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## Educational inequality and state-sponsored elite education: the case of the Dutch gymnasium

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors examine the role the Dutch gymnasium continues to play in the institutional maintenance of educational inequality. To that end they examine the relational and spatial features of state-sponsored elite education in the Dutch system: the unique identity the gymnasium seeks to cultivate; its value to its consumers; its geographic significance; and its market position amidst a growing array of other selective forms of schooling. They argue that there is a strong correlation between a higher social class background and the concern to transmit one's cultural habitus. They further speculate on the moral implications of state-sponsored elite education, both as it concerns the specific role of the gymnasium in the reproduction of social inequality as well as the curious tendency among its supporters to rationalise the necessity of its existence.

教育不平等与由政府资助的精英教育：以荷兰的高级中学为例

### 摘要

在本文中，作者探究了荷兰的高级中学在教育不平等的制度维护中所持续发挥的作用。为此，作者考察了荷兰体系中由政府资助的精英教育的关系与空间特征，包括：高级中学寻求培养的独特身份认同；其对消费者的价值；其地理意义；以及其在日益增多的可选的学校教育形式中的市场地位。作者认为，较高的社会阶级背景和对文化惯习传承的关注之间存在较强的关联性。作者进一步探究了由政府资助的精英教育的道德意涵，因为这涉及高级中学在社会不平等再生产中的特殊角色，以及高级中学的支持者们对其存在的必要性进行合理化的奇怪倾向。

### KEYWORDS

Gymnasium; cultural habitus; selection; school competition; segregation; educational inequality; entitlement; the Netherlands

For a long time now, left-leaning politicians, academics and parents have condemned expensive and selective private education as elitist and unfair. Expensive and selective private schools are *elitist*, the argument runs, insofar as they generally cater to those able to pay. But for a small number of pupils admitted on scholarship, by definition this generally will exclude pupils born into poor families. And these schools are further depicted as *unfair*, first, for how they too often rely on narrow measures for admission – such as a single test score, and often at a very early age – or else depend heavily upon a

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recommendation from a teacher. With regard to the test score, more affluent parents possess the financial means to pay for private tutoring and test prep, thereby markedly improving their child's chances for admission. Second, expensive and elite private schools are considered unfair because they offer their pupils considerable academic and social advantages that can be leveraged for admission to more selective universities (Ball 2003; Swift 2003).

Third, owing to the benefits of networking within selective school environments, expensive and selective private schools are accused of placing an additional burden on those 'left behind' for want of admittance to those networks, so crucially important to accessing careers with influence (Adams and Bengtsson 2017; Burden 2018). For instance, many of the most selective universities in the UK have a disproportionately large intake of pupils who have attended elite private schools (Bourdieu 1989; Barnes 2018; Boliver 2013). Expensive and selective New England boarding schools arguably serve a similar function for access to the Ivy League (Cookson and Persell 2008; Nunes 2015), as do elite schools more generally across the world (Chua, Swee, and Wellman 2019; Maxwell and Aggelton 2015; Rizvi 2014). For these and other reasons many routinely express disapproval of expensive and selective private schools.

We acknowledge the concern many may have with the inequitable access to high quality education, and moreover with the intended or unintended effects such schools have on other, non-selective or 'comprehensive', schools. Yet by restricting one's attention to the private educational sector, critics too easily overlook the state-sponsored elite education that operates within the *public education sector*. In continental Europe, for instance, one finds the prestigious *gymnasium*, a highly selective school *fully subsidised by the state*, and thus operating in plain view within the public system.

Though it charges no fees and in principle is open to any child whose test scores meet the threshold, the gymnasium's place in the public education system has generated some controversy, particularly in Germany, where political opinion is sharply divided. Expressing their support for the gymnasium, more conservative parties (e.g. Christian Democrats) appeal to arguments such as free school choice, parental discretion and the idea that more talented children deserve a more selective education. Conversely, those expressing disapproval, including various left-leaning parties (e.g. Greens), have since the 1970s called for their abolition. Similar to critics of elite privates in the UK, these German opponents view the gymnasium as an elitist and outmoded form of schooling that disproportionately favours the well-to-do, and hence reproduces social class privilege. Indeed there is considerable evidence to suggest that immigrant and working class children are vastly under-represented relative to the native (white) German population (Baysu and de Valk 2012; Ehmke et al. 2003; Kristen 2003).

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands similar demands in the 1970s that the gymnasium be abolished had subsided by the mid-1980s owing to support by some unlikely political bedfellows: the communist party on the one hand and the more conservative parties (i.e. VVD) on the other. Communist support was galvanised by the belief that the gymnasium was an important mechanism for upward mobility of the working classes, effectively ensuring fair opportunity within the state school system. This argument, however, has fallen by the wayside, in part because the membership of leftist parties has diminished considerably in recent decades, and in part because no substantive evidence could be proffered demonstrating that gymnasia were indeed elevating the position of the working class.

The 1990s also witnessed sweeping neoliberal reforms in Dutch education, resulting in a choice-friendly climate that yielded a proliferation of different school types (Dronkers 1993, 1995). Consequently the market position of the gymnasium in the last 15 years not only has become more secure; the number of gymnasia has in fact markedly expanded.

In this paper we examine the reasons for this development, most especially the role the gymnasium continues to play in the institutional maintenance of educational inequality. To that end, we examine the relational and spatial features of state-sponsored elite education in the Dutch system: the unique identity the gymnasium seeks to cultivate; its brand value to its consumers; its geographic significance; and its market position amidst a growing array of other selective forms of schooling. We first begin by situating this discussion within its appropriate sociological frame, one we believe best explains both the structural features and social significance of these phenomena. We then briefly canvass its historical place in the Dutch educational system, and document its recent expansion against the background of increasing neoliberal reform and school competition. Following this, we examine the historical reasons for the gymnasium's approval among the well-heeled, as well as a more recent dramatic upsurge in popularity.

We will demonstrate that the neoliberal educational reforms of the 1990s lay the groundwork for a proliferation of more selective schooling in the 2000s, including the elevated position of the gymnasium. We further will argue that there is a strong correlation between a higher social class background and the concern to transmit one's cultural habitus. Indeed, this perhaps best captures the reason why some parents not only prefer the gymnasium over 'lower' forms of secondary schooling, but also over other academically rigorous schools with which the gymnasium increasingly is in competition. We conclude by speculating on the moral implications of state-sponsored elite education, both as it concerns the specific role of the gymnasium in the reproduction of social inequality, as well as the curious tendency among its supporters to rationalise its continued existence. In so doing we aim to fill a longstanding lacuna in the already very scarce literature on the gymnasium.

## Theoretical frame

The sociological literature consistently highlights the ways in which the various markers of social class inform parents' communication style and behavioural norms, and more broadly interests, attitudes and expectations, especially as these pertain to how a child is formally educated. Yet in order to understand the mechanisms whereby parents of a certain background select gymnasia for their children, we build upon three interrelated concepts: *habitus*, *cultural capital* and *concerted cultivation*.

