

What can schools really do? (In)equality of opportunity in Dutch secondary education

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Abstract

Despite more than 50 years of research, policy developments and high quality education, inequality of opportunity has increased in secondary education in the Netherlands. This study investigates what (in)equality of opportunity in Dutch secondary schools entails in daily practice, how schools attempt to diminish it and what schools wish to do to further reduce it. To take the situational context of (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education into account, this exploratory study collected qualitative data from focus group discussions with school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, from schools in rural areas in the Northeast of the Netherlands. A regional perspective provides additional information on how regional issues influence inequality in daily practice and adds to the existing research and policy debate on inequality of opportunity. Results showed schools strongly act upon the perceived inequality of opportunity of their student population. Therefore, an overarching policy to reduce inequality of opportunity is not appropriate; a regional or even a school specific approach seems more effective. Giving attention to the well-being and learning styles of disadvantaged students was perceived to be most important, where teachers and mentors were perceived as crucial actors.

Keywords: Inequality of opportunity, secondary education, disadvantaged students, teacher perspectives, qualitative data

1 Introduction

1.1 (In)equality of opportunity

Social- and ethnic inequality of opportunity in the Netherlands has increased from 2003 till 2018 in secondary education. Meanwhile, it has been a research and policy topic for more than 50 years (Aalders et al., 2020; Coleman, 1968; Rup & Wesselingh, 2000; Scheerens, 2016). Inequality of opportunity can be explained as a distributive pattern which affects a specific group of students during their education career. These students experience obstacles and therefore do not achieve the educational outcomes that can be expected from them based on their capabilities. Obstacles include the socio-economic status and/or ethnic background of a student (Lazenby, 2016; Westen, 1985). Students who experience inequality of opportunity in education are often called disadvantaged students (Zhang & Hu, 2019).

In order to reduce inequality of opportunity, the Education Council in the Netherlands suggests to allocate students to a suitable school track in a later stage of their education career and more differentiation within a single large classroom (Onderwijsraad, 2021). Compared to other countries, Dutch students are allocated to different school tracks relatively early, when they transition from primary to secondary education. The Dutch education system is strongly externally differentiated, where students are placed in separate levels of education within the same education sector (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Van de Werfhorst et al., 2015). However, studies on the relationship of early differentiation and inequality of opportunity show mixed results, some studies report higher dispersion in countries with more intensified or earlier differentiation, whereas other studies do not (Van

de Werfhorst, 2015). Research on the effects of the educational system on inequality of opportunity has so far been oriented towards general explanations, without a clear view on how a particular context or situation affects educational decision making (Van de Werfhorst, 2015). Policies often state that schools and teachers are unable to teach effectively, and suggest improvement of teacher quality (Dijkgraaf, 2022; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2021).

Considering the increase of inequality, despite more than 50 years of related research, policy developments and a generally high quality of schools (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021), the question arises how (in)equality of opportunity unfolds in daily school practice. More specifically, one might ask what (in)equality of opportunity in Dutch secondary schools and classrooms entails in daily practice, how schools and teachers currently respond to it and what more can be done to reduce inequality adequately. On a theoretical level, a stronger focus is needed on specifying precise mechanisms of how (in)equality of opportunity is experienced in a particular situational context.

Education staff such as school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants are found to be leading actors when trying to reduce inequality of opportunity in secondary education. Understanding their perspective on how (in)equality of opportunity unfolds in a certain situational context can provide important information which can help to improve current educational policies and increase educational equality. How teachers think about their students directly affects the teachers' practice (Handal et al., 1994; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011). Furthermore, students adapt to teachers' expectations of their academic achievement, thus creating self-fulfilling prophecies (Fives & Gill, 2015; Hattie, 2012; Rubie-Davies 2010). Therefore, this study aims to understand how school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants perceive (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education in their daily practice, how they act to diminish it and what they perceive as important factors in order to further reduce inequality of opportunity in education.

