separated from their knowledge, skills, health, or values in the way they can be separated from their financial and physical assets.”

Different labour market outcomes, therefore, are related to different investments in human capital. From a similar logic, educational mal-performance or under-representation can be attributed to an insufficient investment in human capital. Translating this perspective to the matter at hand, we can pose the following question: Why do some prioritize investment while others neglect the value of adequately investing in human capital? HCT offers three explanations for this scenario: Information asymmetry, discount rate, and credit constraints. These concepts are discussed in the next section, following an introduction to the second framework comprising the theoretical synthesis.

Cultural Reproduction Theory (CRT) originates in the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977), pertaining to cultural capital and the ways by which its possession and transference serve as means for class reproduction. The concept has been greatly advanced throughout the years (see Bourdieu 1979, 1984, 1993, 1996). CRT explains the interaction between individuals’ production of cultural capital and the institutional mechanisms by which those with high cultural capital are given sole access to the societal ladder (and
thus, to cultural reproduction).

The starting points in Bourdieu’s theory are social locations. Individuals in different social locations, he argues, are socialized differently. Through this socialization process, children acquire- from their parents and, more generally, from their ‘social environment’, a sense of what is comfortable and what is natural. These experiences become embodied, incorporated into the individual. Bourdieu calls this embodied position the individual’s *habitus* (a term he borrowed from Elias 2000 [1939]). One’s early socialization also shapes the form and amount of resources (*capital*) that the individual inherits and draws upon in interactions with and within various institutions in the social world (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As such, differences in socialization lead to differences in *habitus* and *capital*, which determine – to a certain extent – how well one can perform (or, how powerful one is) in different spheres of life (*fields*).

Both CRT’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital and HCT’s treatment of preferences, it has been argued, are too vague and slippery to satisfactorily incorporate into empirical research (e.g., see Bowles and Gintis 1975; Kingston 2001; Sallaz and Zavisca 2007). Instead of dodging this obstacle altogether, in this paper I offer an integrated and applicable synthesis of the relevant concepts from the competing theories. In the next section, I will show how we can use elements of both theories to construct a theoretical framework, which can guide our empirical research.

**SYNTHESES: PEACE-LESS INTEGRATION**

If we remember that the task is not to reconcile these competing traditions, but to take from each what we need for our theoretical framework, we can do so by treating individual differences highlighted in HCT as linked to the social positions discerned in CRT. That is, people making investment decisions, more or less conscientiously, is a good starting point in the study of educational inequality. An adequate account however needs to place these decisions in the context of their *social locations* and within *institutional structures* (the latter of which I will turn to in the next section). Social locations are those positions that people are born into. From CRT and, more specifically, Lareau (2003) I take three elements, which greatly affect investment decision: *time perspective*, *entitlement/constraint*, and *savoir-faire*. HCT confirms the importance of time perspective through stressing the term *discount rate* and adding a fourth
element that affects decisions: information (asymmetry). Together, these four factors form what I will call a mindset, which can be more or less generalized as a *middle-class mindset* (figure 1). Having this mindset, to greater or lesser extent, is having a profound advantage in educational opportunity.

![Matrix of the dimensions constituting a ‘middle-class mindset’](image)