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990), children enter the school environment after they have been inculcated with the specific dispositions and skills of their family upbringing. This upbringing produces a *primary habitus*, i.e. a socialised way-of-being that seems both natural and comfortable, and which produces indelible orientations, attitudes and dispositions towards society. It is a mental and behavioural structure embodied in the actor that is used to perceive, interpret and classify social life. The primary habitus constitutes the basis for the subsequent formation of any other habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). In other words, the upbringing of children instils deeply ingrained attitudes, dispositions and skills that one carries throughout one's life.

Schools and the educational field more widely are characterised by valuing dispositions and practices that demonstrably privilege the middle and affluent classes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Domina, Penner, and Penner 2017). And the mismatch between the primary habitus of working class children and the rules of educational fields not only disadvantages their parents with respect to the ‘asymmetry of information’ concerning educational options on offer (Ingram 2011; Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016; Voigt 2007); even when working class and poor children defy the odds to gain access to higher education, too often the cultural mismatch creates an unsettling experience. Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009), for instance, have shown how entering into university education for working class pupils is tantamount to entering a hostile environment, as various dimensions of habitus and the new field are not in sync but instead entail tremendous personal costs, both in socio-psychological terms owing to anxiety and alienation, but also in terms of the potential threat posed to one’s working class identity.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, *cultural capital* is meant to capture an individual’s cumulative education, her total repertoire of knowledge and skills – often not included in one’s formal schooling – that can be leveraged for elevated social standing and advantage. Cultural capital can be *embodied*, i.e. the outcome of socialisation and thus passively ‘received’ over time; its influence works in tandem with one’s habitus, that is, one’s mental and behavioural structure. Those things that comprise the cultural repertoire will align with what is valued, or taken to have value, within an individual’s social milieu, including etiquette and the – presumably ‘correct’ – uses of language. Cultural capital can also be *objectified*, i.e. transmitted in the possession, accumulation and knowledge about cultural artifacts, commodities such as ‘approved’ works of art (e.g. literature, music, painting), or other objects believed to have intrinsic value. And finally, cultural capital can be *institutionalised*, i.e. come to enjoy public recognition, often by what is displayed in museum collections, but also in the form of academic and/or professional credentials. The inherent value believed to reside in these credentials allows one to distinguish oneself from others, and may also provide competitive advantage.

More recently, Annette Lareau (2000, 2003) has coined the term, *concerted cultivation* to refer to the conscious and sometimes unconscious ways that well-educated middle-class and affluent parents seek to educate their children inside and outside of the home by encouraging certain etiquette and behavioural norms, membership in recognised social clubs, but also a particular communication style, including negotiation and dialogue. In contrast to working class parents whom Lareau describes as possessing a parenting style that facilitates what she calls the *accomplishment of natural growth*, where children defer to adult authority because their opinions do not seem to count, concerted cultivation entails the ceaseless pursuit of ‘teachable moments’ throughout the day with one’s child, be they in the park, the grocery store, or even while sitting in traffic. Because well-educated middle-class and affluent parents see their offspring as conversation partners, children raised in the parenting style of concerted cultivation are socialised into the expectation that their opinions matter. Indeed the socialised norm of asking questions to authority figures (e.g. doctors, teachers, police officers) is both encouraged and expected. This parenting style, Lareau argues, induces in children a strong sense of *entitlement* (cf. Calarco 2014).

*What concerns us in this paper is the extent to which these behavioural and attitudinal norms are institutionalised in the gymnasium. After all, the rules of the game of elite*

education in Dutch gymnasia are produced by, and geared toward, the habitus of a certain kind of (privileged) middle- to upper class child. Reay refers to this as *institutional habitus* (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010, 109): ‘Institutional habituses, no less than individual habituses, have a history and have in most cases been established over time. They are therefore capable of change but by dint of their collective nature are less fluid than individual habitus’. Yet regardless of whether the most suitable frame is institutional habitus or field, gymnasia undeniably are places in which concerted cultivation has resulted in important forms of cultural capital that ideally are suited to that specific context; further, the gymnasium is an institutional environment, i.e. a field, in which specific *experiences* are accumulated, and particular *behavioural norms* are learned and reinforced. For those whose newly added layers of experience fit nicely onto previous experiences (the primary habitus), this yields both a sense of familiarity as well as an integrated habitus (Wacquant 2014), i.e. a sense of *savoir-faire* within and beyond the school environment.

Meanwhile, for children lacking the natural feel for the game, the newly acquired experiences can present a shock, resulting in what is referred to as a *habitus clivé*, a cleft habitus (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Curl, Lareau, and Wu 2018). A cleft habitus describes the feeling of being out-of-place, of not belonging, and in some cases of being actively excluded from an environment alien to one’s sense of self and socio-cultural experience outside of the school. While a cleft habitus is not necessarily a disadvantage – for example, cleft experiences may allow for a hybrid or flexible habitus, enabling movement between different social worlds and easily adaptive to new circumstances – it nevertheless is strongly correlated with lower chances of success, and more generally difficulties in terms of fitting in socially (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010).

Importantly, however, while cultural capital is certainly relevant to the gymnasium’s pupil intake, in discussions concerning the qualifications necessary for attending gymnasium the *social class dimensions of capital*, and in particular the mutually reinforcing concerted cultivation of the parents, as well as their concomitant knowledge of the school field, are routinely downplayed. Further, as in most European countries, in the Netherlands one’s ethnic / racialised background and social class often intersect, particularly in some urban contexts, but the more relevant point vis-à-vis the gymnasium is that the underrepresentation of low SES pupils is more likely to be significant than his or her ethnic background per se.

## Dutch education

The gymnasium must be situated within a complex systemic constellation of school choice and early tracking. First of all, and quite similar to Germany, Dutch children are selected at a young age into different hierarchically ordered tracks of secondary education. The transition from primary to secondary education is therefore very important for the educational careers of children and a crucial catalyst for the reproduction of inequality (Dumont, Klinge, and Maaz 2019; Kraaykamp, Tolsma, and Wolbers 2013). Completing the highest track (VWO: Preparatory Academic Education), which takes six years, gives access to any university in the Netherlands; a diploma similar to *Abitur* in Germany (Deppe and Krüger 2015). However, pursuing this track is generally only open to those children who do well on the nationally standardised test and/or receive a corresponding school advice from their primary school teachers.

Furthermore, the Netherlands can be characterised as a facilitative state (van der Ploeg et al. 2000), one in which a plurality of educational choices are on offer. In principle any number of different school options is free and accessible to all; indeed, freedom of education (including unrestricted parental choice) is held as a sacred constitutional and moral right in the Netherlands. At least since the Constitution of 1848 there formally has been considerable leeway to establish non-public schools, though it was not until 1920 that this became an affordable option for most. By this time, an historic compromise (1917) had been reached between the different religious and political communities in the Netherlands resulting in full state funding for privately-run schools (Ritzen, Van Dommelen, and De Vijlder 1997). In the subsequent decades, a unique system known as ‘pillarisation’ (*verzuiling*) governed the choices available to most people, with for instance Catholics attending Catholic schools, reading Catholic newspapers, using Catholic hospitals, listening to Catholic media, and so on. The same was true of Reformed, Socialist, and other groups.