1.2 Situational context

Dutch secondary education is a multi-tiered education system consisting of different school tracks (Dijks et al., 2020). When students transition from primary to secondary education they are placed on a suitable school track matching their (cognitive) capabilities (Hebbink et al., 2022). School tracks can be roughly divided into four categories, ranging from more practice focused to more academic focused: practical training (praktijkonderwijs, four years), prevocational secondary education (vmbo, four years), senior general secondary education (havo, five years), and pre-university education (vwo, six years). Practical training is aimed at students who are unlikely to obtain a qualification through one of the other school tracks. It is organised in a different way compared to the other tracks, with a higher focus on practical development and smaller classrooms with eight to ten students. Practical training is part of the special

needs education policy. Furthermore, prevocational secondary education is divided in four more sub tracks: vmbo-bb, vmbo-kb, vmbo-gl and vmbo-tl, ranging from more practice focused to more academic focused (Eurydice, 2022; Nuffic, 2018). Early placement of students into different school tracks can make sure students are matched with a suitable school track. However, research strongly suggests that early selection can also increase inequality of opportunity, especially for students with a less favourable socio-economic background (Crul, 2018; Korpershoek et al., 2016).

While many studies on inequality of opportunity focus on students' overall track placement, educational attainment, track mobility and success rate, it is important to take the effect of the situational context of the student on their experienced (in)equality of opportunity into account (Zhang & Hu, 2019). Within the Netherlands, regional differences play a role on how (in)equality of opportunity is experienced (Jonkman et al., 2021). The Northeast of the Netherlands is thereby an interesting region to focus on due to the specific contextual influences on (in)equality of opportunity. Contrary to the West, the population in the Northeast of the Netherlands is declining. Related to the depopulation of the region, the industry is diminishing. Infrastructure in terms of transportation, shops, and social care is less available. Moreover, higher educated individuals move away out of the region due to a lack of job opportunities. The region itself was already characterized as a language deprived region, which is reinforced because of the emigration of these high educated individuals (Doets et al., 2021; Merx et al., 2022).

As a result of all this, student populations in primary and secondary schools are diminishing and more of these students come from a disadvantage background. A large part of the student population therefore experiences inequality of opportunity in education, for example students from families living below the poverty threshold and/or students with language delays (Visser et al., 2021). Intergenerational poverty has been found to influence the opportunities of students from this specific region (Edzes & Strijker, 2017). For the coming years, these regional issues are expected to further increase.

This also affects secondary education because financial support for secondary schools is largely based on the amount of students, resulting in smaller schools, staff cutbacks and school closings. Subsequently, this leads to a limited offer of schools available, lower quality of schools and therefore poorer opportunities for students in the Northeast of the Netherlands (VO raad, 2019). Taking the situational context of the Northeast of the Netherlands into account can provide additional information on how these issues influence (in)equality in daily practice, what is needed to support these schools, and add to the existing research and policy debate on (in)equality of opportunity.

1.3 Influencing (in)equality of opportunity

While little research has taken a situational context into account, more is known about overall factors that influence (in)equality of opportunity. Factors can be found on a micro-level (student), meso-level (school)

and macro-level (society). Studies have shown that the gap in test performance between students with highly and less highly educated parents has widened over time, implying that the influence of social origin on students' test performance has increased. Furthermore, students' ethnic background has been found to have an influence on their test results and educational position (Aalders et al., 2020). Availability of educational resources, cultural possessions and welfare in the family also appear to influence inequality of opportunity (Bol, 2020; Visser et al., 2021). Students with highly educated parents and/or parents without a migrant background seem to have more parental resources to help them in their educational career than students with less highly educated parents and/or parents with a migrant background. Parental resources are, for example, parents helping with homework, paying for tutoring lessons or providing school guidance (Bol, 2020; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2021). Extensive literature reviews and PISA studies report several school-level factors such as school climate, leadership practices, teacher characteristics, school curriculum, school resources and early education to contribute to equality of opportunity in education (Agasisti et al., 2021; Badou & Day, 2021; Jonkman et al., 2021). Regarding the influence of macro-level factors, the question arises whether education can compensate for inequality of opportunity in society (Bernstein, 1970; Gorard, 2010; Pring, 2011). On the one hand, there is no convincing evidence education can overcome inequality of opportunity students experience, originating from the way our society is organised. On the other hand, various findings suggest that the school system and social experiences of students in schools can reduce inequality of opportunity (Gorard, 2010; Pring, 2011).