**Figure 1. Matrix of the dimensions constituting a ‘middle-class mindset’**.

The entitlement/constraint-spectrum is proposed by Lareau (2002, 2003) in her study of childrearing among middle-class families on the one hand and working-class and poor families on the other. In her study, she maps the ways in which parents’ resources shape their children’s daily lives. To middle-class parents, she ascribes a style she calls ‘concerted cultivation’ and to the other parents, ‘accomplishments of natural growth’. The two modes of childrearing lead to differences in skills, attitudes, and circumstances. Lareau describes how parents in middle-class families actively foster and assess children’s talents, opinions and skills (Lareau 2003: 31); parents stress the importance of reasoning, discussing with their children *what* is considered acceptable behaviour and *why*. Additionally, children are encouraged to ‘foster their talents’, primarily through their enrolment in an assortment of organized activities (*i.e.* soccer practice, piano lessons, church choir, etc.). Furthermore, parents actively intervene in institutional organizations (*i.e.* in school, in the context of medical professionals) to ensure their children are getting the best possible treatment. In doing so, parents teach their children how to (later) intervene for themselves. Through all this, children are prepared for ‘adult life’ with better skills, greater *savoir-faire* in institutions, and a sense of entitlement: a feeling that they ‘deserve’ to be, or land, in a good place. Examples of these are: “greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority
figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts” (Lareau 2003: 5).

In contrast, working class and poor parents undertake a mode of childrearing called ‘accomplishment of natural growth’. In the accomplishment of natural growth, parents see it as their main responsibility to make sure their children are “fed, clothed, sheltered and transported” (Lareau 2003: 66). Parents’ efforts are geared primarily towards making sure these necessities are accounted for, and children are given relative freedom to arrange their own time, and choose their activities and playmates, as long as the children remain within the boundaries of safety, rules, and discipline enforced by their parents. While this may, from a middle class point of view, seem simply like taking ‘lesser responsibility’ or a ‘smaller burden’, Lareau stresses two counterpoints to this perception: first, she explains that working class parents regularly spend a lot of their resources (money and time) on making sure these circumstances are realized; and, second, she asserts that the greatest difference between the middle class and lower classes is their divergent views of what good parenthood entails. This less intricate mode of childrearing, however, tends to result in a suboptimal development of children’s skills and abilities; the parents’ relatively strict approach of directives and discipline leads to underdevelopment of reasoning skills and a general acceptance of authority; through their parent’s (negative) examples, children generally inherit a sense of dependence and powerlessness when it comes to making their way through (dominant) institutions; and finally, all this leads to an emerging sense of constraint on part of the child – constraint which limits the child’s level of ambition and which tends to bind it to the social position it was born in (Lareau 2003: 31)

Information asymmetry, prominent in HCT, points to the disparity in the information that is available to different socio-economic groups or to the distortions in channels of information that are accessible at different rungs of the social ladder. An example would be the insufficient information that is available to recently immigrated Moroccan parents, on which to base their decisions for investment in their children’s human capital – i.e. through sending their child to pre-school or selecting, out of all schools, the best one for their children. Information asymmetry leads to suboptimal investment decisions 5

5 This last thing might be especially important in light of the increasing importance of IQ-tests and other testing embedded in the ‘access procedures’ of selective schools and universities. For a discussion, see Buchmann and Roscigno (2003) and Mijs (2008).
and can explain different decisions between groups of individuals who differ in their ability (or power) to access and/or utilize relevant information.

**Time perspective**, in the context of investment decisions, is intrinsically linked to the willingness to account for foregone earnings. This willingness of course gains importance when taking into account the credit constraints that people are faced with (that is, they have a limited amount of money to spend). Take for example the question of whether to attend university (when eligible). Were one to choose to attend university, one would not only have to pay tuition fees and other related expenses, one would also *forego earnings* for the duration of time that has been, in a sense, exchanged for the use of the university’s resources; one has no time to work and earn a wage. This willingness to forego earnings is explained by the extent to which one is present-oriented or future-oriented — economists measure this willingness in terms of one’s ‘discount rate’; e.g., see Warner and Pleeter 2001).

**Together, these four** constitute what I call a middle-class mindset; devised so as to grasp what I see as the essence of what is referred to by scientists studying ‘human capital’ or ‘cultural reproduction’ in relation to educational opportunity.