After 1970 a variety of social developments led to changes in the pattern of Dutch pillarisation (Karsten and Teelken 1996). The most prominent developments in the period were increased secularisation on the one hand, and the influx of migrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds on the other. These two developments have yielded seemingly contradictory tendencies in Dutch education policy. For example, increased secularisation has not resulted in the de-pillarisation of educational organisations; institutionally speaking, the Netherlands remains in fact a very religious society on many levels. Thus while there has been a precipitous decline in official church membership since the 1960s, denominational school attendance levels remain high, and the (state-financed) ‘private’ education market share more generally has remained almost constant. Indeed, while *verzuiling* is a relic of the past, its legacy remains hugely influential and its impact is still felt throughout the country (Dijkstra, Dronkers, and Hofman 1997).

Another major development, about which we will have more to say later, concerns more recent liberal reforms. Since the early 1990s there has been an explosion of different types of school entering the educational market. International streams offering English or bilingual instruction have grown tremendously in popularity, but a variety of many other schools (e.g. top sport schools, democratic schools, Unesco schools, Steve Jobs schools etc.) all compete alongside thousands of denominational schools, as well as a large network of so-called ‘free schools’, which include Dalton, Steiner, Jenaplan and Montessori. Since 2000, there also has been a rise in the number of gymnasias. In any case, Dutch gymnasias operate within this competitive field, but as we will see, its historical identity and selective features cater to a more exclusive constituency than is generally the case with other school types. Indeed, even the relatively new gymnasias need not invest much in marketing themselves to potential clients because the reputation of gymnasias is already firmly established.

### **Dutch gymnasias in European perspective**

European gymnasias have long prided themselves on their educational distinction. Though many by now have incorporated a number of modern subjects into their curricula, including computer science, business informatics, economics and modern languages, the ‘core



business' of the gymnasium continues to be its claim of fostering *Bildung*, i.e. the purported moral and intellectual cultivation of the whole person; a strong belief in the importance of classical languages for the disciplining of the mind; an unremitting emphasis on academic rigour; and the small and homogenous classes necessary to carry out these aims.

Continental Gymnasia historically have a great deal in common with their grammar school cousins in the UK. With a long and illustrious history dating to the Renaissance period, by the mid twentieth century English grammar schools enjoyed the status of being the most elite and selective schools in a Tripartite system of state-funded secondary education. Grammar schools became known for their heavy emphasis on classical subjects, including mathematics, classical literature, Latin and Greek, and their focus has continued to be advanced preparation for an (elite) university education. Political pressures in the mid- to late 1960s precipitated sweeping changes to this system, the result of which was that either a majority of grammar schools were subsumed within the comprehensive system, or else opted out of the system; those that opted out subsequently began charging hefty fees. More recently, several vestigial grammar schools assumed 'academy' status, extricating themselves from the local educational authority (LEA). Scarce places in the grammar school are awarded largely on the basis of an entrance exam (or a grade point average, though increasingly this is balanced against a teacher's recommendation, and in some cases, a one-on-one interview), and enrolment historically has been heavily skewed toward the upper-middle and affluent classes.

Dutch gymnasia share many of their historical roots with their continental and English counterparts. Nonetheless, the position and role of gymnasia in the educational system at large also clearly differs, particularly in terms of its exclusivity: Dutch gymnasia have always been host to a very small minority of – indeed a rather specific population of – pupils. Originally established as Latin schools, gymnasia have been elite educational institutions for several centuries in the Netherlands (Mandemakers 1996). What is clearly different from other contexts is the fact that Dutch gymnasia have *remained* exclusive, even surviving several waves of educational reforms. In contrast, elsewhere in Europe gymnasia and their equivalents have been converted into more general tracks of secondary education (Becker, Neumann, and Dumont 2016), teaching to a substantial part of the school-age population.

In the Netherlands, before the major educational reforms of 1968 [*mammoetwet*], gymnasia enjoyed a position at the apex of the educational pyramid in which stratification was strongly connected to social class (De Rooy 2018). Indeed, in addition to different levels of education (low, intermediate and higher), several elements of the Dutch educational system until 1920 were officially based on class differences (*standen*) in which, for instance, education was divided into lower education for the common people (e.g. charity schools, the Sunday school) on the one hand, and the (petit-) bourgeoisie on the other. Intermediate education at French or German schools, or higher bourgeois schools, as the name suggests, catered primarily to the (petit-)bourgeoisie. Higher education was offered at lycea and gymnasia, and chiefly recruited pupils from among the social elite. The vast majority of children remained within the lower strata of the system; no more than 5–10% attained intermediate or higher levels. Only a small portion of the Dutch school-aged population followed gymnasium education at acknowledged gymnasium schools (about 1% in 1930 and about 1.5% in 1960). The share of children who followed

gymnasium-level education (also at the somewhat less homogeneous lycea) had reached roughly 3% by 1967 (Mandemakers 1996, 81).

The small intake was even further reduced during the 1970s and 1980s, when the gymnasium almost disappeared from the educational landscape. At that time it seemed – in the years following the ratification of the Secondary Education Act of 1968 – that the gymnasium might even become an historical relic. However, the past two decades have witnessed a substantial expansion of the number of pupils attending gymnasia. The Netherlands now has about 60,000 pupils following a gymnasium curriculum at more than 300 schools,<sup>2</sup> of which about 30,000 children attend one of the 40 categorical (only offering this curriculum), independent gymnasia. Though this is still only about 7% of the total number of pupils in secondary education, it represents a substantial increase relative to some decades ago, when merely 4% received gymnasium education. Recently, several new gymnasia have been established, but the growth also takes place within pre-existing schools (Stichting zelfstandige gymnasia 2018).

In this respect Dutch gymnasia strongly differ from German gymnasia, where 40% of all secondary school pupils attend this school type (Deppe and Krüger 2015), and even more so from Scandinavian gymnasia, which welcome more than half of the pupils coming from comprehensive schools, generally at age 16 (Holm et al. 2013; Jæger and Holm 2007). While gymnasia in Germany and Scandinavia also recruit pupils from relatively well-educated and affluent groups, Dutch gymnasia traditionally have had a much more selective intake and hence a more homogeneous population. For instance, Weenink (2006) used survey data in order to document that two-thirds of the parents who have children attending gymnasia belong to the upper classes, nationally constituting only 10% of the employed population, and more than half of the children from this social class also have a grandfather belonging to the same social class. This overrepresentation of upper class children, roughly double the share in other VWO schools (see Weenink 2006, 373), is indicative of a specific role the gymnasium plays on the Dutch educational landscape. Even so, according to Dutch educational law, gymnasia are not a different educational track than VWO, the standard pre-university academic track. While the gymnasium curriculum always includes Latin and Greek, and in this narrow sense offers a profile that differs from other schools, gymnasia diplomas officially are indistinguishable from regular VWO diplomas.

### The market position of the gymnasium

Meanwhile, there also are clear and observable trends in the state-managed organisation and regulation of Dutch education that have improved the institutional conditions for gymnasia. For instance, earlier we noted how the decentralisation of education has led to a greater competition between schools (Dronkers and Robert 2008; Karsten 1999). This includes more categorical (non-comprehensive) schools, such as bilingual (*tweetalig*) schools; a proliferation of experimental schools offering an alternative pedagogy (e.g. *vrijescholen*); and also a general focus on ‘excellence’ which has also led to schools being established to serve the ‘gifted’ (*hoogbegaafd*). These trends have contributed to an increasingly diversified and competitive educational landscape, resulting in a stronger need to create a profile or image in order to survive in the educational market (De Regt and Weenink 2003). Against this backdrop, gymnasia offer both a well-tested and very

distinctive brand; additionally they also promise education on a smaller-scale, an attractive option to a certain type of parent concerned about their child getting ‘lost in the crowd’.