However, explanations on how these influences become apparent in specific schools and situations remain diverse and unclear. Investigating how schools in a particular situational context act to reduce inequality of opportunity is especially relevant in a society where policy makers tend to design general policies that will be applied to schools throughout the whole country. For instance, the advice of the Education Council in the Netherlands suggesting later allocation of to a suitable school track and more differentiation within a single large classroom (Onderwijsraad, 2021) or the recent policy advice to professionalize teachers (Wiersma, 2022). Considering the persistence of the problem of inequality of opportunity, it remains the question whether general policy measures are really effective and whether more context- or regional specific policy measures are needed.

In sum, it is expected that school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants will perceive several factors to influence (in)equality of opportunity in daily practice in secondary education, such as students' socio-economic status, ethnic background, parental resources, school climate, leadership practices, teacher characteristics, school curriculum and school resources (Agasisti et al., 2021; Badou & Day, 2021; Bol, 2020; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2021; Jonkman et al., 2021; Lazenby, 2016; Westen, 1985). Moreover, it is expected that the situational context has an influence on how (in)equality of opportunity is perceived

by participants (Zhang & Hu, 2019). Thereby, the regional issues related to the declining population in the Northeast of the Netherlands and its consequences are expected to influence the perceived (in)equality of opportunity.

1.4 Present study

A clear picture of (in)equality of opportunity in a specific situational context in secondary education is needed. Furthermore, it is paramount to investigate how schools in a certain situational context act to diminish inequality of opportunity and what schools would like to do to further reduce inequality. This study can therefore provide important contextual information to the existing policy debate and provide vaster definitions on how (in)equality of opportunity in education and the factors that influence it become apparent in practice. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions: *(1) How do school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants perceive (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education in their daily practice? (2) What do school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants do in order to diminish inequality of opportunity in secondary education in their daily practice? (3) What would school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants like to do more in order to further diminish inequality of opportunity in secondary education in their daily practice?*

To look at the situational context of (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education, this exploratory study collected qualitative data from focus group discussions with school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, from four different schools in rural areas in the Northeast of the Netherlands. Focus group discussions are a widely used technique in social science to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues through people's perceptions and values (Nyumba et al., 2018). Furthermore, focus group discussions generate debate about a research topic that requires collective views and investigates meanings that lie behind those views, including participants' values and beliefs (Buijs et al., 2008; Wibeck, 2012). Thus, focus group discussions are a suitable method to answer the research questions of this study.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

School leaders, teachers and teaching assistants that were interviewed worked at four different schools, which were all part of an overarching partnership in the Northeast of the Netherlands. Participants were contacted through convenience sampling, where the school leaders contacted teachers and teaching assistants to take part in the study. 18 different departments, representing different school tracks within the same school, agreed to participate. From each school, one focus group with school leaders was made,

including the main school leader and all department leaders. Furthermore, teachers and teaching assistants were interviewed together in focus groups of approximately four participants per group. Different focus groups were created for different school departments to account for possible differences between the departments and between school tracks. This resulted in a sample size of 25 school leaders and 55 teachers and teaching assistants. In total, 22 focus group discussions were held, including 18 group discussions with teachers and teaching assistants and four group discussions with school leaders. In some group discussions, participants from a specific department were grouped together for organisational reasons. Participants were required to complete an informed consent form before participating, all forms were completed and signed.