**Different mindsets**

When this theoretical approach is applied to Moroccan immigrant students in the Netherlands, the differences that may exist between ethnic minorities must first be addressed. One factor to consider is the duration of stay. While there has been migration to and from Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles since the Dutch colonization in the 17th century, Moroccans and Turks have been migrating to the Netherlands only since the 60s and 70s – and have only since the 80s and 90s done so in great numbers and with the intention to permanently settle in the Netherlands (De Valk et al. 2001; Central Bureau of Statistics 2003; Garssen, Nicolaas and Sprangers 2005). On top of those differences in duration

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6 While credit constraints are potentially of enormous importance, it can safely be stated that financial constraints are of relatively little importance in the context of the Netherlands, for the Dutch educational system is largely state-funded. Consequently, primary and secondary education is free of charge and students of tertiary education are supported financially, while tuition fees are set annually at an affordable level.

7 Migration to the Netherlands, however, became substantial only from the late 1940s on.
of stay/settlement, many Surinam and Antillean immigrants have learnt the Dutch language and have seen, in their respective countries, the introduction of a public school system, which was built by the Dutch and is based on the Dutch educational system.\(^8\) Thus, people from Surinam and the Antilles (which I will collectively refer to as Caribbean immigrants) have been migrating to the Netherlands longer and are expected to have had better preparation for participation in Dutch education.

Another element, which might be of importance, is religion. Of importance here is not so much how religious practices differ, but how religion tends to contribute to individuals’ identities. In this sense, the adaptation to ‘Christian-Judeo’ Dutch society may be less of an obstacle for Caribbean immigrants of predominantly Christian faith, than for Moroccan and Turkish migrants (to whom I will collectively refer as Mediterranean immigrants) of the Islamic religion. Important to add is the differences between groups when we compare levels of religiosity between 1\(^{st}\) and 2\(^{nd}\) generations of immigrants. Where Antillean and Surinam religiosity has greatly diminished and regressed towards the native Dutch’ level (from 75% to 36% and from 77% to 54% respectively), Moroccan and Turkish religiosity remains practically unchanged across generations: from 97% to 96% and 95% to 93% respectively (Dagevos, Schellingerhout and Vervoort 2007: 180). Adding one and two together, we have reason to hypothesize that Caribbean immigrants will have had less difficulties in adapting to secular Dutch society and will have had better opportunities to develop a middle-class mindset than immigrants from the Mediterranean.

When it comes to differences between Turkish and Moroccan immigrants, we have some reason to assume that Moroccans do worse than Turks. The differences kick in when we look at peer groups and social interactions. While both groups are greatly overrepresented in cities and, within those cities, in bad neighbourhoods, we can name two factors that distinctly influence Moroccans (Garssen and Wageveld 2007). The first element we get from De Jong’s (2007) study of street culture. It is argued that Moroccan youth, independent of their social origins, tend to be drawn to a specific street culture, which is typically diametrically opposed to school norms and, thus, detrimental for educational opportunity. While a universal mechanism may lie at the base of street culture’s

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\(^8\) And which’ official language of instruction is Dutch.
attractiveness (alternative means for self-respect and ‘success’ when one ‘fails’ in mainstream culture/education), Moroccans particularly seem to be drawn to this way of life. One factor leading to that may be the stress on manliness in their Islamic upbringing and lack of parental supervision; another can be found in socio-economic conditions: small housing, big families, effectively forcing children to spend their time on the streets (Garssen and Wageveld 2007). What differentiates Turkish from Moroccan immigrants here is that the former tend to have more organized activities and strong and extended networks that can be seen as giving alternatives to street culture, while the latter are greatly lacking organized activities and have, of all immigrant groups, the least contact with native Dutch speakers (Gijsberts 2004; Van den Broek and Keuzenkamp 2008; Vermeulen and Berger 2008). These differences point not only to a lack of alternatives, but also to the relative isolation in which many Moroccan boys find themselves to be.

Public opinion and the media constitute the second element. The Moroccan boys’ overrepresentation in Dutch crime statistics is a fact well known to the public and often mentioned by policy makers. We can imagine that these well-known statistics influence the ways in which Moroccan boys are perceived – especially those boys that are very ‘present’ on the streets, i.e. loud and attracting attention, preoccupied with showing their cool and toughness. This is confirmed by the finding that native Dutch speakers, of all immigrant groups, speak most negatively of Moroccans (Gijsberts and Vervoort 2007).