At the same time, however, it would not be inaccurate to say that the decentralisation of education is largely responsible for planting the seeds of entitlement, something which the gymnasium is arguably best suited to harvest. Indeed, relevant stakeholders understand that gymnasia are key institutions within the state-sponsored school system for the accumulation of cultural capital. As we have seen, the gymnasium’s illustrious history, selectivity and homogeneity appeal to the distinctive repertoire of the (upper) middle classes. In an increasingly marketised system, in which parental choice and school autonomy are paramount, social groups are increasingly segregating by school type. While school segregation is neither something new nor always problematic (Merry 2013; Shelby 2016), the combination of a highly selective, early tracking educational system, combined with strong constitutional liberties for parents and schools, have further solidified the institutionalisation of educational inequality. The higher tracks of secondary education more generally, but gymnasia in particular, have become less meritocratic than they perhaps once were, and instead more socially reproductive (Spruyt and Laurijssen 2010; Tubergen and Volker 2015) Indeed Weenink (2005, 177–78) concludes that they are ‘just as socially exclusive with regard to the origins of their pupils as [the] British private schools that are associated with social advantage [and] are more socially selective than the *classes préparatoires* [in France]’.

The concentration of children of privileged backgrounds is partly reflected in the average performance of pupils at the school level. The foundation for independent gymnasia (SHZG) publishes data on the average marks of gymnasium pupils compared to the national average for the central written exam. As can be seen in Table 1, compared to VWO schools exam results for gymnasia are slightly higher in most subjects. Other indicators of performance reveal that 25% of all gymnasia have a cum laude (average mark of at least 8) share that is higher than 10%, compared to a more modest average of 4.3% at all VWO schools (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2006, 2017, 2018, 2019).

Meanwhile, *all* VWO schools are aggressively recruiting among the upper strata of Dutch society. This is unsurprising. After all, owing to the wealth of resources available to them, children with well-educated parents have much better odds of scoring at VWO level on the final standardised test of primary school (*citotoets*); they also are more likely to receive a teacher’s recommendation to attend VWO schools, irrespective of their test score. This is significant considering that substantial weight is given to the

**Table 1.** Average marks on a selection of subjects Central Exam school year 2017/2018.

Subject	Gymnasia	VWO
Dutch	6.3	6.0
French	7.1	6.4
German	6.8	6.3
English	7.5	7.0
History	6.8	6.5
Geography	6.5	6.3
Economics	6.5	6.3
Math – A	7.1	7.0
Math – B	7.4	7.2
Physics	6.8	6.5
Chemistry	7.3	7.0
Biology	6.7	6.4

Source Gymnasia.nl (retrieved December 2018).

**Table 2.** Composition of Gymnasium and VWO school population in the Netherlands by educational attainment of parents.

	VWO	Gymnasium
Max. lower vocational	6%	4%
Vocational	18%	14%
Higher Vocational	23%	20%
At least college degree	31%	45%
Unknown	23%	17%

Source: Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2019).

teacher's recommendation, and there is considerable evidence that children from lower SES (often but not exclusively minority) backgrounds consistently receive advice to attend lower high school tracks *even when test scores are comparable to their more advantaged peers* (Crul 2013; Elibol and Tielbeke 2018; Weiner 2016). Finally, highly educated and affluent parents are more likely to send their children to VWO schools than other parents of children with similar school advice (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2006, 2017).

In a recent report from the Inspectorate of Education (2019), the Inspectorate assessed the effect of different school profiles on levels of school segregation. The report differentiated between a wide range of school profiles related to denomination, or pedagogical principles such as Montessori and Dalton, but also related to the curricula and the types of courses offered. Gymnasias are distinguished from ordinary VWO schools in the analyses, which makes it possible to differentiate averages between their pupil population and that of a VWO school. From the description of the data it appears that gymnasias indeed have a different pupil composition compared to other VWO schools (Table 2). The share of children with well-educated parents is significantly higher than other VWO schools, which already is above the national average. These figures, based on register data and thus more reliable than survey data, reveal a smaller difference between VWO and Gymnasium than reported by Weenink (2006) some fourteen years earlier.

Interestingly, this report also demonstrates that the contribution to school segregation, measured as an imbalance of the distribution of ethnic and SES groups across schools, is smaller than for the other VWO schools. On the face of it this is counter intuitive. But we can clarify this by pointing out that other VWO schools on average have much greater variation in terms of their pupil composition: some have very homogeneously middle class populations while other schools deviate by having a strong overrepresentation of lower SES pupils.

Further, as we have seen, lower segregation indices can also be explained in terms of the geographic location of most gymnasias. Given that gymnasias are generally situated in areas with larger concentrations of the affluent and well-educated, they simultaneously are able to have a disproportionately large share of high SES pupils, and at the same time be comparatively less segregated than other VWO schools relative to other schools in proximity. However, when measured by the isolation index, which is a better indicator of concentration, gymnasias obviously score higher.

## The geography of the gymnasium

An important explanation for the market position, as well as the current revival of notably independent gymnasias in the Netherlands, might have something to do with its specific