A further step is hypothesizing, independently of whether people perceive all Moroccan boys differently because of the misbehaviour of some, that Moroccan youth themselves might feel stigmatized by the media. De Jong’s account offers just one of many descriptions of these boys’ taking offense to the way they are often portrayed in media and politics (as “problem youth” [probleemjongeren], “youth delinquents,” [jeugdcriminelen] and “damned-Moroccans” [kutmarokkanen]). His qualitative account is supported by evidence regarding perceived discrimination against Moroccan immigrants in housing, on the labour market and in popular media (Andriessen et al. 2007). Also, a recent survey by the Cultural Planning Bureau (CPB), found Moroccan
immigrants to answer more negatively than other ethnic groups to questions relating the openness of Dutch society to immigrant culture, the Islam in particular (Gijsberts and Vervoort 2007).

If we revert back to HCT’s notion of information asymmetry, we can formulate the following explanation: Moroccan boys, more than other immigrants, embody a negative image, feel and/or are discriminated against, and ultimately acquire a more negative perspective of their educational and labour market chances. All of this presents the alternative (street culture) attractive, for it offers the means for upholding one’s self-worth. Information asymmetry, here, is the process of ascribing perceived negative group characteristics to individuals – i.e. teachers treating particular students negatively for they are considered, ex ante, to be potential disruptions in class.

SEGREGATION AND TRACKING

It should be recognized, and this is where the institutional perspective comes in, that the importance of peer pressure (friends and neighbourhood) is intrinsically related to school segregation in which, more than stressed-out teachers and poor financing, other students have the most negative effect on one’s educational aspirations and accomplishments. Before suggesting more institutional effects on educational inequality, a brief overview of the Dutch educational system is provided.

Figure 2 gives a schematic overview of the different levels in the Dutch educational system. While every child attends elementary school from age 5 on, around the age of 12, children take a national ability test (‘CITO-test’), the scores of which their access to the different levels of secondary education is largely determined: VMBO (lowest; leading to MBO), HAVO (intermediate; leading to HBO) or VWO (highest; leading to WO). The uninterrupted lines represent clear boundaries between school levels, the interrupted lines mean that within the school level, various programs are available, differing in years of schooling. In principle the only way to go is up within a column. However, movement between columns is possible, while this often implies additional procedures, study delay and sometimes additionally schooling. The steps that are possible between the columns are those between the highest levels of VMBO
onto HAVO, from HAVO to VWO, from MBO-4 to HBO and from HBO-p to WO. Each transition implies successful graduation from the previous level of education and sometimes-additional requirements; for example, if one wishes to study an economics program at HBO-level, one needs to have finished an MBO-

![Diagram of educational tracking in the Netherlands](image)

*Figure 2. Tracking in the Dutch Educational system.*

program that meets specific economics requirements. The Dutch educational system has, in an international comparative, a relatively vast system of tracking, which starts differentiating students when they are relatively young.¹⁰

The negative effects of school segregation, mentioned above, which are related to the institutional make-up of the Dutch educational system, lead

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9 VMBO itself is subdivided in four different programs, all of which take four years to finish, but differ greatly in quality and level. Consequently, only the highest level (as a rule) and the next-to-highest level (conditionally) give access to HAVO.

10 Countries with an even more differentiated system of education are, most noteworthy, Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic, while most developed countries are less differentiated than the Netherlands. The least differentiated countries in Europe are Sweden, Spain, Iceland, Norway and Finland (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2007).
to the re-enforcement of disadvantages for those who go to ‘Black’ schools\textsuperscript{11} (the disadvantaged) (Paulle 2006). The rigid system of early tracking in the Netherlands contributes to this process in that students with initial disadvantages tend to be sent to lower school levels in which ‘Black’ schools are the vast majority (Gijsberts and Herweijer 2007; see also Oakes 2005). Additional negative effects of tracking lie in the characteristics\textit{early} and \textit{rigid}. Research on tracking shows negative effects for equality of educational opportunity in internationally comparative studies (Schütz et al. 2005; Brunello and Checchi 2007), in studies of Dutch society in particular (Crul and Schneider 2005; Dronkers 2007); and it is argued that the same effects can be found even in systems with relatively loose tracking (or \textit{streaming}) (Lucas 2001). Early tracking implies that parents have an important role in educational decisions (\textit{i.e.} which school level one goes to), thus increasing the importance of societal position.\textsuperscript{12} The system’s rigidity makes these early decisions harder to ‘correct’ later on when a student may be found to be brighter than initially assumed (\textit{i.e.} masked by language deficiencies or cultural differences). We can thus theorize that these institutional characteristics of the Dutch educational system tend to increase disadvantages by constraining educational transitions.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushleft}
\textbf{Institutional characteristics privilege dominant societal groups}
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\textit{When we consider} school segregation and tracking in joint operation, we can convincingly argue that the institutional characteristics privilege dominant societal groups; they are both better prepared and better informed for making the important decisions that have to be made at a relatively early stage. While

\begin{itemize}
\item[11] The notion of ‘Black school’ refers to ethnicity rather than skin color and to social class, to reflect schools with a concentration of relatively deprived [\textit{kansarm}] non-Western immigrants.
\item[12] This line of reasoning is part and parcel of the \textit{life-course perspective} (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Erikson and Jonsson 1996).
\item[13] While I do not present it here as such, the Dutch system of tracking, when judged by its effects, can be seen as an example of the ‘rules of the game’, which Bourdieu describes as being set \textit{by} dominant societal groups to \textit{advantage} dominant groups. While it may not have that explicit goal, the reproduction-effect of tracking may be a factor which reduces the resistance there is to the system. To put it in plain terms: dominant groups are not likely to oppose a system which helps them to maintain their dominance.
\end{itemize}
the Dutch educational system leaves room for ‘correction’ of initial decisions by means of mobility between school types, this should not be overestimated. First, mobility is hindered by the costs it brings for the mobile student, *i.e.* study-delay and re-schooling. Secondly, and most importantly, initial differences tend to increase throughout the school system. The latter is caused by curriculum differentiation on the one side, setting higher targets and providing better support for those students in the highest tracks, and school-segregation on the other: disadvantaged students constitute the vast majority in lower school levels (Paulle 2006; Gijsberts and Herweijer 2007; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2007).

**HYPOTHESES: APPLYING OUR THEORETICAL MODEL**

*When we apply* our theoretical model to Dutch education and draw from the knowledge we have of the main groups of ethnic minorities, we can propose the following hypotheses. First, we expect both Caribbean and Mediterranean immigrants to have been less able to develop a middle-class mindset than the native Dutch. This, we hypothesize, will be expressed in four ways: immigrants have less familiarity with and knowledge of the Dutch educational system (H1); hence, when it comes to finding their way in the educational system, we expect they have less *savoir faire*, especially since they can draw on little experience in other institutions (H2); immigrants’ perspective is likely to be more present-oriented than future-oriented, especially for those immigrants who initially did not plan to settle permanently (H3); due to cultural-differences, especially in language and religious identity, we expect there to be less entitlement and more constraint in the subjective experiences of immigrants (H4).