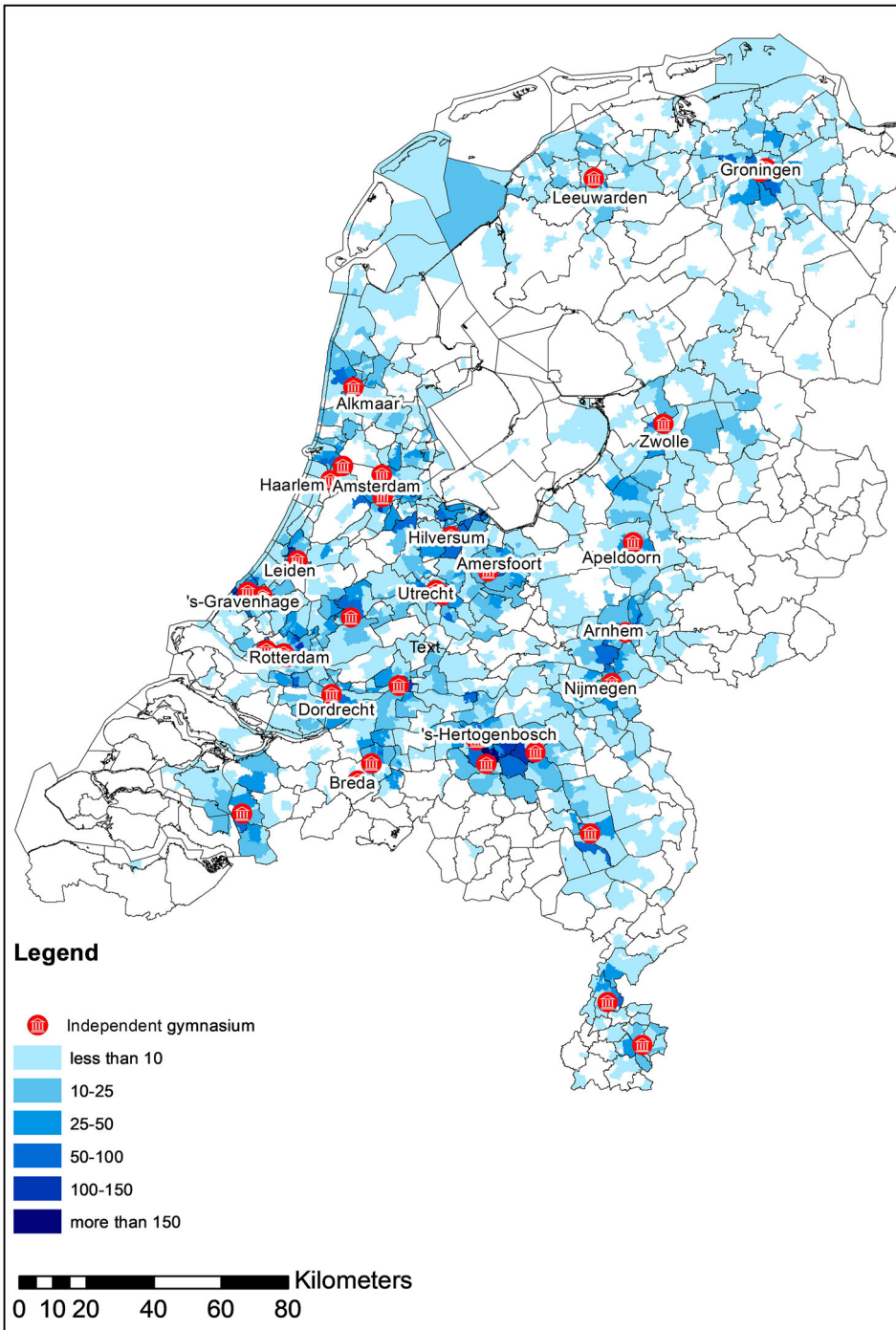
geography. As a general rule, historically the diversity of the educational market in the Netherlands is more apparent in urban areas. The sheer size of the market in terms of the number of pupils, as well as the greater diversity of socio-economic and social-cultural groups – not to mention parenting styles and religious and political views – Dutch urban areas have facilitated a schooling landscape in which several niches are available. For both primary and secondary education a wide range of niches cater to different constituencies, from the religiously devout (for which there is an array of options, including Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Catholic and several Protestant varieties) to ‘alternative pedagogies’ (e.g. Jenaplan, Dalton, Steiner, Montessori) to various ‘cosmopolitan’ options (e.g. schools offering the International Baccalaureate programme) to ordinary public (*openbaar*) schools. The state-mandated threshold for the establishment and maintenance of a school is such that sufficient demand is required to maintain a diverse and varied supply.

The largest cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague, are characterised by the broadest collection of schools at both primary and secondary levels. Gymnasia, with their more specific curriculum and rigid application of meritocratic admission policies, need to fish in a large pond in order to survive. In other words, elite schools need the demographics to work in their favour. It is therefore not a coincidence that gymnasia are located in close proximity to their constituency.

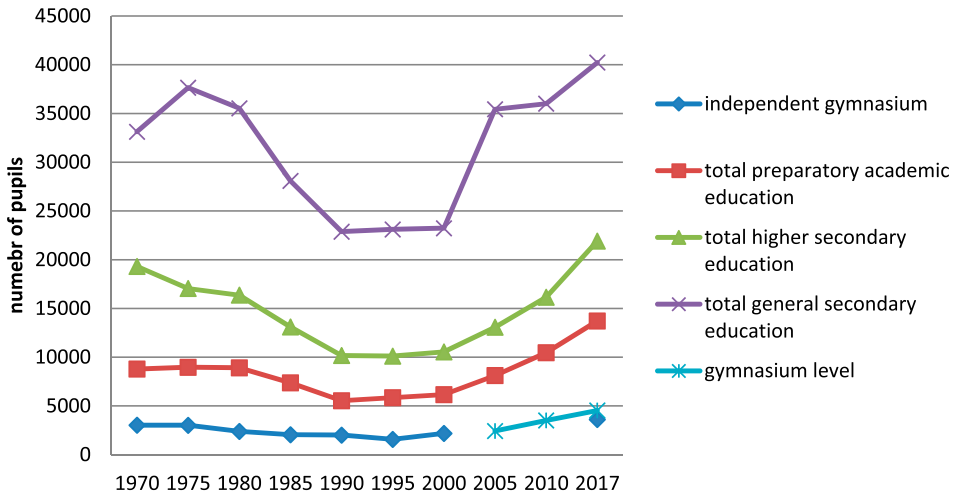
These geographic features also mean that spatial transformations associated with residential mobility may often lead to changes in the educational landscape. In Paris and Milan, for instance, concentrations of wealth have long been established that serve to spatially isolate the wealthy from the rest of the population (Cordini, Parma, and Ranci 2019; Pinçon-Charlot and Pinçon 2018). In London, by way of contrast, many urban elite schools moved to suburban locations as a response to the suburbanisation of the upper (middle) classes (Gamsu 2016). Similarly in the Netherlands, the specific geography of gymnasia has important repercussions for its success. Gymnasia are mainly located in cities and larger suburbs that are characterised by large concentrations of university graduates and affluent residents (Figure 1).

Often these are university towns, but also some larger provincial capitals have a gymnasium. However, in the 1970s and 80s, when suburbanisation of the middle classes coincided with substantial migration of largely unskilled workers to the city centres, the demographics of the pupil population began to change significantly. In particular the school aged population in the bigger cities became minority-majority, where pupils with white, native Dutch background only constituted about a third of the total number (Boterman 2019; Savini et al. 2016). Hence while the share of children of more middle and upper middle class backgrounds remained above the national average, the absolute numbers of children from privileged backgrounds dropped significantly in the cities where most gymnasia could be found. The changes were so dramatic that in the 1980s and 90s the altered demographics of larger cities seriously jeopardised the survival of the gymnasium. Correspondingly, the current revival of gymnasium education coincides with today’s demographic, ethnic and class-based transformation of Dutch cities.

Among the new gymnasia opened in recent years, most are located in cities that have also witnessed rapid and substantial gentrification. While this process may have begun with younger households, it is evident that families also gentrify and that urban school populations – most especially in Amsterdam – increasingly consist of children from more affluent, well-educated parents (Boterman, Karsten, and Musterd 2010), who



**Figure 1.** Independent Gymnasia in the Netherlands and number of pupils per postcode area (Source: DUO 2018).

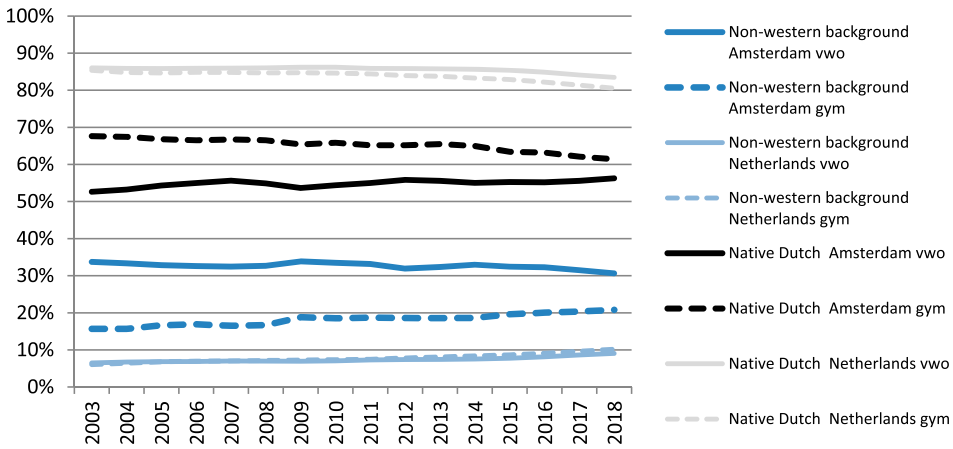


**Figure 2.** Total number of pupils in Amsterdam's general secondary schools 1970–2017 (Source OIS, DUO 2018).

themselves often attended gymnasia. Moreover, in addition to school populations becoming more middle class, there simply are more of them. To wit: the number of children in Dutch cities has increased substantially, for instance with about 20% in Amsterdam in the past decades. Figure 2 shows the absolute numbers of pupils in Amsterdam secondary schools. It appears that the number of pupils following the highest level of secondary education has strongly increased in the past decades after a low during the 1980s and 90s. Further, the number of children attending categorical (independent) gymnasia in Amsterdam has more than doubled in the last fifteen years, though the overall percentage still remains relatively small (7%). The increased demand for gymnasium education is therefore at least partly a logical consequence of more potential candidates in the school-aged population, especially girls from middle class families.

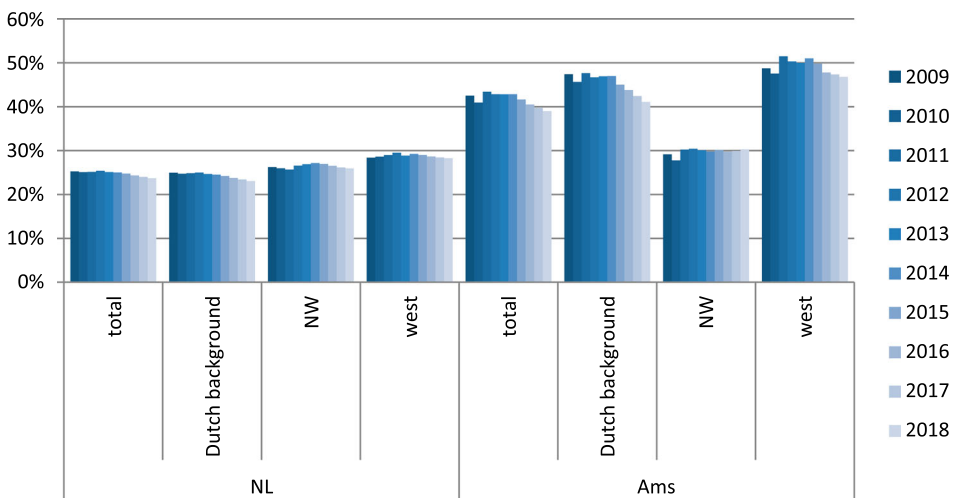
A second key aspect of the geography of gymnasia is related to the ethnic and racialised dimensions of school choice and school segregation. The vast majority of non-white pupils, often with non-Western backgrounds, live in the larger cities, such as Amsterdam. Figure 3 compares the share of children with different backgrounds in the Netherlands (excluding the four largest cities) and Amsterdam in VWO and in gymnasium education. It becomes clear that in the Netherlands the vast majority of VWO and gymnasium education has a native (white) Dutch background (about 80%). In Amsterdam the majority of pupils following gymnasium education is also without a migration background (61%), but this is considerably lower than the national average.

Correlatively, the share of pupils with a non-Western migration background is much higher in Amsterdam's gymnasia and even more so in other VWO schools. This is principally related to the more multi-ethnic population of Amsterdam compared to the rest of the country, but the increasing share of non-Western children occurs in gymnasia rather than in other VWO schools, both nationally and in Amsterdam. This is also reflected in Figure 4, which represents the share of pupils in gymnasium programmes of all children in the VWO-track. Nationally there is very little difference between



**Figure 3.** Pupils attending VWO and gymnasium education in Amsterdam and the Netherlands, by migration background, 2003–2018 (Source CBS 2018).

different ethnic groups in terms of the share of highest track pupils receiving a gymnasium education (about 25%). In Amsterdam this is considerably higher (given the greater supply of gymnasium education), but especially among children with a native-Dutch and Western background. Among children with a migration background in Western countries, almost half attend gymnasium. Conversely, among pupils with a non-Western background, this figure is lower but higher than is the case nationally (and there are signs suggesting modest improvement). In sum, while gymnasia are predominantly comprised of upper middle class and predominantly ‘white’ pupils, in the bigger cities like Amsterdam, where quite a few gymnasia are located, there are no signs of an increasing homogenisation of the ethnic composition of these schools.



**Figure 4.** Share of pupils in gymnasia of all children attending VWO-level education in the Netherlands and Amsterdam, by migration background (Source: CBS 2018).



## What parents want from a gymnasium education

When asked, parents preferring gymnasia for their children indicate their preference for the ‘protected environment’, the ‘homogenous climate’, the ‘small scale’ of the classes, and the ‘intellectually rigorous’ curriculum (Weenink 2005). It is particularly the latter of these characteristics – academic rigour – that is perhaps most commonly invoked by those adamantly opposed to the abolition of the gymnasium, even, curiously, those who have no children, i.e. those who have no immediate stake in the matter (e.g. highly-skilled expats). The conviction that the gymnasium is indispensable to the school landscape is in part predicated on certain meritocratic beliefs about innate talent, as well as the fairness of the testing and intake procedures. However, *it is seldom acknowledged that the pupil intake overwhelmingly is drawn from well-to-do families*, whose socio-economic privileges make favourable academic outcomes more probable to begin with (Merry 2020; Prosser 2018). And thus, Weenink (2005, 63) writes, while both parents and gymnasium personnel often stress ‘that access to gymnasia is determined by academic criteria, the issue of the resulting socio-economic exclusivity is passed over’. Indeed the homogeneity of Dutch gymnasia, only slightly attenuated in recent years, is both a product of the specific rules of the educational field, but perhaps more importantly a pre-conditioning factor for its continuity.

Researchers for a long time now have deployed the notion of a ‘hidden curriculum’ or ‘implicit curriculum’ (Jackson 1968) to describe how unofficial institutional features, such as the rules, routines and sorting and labelling practices of schools function to promote particular behavioural norms, habits, attitudes and values. Simultaneously palpable and concealed, these features combine to reinforce a set of dominant ideas and values (Anyon 1980; Apple 1971). Different dimensions of the hidden curriculum that are fostered by the gymnasium’s institutional culture include: the teacher’s attitude and decorum, the homogeneous peer group, the prescribed social interaction dynamics in the classroom, language use and vocabulary, differentiation by rank, and even the spatial layout of the classrooms and school grounds. Taken together, these features again underscore that it is not only, or even principally, the rigour of instruction that gymnasia offer, so much as it is the features of the hidden curriculum – which are then often conflated with the cultural-moral ideal of *Bildung* we canvassed earlier – that distinguish them from other schools. In other words, where parental preferences are concerned, the putative academic benefits of a gymnasium education appear to play less of an important role than its *overall socialising function*, one that accords well with one’s own parenting style of concerted cultivation, and moreover which is likely to produce and preserve a certain kind of individual, one whose cultural capital is both secure and beyond reproach.