This lack of a middle-class mindset, we expect, will result in lower investments in human and cultural capital, which, in turn, will be reflected in lower ability scores (H5). Information asymmetry plays a large role here: the ‘risks’ related to making such investments could be perceived differently between groups; perceptions about risk of failure in school – and the consequence of failing – tend to differ (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2007). It should be noted, also, that money plays a role. While ‘credit constraint’ on its own may be of limited importance in choosing one’s educational path, in combination with a more
negative perception of the ‘risk’ of failure and its consequences, it may lead to more ‘safe’ choices.\textsuperscript{14} Especially in the multi-track system of secondary and tertiary education in the Netherlands, this process may be of great importance. This process, I expect, results in an overrepresentation of immigrant students in vocational education (MBO and HBO – safe choices) as opposed to general/academic school levels (HAVO/VWO and WO) (H6).

For all these hypotheses it goes that Caribbean immigrants tend to have fewer problems adapting and, thus, have had more ease in developing a middle-class mindset. Consequently, we expect Caribbean immigrants to have less of an educational disadvantage than do Mediterranean immigrants (H7). Due to the effects of ‘street culture’, we expect Moroccans to generally do worse than

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H1</th>
<th>Immigrants, compared to the native Dutch, have less familiarity with and knowledge of the Dutch educational system.</th>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Immigrants, compared to the native Dutch, have less institutional savoir faire.</td>
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<td>H3</td>
<td>Immigrants’ perspective, compared to the native Dutch, is more present-oriented than future-oriented.</td>
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<td>H4</td>
<td>Immigrants, compared to the native Dutch, feel less entitled than restrained.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Immigrants, compared to the native Dutch, make lower investments in human and cultural capital, which is reflected in lower ability scores.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>Immigrant students are overrepresented in vocational education (mbo and hbo) as opposed to general/academic school levels (havo/vwo and wo).</td>
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<tr>
<td>H7</td>
<td>Caribbean immigrants have less of an educational disadvantage than do Mediterranean immigrants.</td>
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<td>H8</td>
<td>Moroccan immigrants have a larger educational disadvantage than Turkish immigrants.</td>
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<td>H9</td>
<td>Tracking and school segregation increase disadvantages across educational transitions, especially for Moroccan students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immigrants lag behind the native Dutch even when we control for family background by conventional measures.</td>
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Table 1. Overview of hypotheses

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. the theory of ‘Relative Risk Aversion’. See Breen and Yaish 2006; Stocké 2007; Van de Werfhorst 2008.
Turkish immigrants (H8). If we combine our model with our knowledge of the institutional structure of the Dutch educational system, we can add the following hypothesis: tracking and school segregation increase disadvantages across educational transitions. This goes especially for Moroccan immigrants, for whom street culture becomes more attractive the worse they do in school (H9).

Finally, when we control for family background by conventional measures (i.e. family income and parents’ educational attainment) I expect the educational disadvantages of immigrants to be reduced, but not to disappear (H10). This, I suggest, is because conventional measures of family background fail to capture the nuances, which lie in the concept of middle-class mindset; i.e. immigrants’ relative short stay in the Netherlands and the vast cultural differences between the Netherlands and their country of origin, first, make them less confident and at ease in Dutch education; second, make them less oriented towards Dutch education; and, third, less likely to have family and friends that bring with them valuable experiences in Dutch education.

The hypotheses formulated in the preceding are summarized in table 1.

AN EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION

While my main target was to formulate a theoretical approach, a pre-empted tentative empirical exploration can be offered to address my assumptions and test my predictions. I do so by analyzing data collected through the longitudinal NWO-funded PRIMA research and additional data provided by CBS and CFI – well-respected government funded institutes. The figures presented below are adapted, sometimes recalculated, from the most recent SCP and WODC reports on minority integration in Dutch society (Dagevos and Gijsberts 2007; Jennissen and Oudhof 2007).

15 PRIMA is a cohort study, started in ’94/’95, on the educational careers of students in the Netherlands.
16 SCP is the Netherlands’ Social and Cultural Planning Office, a government agency which conducts research into the social aspects of all areas of government policy (www.scp.nl/english).
17 WODC is the Ministry of Justice’s Scientific Research and Documentation Center (english.wodc.nl/organisatie).
A first glance at educational inequality is provided in figure 3. We see how children of ethnic minority groups perform relative to native Dutch children. Even at this point (grade two; age five and six) we see substantial differences between groups. While most minority groups (Surinamese students being the sole exception) have through the last eight years made good progress towards decreasing their disadvantages, there remains a gap between their performance and that of native Dutch students. Important to note is that even Dutch students from very low-educated parents outperform the best performing minority groups.
As we expected from our knowledge of the Dutch educational system, the differences in elementary school performance persists as differences at the secondary level – while the data does not allow one to make clear-cut comparisons, one could make a case for an actual increase in inequality. Figure 4 shows that Moroccans are the most underrepresented group in VWO with a relatively large gap between them and Turkish students on one side and Caribbean students on the other. For HAVO, the pattern is somewhat more gradual, although here also Moroccan students are fewest. Conversely, Moroccans are overrepresented in VMBO-b/k, the lowest levels of education in the Netherlands. The observed differences are of essential importance for the students’ educational opportunities as even minor differences may either greatly enhance or limit one’s access to further (tertiary) education: while VMBO leads solely to vocational education (MBO), HAVO is the gateway to higher education (HBO and, through that, WO). The differences within levels of VMBO are important also, as VMBO-gl & -tl are the only levels of education (within VMBO), which offer the possibility, after successful graduation, of a transfer to the HAVO-level (thus, possibly to higher education).

Lastly, we take a look at minority students’ performances in higher education (figure 5). While the Dutch educational system offers relatively good chances to students graduating from vocational education, higher education undeniably gives students the best labour market opportunities (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2007).
While all minority groups show a rising number of higher education students (e.g., relatively to ’95-’96, the percentage of Moroccan students has doubled in ’05-’06), their numerical importance is overshadowed by the fact that, still, the vast majority of higher education students are native Dutch speakers.\(^{18}\) However, when we juxtapose these percentages to the relative share of youth aged 18-20 of the corresponding ethnicity, we get an entirely different picture – as you can see in figures 6 and 7.

These figures continue to show the impressive growth of minority student enrolment. However, we see that there still is a considerable gap between native Dutch students and those of Moroccan, Turkish and, to a lesser extent, Surinamese origin. Antillean students differ from other minority groups in their relative advantage to native Dutch students. The decline of their advantage has been attributed to changes in migration patterns: recently migrated Antillean children tend to come from poor and low-educated families (Van Kralingen 2003; Besjes and Oudhof 2007; Van San, De Boom and Van Wijk 2007). Another noteworthy phenomenon is the relatively high enrolment of students from other non-western minority groups. This could either point to the relatively good performance of specific immigrant groups (e.g., political refugees) or of international students who have registered at universities and have indicated

\(^{18}\) In 2008, more than 85% of students in higher education were either native Dutch or of Western-origin (CBS Statline).
TENTATIVE FINDINGS

Firstly, we found unambiguous support for our sixth and seventh hypotheses: immigrants are overrepresented in vocational education and Caribbean students, across the board, have less of an educational disadvantage than Mediterranean immigrants. Additionally the data seem to confirm hypothesis five when we accept children’s primary school performance to be a reflection of early investment in human and cultural capital. Hypothesis eight is difficult to assess because the position of Moroccan students and Turkish students are not consistent when we look at different school levels. With the available data, we cannot confirm nor reject this hypothesis. The evidence regarding hypothesis nine is ambiguous too. First, the data do not allow for straightforward comparisons across educational transitions. Second, and taking into account the data limitations, while there seems to be a case for increasing disadvantages, Antillean students, due to their overrepresentation in higher education form an exception to this phenomenon. We can therefore neither reject nor accept the hypothesis.