## The gymnasium and the state-sponsored social reproduction of inequality

In the foregoing pages we have been examining many of the relational and spatial features of the Dutch gymnasium, whose institutional habitus so explicitly functions to supply and reinforce the cultural capital of a social elite. Indeed, as our historical survey suggests, the abandonment of the communist party’s support in the 1980s was in large part due to the erosion of belief concerning the role the gymnasium might be expected

to play in the social mobility of working class children. We also have seen that for parents invested in the concerted cultivation of their child's upbringing, the socialising function of the gymnasium serves to reinforce these behavioural norms, norms that align with a certain kind of cultural capital the social elite have reason to value.

Moreover, we have also seen how children with well-educated and affluent parents enjoy much better odds of admission to a gymnasium in part owing to their geographic proximity to affluent postcodes, but also given the weight of teacher recommendations for pursuing more selective VWO education. As we have shown, this is the case even when standardised test scores are comparable to children whose cultural capital is less well-aligned with that of the gymnasium (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2017). More important than admission, however, is the function of the hidden curriculum within the gymnasium, i.e. both subtle and not-so-subtle features of the organisational structure, as well as social and cultural norms, that serve to sift and sort pupils from within (Domina, Penner, and Penner 2017; Klaassen and Vreugdenhil-Tolsma 2012). The hidden curriculum speaks to the (un)likelihood that children not possessing the relevant cultural capital will *fit in* with the organisational structure and social culture of the gymnasium. The hidden curriculum is therefore a powerful predictor concerning whether or not one is likely to graduate from a gymnasium or transfer to another school. Importantly, too, the mechanisms of exclusion need not be explicit, as is often the case for minority pupils. Whatever the school environment, pupils quickly come to realise whether or not they really belong, quite irrespective of how the school chooses to capitalise upon particular notions of 'merit' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Demanet and Van Houtte 2012).

Finally, we also have seen how the Dutch gymnasium exists within an educational landscape that not only is considerably segregated by social class; proponents of the gymnasium also situate their discourse about school quality within a highly racialised nomenclature, i.e. 'white' versus 'black', where a 'black' school invariably denotes 'a school to be avoided' in the white imagination (Boterman 2013; Merry 2013), even when the evidence suggests otherwise (De Fauwe 2013; Van Oordt 2019). Accordingly the implications are clear concerning who belongs, or even who one *expects to see*, at the gymnasium. Indeed many are still surprised when a non-white and non-affluent pupil is admitted to the gymnasium, a reaction that not only reinforces racialised notions of merit; it also exacerbates the experience of a cleft habitus, i.e. the feeling of being out-of-place, if not simply feeling unwelcome (cf. Amatmoekrim 2012; Ghaemina 2008; Walters and Bouma 2009).

Moreover, Dutch gymnasia are situated within an educational system that is one of the most institutionally stratified in Europe. The segregation indices concern more than ethnicity/race, religion and social class: PISA scores also indicate that the differences *between* schools are larger in the Netherlands than elsewhere in Europe.<sup>3</sup> In other words, where one attends school in the Netherlands is *causally* related both to the kind of education one receives, as well as to the possibility one has of pursuing both a university degree and careers with influence. Additionally, as we have seen, the Dutch education system is also one in which native (white) Dutch children with well-educated parents stand a much greater chance of receiving referrals from teachers for more demanding academic secondary education than children with racialised minority backgrounds, even when test scores are roughly equivalent (Elibol and Tielbeke 2018; Kooijman 2018).

Gymnasia personnel are to some extent aware of these problems. In 2012, a research report was commissioned concerning the barriers some pupils might face both in entering and successfully completing a gymnasium education. This research, for which several methodologies were applied, including text analysis and interviews with school principals (*rectoren*), resulted in a report entitled 'New Dutchmen at the Gymnasium' (Klaassen and Vreugdenhil-Tolsma 2012). Although the original scope of the research also made mention of all socially mobile groups, the final report focused on socially mobile pupils (*sociale klimmers*) with a non-Western background. Notwithstanding the class-based implications of 'socially mobile pupils', much of the debate concerning how gymnasia have difficulty attracting and keeping pupils continues to be framed in ethnic, and even racialised, terms. For instance newspaper coverage of urban gymnasia routinely adopt the stigmatising, yet customary, Dutch habit of referring to schools more generally in terms of being either 'white' or 'black'; as we mentioned earlier, this is a transparently racialised reference to the majority or minority pupil composition of a given school (Kiene 2009; Van Baars 2014; Weeda 2015). The report thus accentuates the correlation between social mobility and migration background, thereby drawing attention to certain aspects of the 'disadvantage' (*achterstand*) some pupils have by virtue of their background vis-à-vis the institutional habitus of the gymnasium, and the racially-coded script concerning a child's presumed cultural capital and his or her ability to 'fit' within the gymnasium ethos.

Alongside these concerns about socioeconomic disadvantage and equitable selection, education researchers and policy makers, mainstream media, and left-leaning parents more generally stress the importance of 'diversity' and 'citizenship': twenty-first century buzzwords denoting encounters with 'different others' at school, particularly at a time in Dutch history where longstanding segregation is now more *visible*. However, these attractive ideals are difficult to realise when a competing belief – buttressed by a sacred constitutional right – maintains that parents have the prerogative to select a school they think best. Indeed, parents continue to enjoy considerable latitude in selecting a school for their child that accords with their own beliefs and preferences (Merry 2020). Yet as we have seen, it is precisely these prerogatives, when combined with the institutional features of the Dutch education system – which again offers a variety of school types – whose respective identities serve to maintain, rather than mitigate, the stratified status quo. As this concerns the gymnasium, a parent's preference is not only likely to reflect one's own school experience; as we saw earlier, for many parents the features of the gymnasium that seem to matter most also include a preference for small class size, a 'protected environment' and an academically rigorous curriculum.

With respect to the first item, it remains unclear why smaller class size is a special feature of the gymnasium; indeed, many types of schools strive to reduce the number of pupils in a classroom, and it is reasonable to assume that a significant number succeed. As it concerns the notion of a 'protected environment', at least where the gymnasium is concerned we have seen how this better translates, both in terms of culture and social class, simply as *homogeneity*. Interestingly, homogeneity appears to be at odds with stated concerns by the Inspectorate of Education about 'segregation' or 'parallel societies', concerns routinely, if not exclusively, directed at schools serving minority populations (Couzy 2019; Remie 2018).

This then leaves the claim that the principal contribution of the gymnasium is to administer academically rigorous instruction. It would be very unjust, many will argue, to take

away a curriculum that more talented children need in order to flourish. On this view the gymnasium is but a form of differentiation that ensures a level of intellectual challenge unavailable in other schools. But given the competitive school landscape we described earlier, where VWO level schools aggressively compete for the same high-achieving pupils, it is questionable whether gymnasia are uniquely equipped to provide an education sufficient to satisfy the relevant standard of 'rigorous'. Indeed, with the possible exception of Greek and Latin requirements – whose importance in any case has been questioned (Van Veelen 2010) – many schools offer a comparable level of challenge. Further, as we noted earlier, ideas about those more 'deserving' of an academically rigorous education are predicated on the dubious assumption that children from more socially privileged backgrounds ipso facto possess greater talent, or intellectual aptitude.