A thorough test of our tenth hypothesis is impossible due to lack of sufficient data. We do find, however, support for our expectation when we compare educational performance for societal groups in primary education: even the very low-educated Dutch outperform all immigrant groups. As for the remaining hypotheses: it becomes clear how little we can say about educational decisions,
attitudes, expectations and mindsets without supplementing our knowledge of enrolment and performance by more qualitative accounts of what goes in schools and in families. This observation provides an additional reason for taking a different approach to educational inequality; using more refined measures in investigating parent to child transfer of educational opportunity.

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION
In this paper, I have argued how the competing traditions of Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Cultural Reproduction (CRT) can be fruitfully integrated into a theoretical model, which addresses inequality of educational opportunity. I showed how Bourdieu’s notion of social locations can account for the different ‘starting positions’ of different societal groups. HCT added to that the notions of time-perspective and information asymmetry as part of the explanation for different educational decisions. Social locations in which individuals are born prepare them better or worse for their educational careers. Differences in individuals’ attitudes, skills, perspectives and information (together constituting, to a lesser or greater extent, a ‘middle-class mindset’), then lead to differences in educational opportunity. Furthermore, introducing a qualitative account of peer pressure, I stated that Moroccan students are more likely to develop anti-school sentiments through their disproportionate involvement in ‘street culture’ (while this culture’s appeal increases too as anti-school sentiments grow). Finally, through an institutional analysis of the Netherlands’ educational system, characterized by rigid and early tracking and increasingly burdened by school segregation, I argued that inequalities in educational opportunity tend to be reinforced throughout the educational system.

Although we only tentatively explored the empirical evidence for the theoretical model, we can formulate three findings: first, most testable hypotheses were supported by the data; and, second, it became clear how little we can learn about educational decisions, attitudes, expectations and mindsets until we supplement our enrolment and performance data with more refined accounts of what goes on in schools and in families. Third, with regard to the particular immigrant group, which was the focus of this article, I found little ground for separating Moroccan from Turkish migrants when studying educational positions. Moroccan immigrant boys’ disproportionate involvement in street culture, as addressed in the theoretical sections of this article, might then be relevant to explanations of delinquency rather than educational disadvantage.
Here we cannot go beyond this observation. I am confident however that measures refined in line with the theoretical framework offered in this paper, will enable us to shed more light on this issue.

When it comes to addressing the provocative question with which I have labelled my paper, I of course opt for the easy way out: we have little reason to assume that the Netherlands is either a meritocracy or a plutocracy. While meritocratic selection remains the basic process through which students qualify for further levels of education (cf. Driessen, Sleegers and Smit 2008), we have however found important cracks in the meritocratic ideal. Albeit not directly through the transfer of wealth, the social location one is born into does greatly affect one’s chances for educational success. We can only come to a comprehensive understanding of inequality of educational opportunity if we take a perspective, which integrates social locations with investments in capital and examines these in the broader context of the characteristics of educational institutions.

To conclude, I cite some lines from the song ‘Subcity’ by Tracy Chapman:

People say it doesn’t exist
‘cause no one would like to admit
That there is a city underground
Where people live everyday
They say we’ve fallen through the cracks
They say the system works
But we won’t let it
Help

While the Netherlands do not have the inner-city ghettos Chapman is referring to, the parallel lies in the way people think about ‘the system’: it works. For disadvantaged groups, belief in the educational system may be a good thing: without it, it would be hard to work up the motivation and effort to perform well in school. This belief however carries a great danger with it, in that it legitimates educational success and failure. If the system ‘works’, those who fail do so by their own fault (cf. Goldthorpe 1996; De Botton 2004; Karabel 2005; Michaels 2006).
The value of thorough, and refined, research thus lies not only in testing my theoretical framework in specific, and the original theories’ generalizability in general. The fruits of such empirical analysis lie in a better understanding of the processes through which Moroccan immigrants, among other societal groups, are being disadvantaged in the Dutch educational system. Understanding is policy’s starting point and, consequently, our point of departure, were we to effectively do anything to increase equality of educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Further research will have to show whether the grounds I have laid for such an enquiry prove helpful in this respect.

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