With respect to aptitude, whatever favourable genetic inheritance (some) children of the well-educated and affluent may have, more relevant to this discussion is the fact that they also possess the fruit of their parents' concerted cultivation, both in terms of the modes of communication they acquire – a broad vocabulary, a palatable tone, but also confidence in negotiation and reasoning – as well as the habitus of behaviours, tastes and preferences that foster a sense of entitlement. Together these correspond to the institutional habitus of the gymnasium. These empirical facts also speak to the facile notion of merit: owing to their parents' financial resources and social networks, children of the well-educated and affluent not only have access to their parents' homework assistance, table talk, extracurricular educational activity (e.g. museum visits, foreign travel) and career advice; where necessary they also have unrestricted access to private tutoring – aimed at improving test scores and cumulative grade averages (Bray and Kwo 2013; Elffers 2017; cf. Exley 2019). In short, the evidence suggests that most Dutch children admitted to the gymnasium are not, on average, more talented, let alone more 'deserving'; most are simply unfairly advantaged from birth relative to their less socially-privileged peers.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as we have shown, the pupil intake at Dutch gymnasia are overwhelmingly drawn from the social elite.

## Conclusions

The Dutch gymnasium not only has survived; it continues to thrive. Indeed the number of children attending gymnasia in the Netherlands is on the rise. This resurgence is a particular amalgam of historical continuities and modern neo-liberal education reforms. The gymnasium survived the egalitarian education reforms of the 1960s and 70s, and could revive its distinctive potential in the wake of marketisation of education in the 1990s. However, allowing the gymnasium to exist as a relic of the old class-based educational system has driven a wedge in education reforms whose aim was to build a more comprehensive system.

When creating a brand name for schools in a competitive market became increasingly important, gymnasia seized that opportunity. Not only had they long enjoyed strong name brand recognition; their well-established educational model proved to be the example worthy of emulation by other schools entering the same market.

Of course, market-based explanations for the popularity of the gymnasium are not the only ones available. For example, some readers with knowledge and experience of gymnasia in other European countries might argue that other variables play at least as strong a

role. One hypothesis would be that native (white) Dutch parents are simply eager to avoid schools with concentrations of children with a migration background; indeed this may strike some readers as intuitively obvious given the explicitly racialised school labels in the Dutch educational market. We neither rule out the insidious racism in educational discourse nor racist bias in parental motives (cf. Herweijer and Vogels 2004; Merry 2015). Nor do we deny that Dutch gymnasia – similar to gymnasia in other countries – have a rather selective intake of pupils relative to many other schools, and that selection by social class also subsumes ethnicity/race.

While Dutch gymnasia share much in common with their German and Scandinavian counterparts – in terms of segregation but also with respect to ‘tradition’ and claims of ‘academic rigor’ – we have demonstrated how parental motivations in the Dutch case need to be interpreted against the backdrop of a much more complex institutional reality. First, as we have shown, the gymnasium is not the only kind of selective school available to parents keen to maintain their children’s social standing in Dutch society and beyond. Many other schools offering pre-university tracks, not to mention a growing number of expensive private schools, compete directly with gymnasia for the ‘best’ pupils. Strongly concentrated in university towns and bigger cities, gymnasia have relatively homogeneous populations compared to their local urban populations; even so, on average they are more ethnically diverse than a typical VWO school in the Netherlands. Thus while avoidance of schools by parents based on ethnic/racial composition is indeed a widespread practice, the ‘whiteness’ of gymnasia is in fact slowly decreasing, rather than increasing, and is clearly not the only, let alone the default, option for parents looking for a homogenous ‘white space’. Other (VWO) schools, including many ‘free schools’ (e.g. Steiner), which cater almost exclusively to white and ‘liberal’ parents, are among the most racially segregated schools in the country. In short, segregation in the Dutch educational system cuts across a variety of school types.

At the same time, however, it is undeniable that the Dutch gymnasium has played a unique role in the emergence of the current competitive and highly segregated educational landscape. Most striking, even when compared to other VWO schools, is its over-representation of children from the upper classes. Indeed the most distinctive feature of the Dutch gymnasium is neither its ‘whiteness’ nor its ‘academic rigor’ but rather its *exclusivity*. For these reasons we have argued that a primary motivation guiding parents’ preference for the gymnasium is to pass along one’s cultural habitus. If we are right about this, then it is rather curious that there is so little public consternation concerning the gymnasium vis-à-vis state-sponsored reproduction of educational inequality given how often one hears from government ministries how important it is to reduce this inequality (Kuiper 2016; van Heest 2018).

To date, however, little if any progress has been made in mitigating educational inequality in the Netherlands<sup>5</sup>; indeed, inequality in the educational sector and elsewhere is more entrenched than ever (Bijlo 2014; Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2019). It is therefore striking that no serious proposals are on the table to curtail the expansion of state-sponsored elite education, let alone any radical proposals to abolish the gymnasium. Be that as it may, the state’s role in directly sponsoring the social reproduction of educational inequality will strike many as odd for a society that continues to pride itself

on its egalitarian ideals.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the structural maintenance of inequality within the educational system, and moreover where the (early) selective mechanisms ensure that a very small number of school age children from a privileged background are able to attend, invite questions concerning the degree to which egalitarian ideals in Dutch education still have currency.

## Notes

1. Bourdieu himself discussed his sense of being ‘out-of-place’ and the inconsistencies between his own primary habitus and the field of academia (Wacquant 2014).
2. According to the interest group gymnasia bvg.aob.nl, the latest count listed 323 schools where a gymnasium diploma is offered.
3. <https://www.schoolverschillen.nl/>.
4. Indeed not a few wealthy Dutch parents turn to private, and extremely expensive, education (*particulier onderwijs*) when their child fails to gain admittance to the gymnasium. See De Regt and Weenink 2003; van Leest 2020.
5. Efforts to reduce educational inequality have included weighted pupil funding and heavy investments in early childhood education, though the evidence for the effectiveness of these investments is still lacking (Fukkink, Jilink, and Oostdam 2017). Moreover, most proposals – such as current efforts to postpone the high school entrance exam – tend to downplay other influential factors that serve to maintain inequality, including any of the following: teacher bias, differential item functioning on standardised tests (Norris, Leighton, and Phillips 2004); information gaps vis-à-vis rules governing enrolment (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016); parental advocacy (Calarco 2014); a chronic teacher shortage, coupled with low teacher retention in the neediest schools (Boussaid and Merry 2020); and perhaps most importantly of all, the design of the school system itself, which assists in facilitating the reproduction of inequality (Domina et al. 2019; Merry 2020).
6. One of the most common ways this pride is expressed is by making dubious comparisons with other, typically much larger and complex, countries, notably the United States. This scholarly habit predictably reinforces the complacent assumption that the Dutch situation is somehow ‘more equal’ than elsewhere, an assumption not borne out by rigorous empirical research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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