Table 1 shows an overview from each department, where schools are indicated with A, B, C and D, and departments are indicated with numbers ranging from one till six. Several departments included multiple school tracks, therefore these departments are indicated with sub-numbers. For example department C1 includes two school tracks, vwo and havo, which are indicated as different sub-departments (C1.1 and C1.2). To specify the student population of all the departments included in this study, Table 1 describes the percentage of students in the concerned department originating from families with a migration background, families living below the poverty threshold and families with a single parent, as these are indicators for students experiencing inequality of opportunity in secondary education (Aalders et al., 2020; Bol, 2020; De Lange et al., 2013; Lazenby, 2016; Visser et al., 2021; Westen, 1985). Results originate from the national cohort studies in secondary education which are conducted yearly in the Netherlands (Nationaal Cohortonderzoek Onderwijs, 2021). Results from department D5 and results from all departments offering practical training are not available because these departments did not take part in the national cohort study (Nationaal Cohortonderzoek Onderwijs, 2021).

Percentages of students coming from families with a migration background, families living below the poverty threshold and families with a single parent are given for the Dutch national average (reference indication) and for every specific department that took part in this study. All departments have a lower percentage of students originating from families with a migration background compared to the Dutch national average. However, large differences between the Dutch average and the specific school departments can be observed when looking at the percentage of students originating from families below the poverty threshold or families with a single parent, where some department have a higher percentage of students included in their student population compared to the Dutch average, and some departments a lower percentage of students. This indicates participants from different departments will probably perceive (in)equality of opportunity on different levels in their departments.

Table 1*Student populations from included departments compared to average Dutch student population*

School Department	School track	% of students from families with a migration background (across the Netherlands)	% of students from families with a migration background (specific school department)	% of students from families below poverty threshold (across the Netherlands)	% of students from families below poverty threshold (specific school department)	% of students from families with a single parent (across the Netherlands)	% of students from families with a single parent (specific school department)
A1	vwo	13.61	8.8	11.43	8.98	15.23	15.24
A2	havo	16.24	8.57	15.09	13.93	18.14	17.38
A3	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	6.99	22.04	20.86	21.60	20.33
A4	vmbo bb/kb	27.13	8.36	31.03	28.11	25.94	23.58
A5	practical training	-	-	-	-	-	-
B1	vwo	13.61	13.34	11.43	19.03	15.23	16.59
B2	havo	16.24	16.52	15.09	21.57	18.14	22.29
B3	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	19.90	22.04	27.49	21.60	25.39
B4	vmbo bb/kb	27.13	20.18	31.03	41.47	25.94	33.39
B5	practical training	-	-	-	-	-	-
C1.1	vwo	13.61	5.89	11.43	15.44	15.23	16.90
C1.2	havo	16.24	5.89	15.09	17.21	18.14	17.17
C2	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	9.97	22.04	35.57	21.60	16.76
C3	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	5.00	22.04	26.38	21.60	18.95
C4.1	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	7.83	22.04	18.06	21.60	14.88
C4.2	vmbo bb/kb	27.13	5.35	31.03	26.35	25.94	28.70
C6.1	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	5.00	22.04	25.84	21.60	20.11
C6.2	vmbo bb/kb	27.13	8.62	31.03	32.92	25.94	28.55
C7	practical training	-	-	-	-	-	-
D1.1	vwo	13.61	5.28	11.43	10.69	15.23	13.01
D1.2	havo	16.24	5.65	15.09	12.95	18.14	13.65
D2	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	5.00	22.04	17.48	21.60	12.60
D3.1	vmbo gl/tl	21.05	5.00	22.04	26.83	21.60	24.06
D3.2	vmbo bb/kb	27.13	5.48	31.03	29.30	25.94	25.46
D4	vmbo bb/kb	27.13	5.00	31.03	30.25	25.94	22.75
D5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
D6	practical training	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note. From Nationaal Cohortonderzoek Onderwijs (2021)

2.3 Procedure and analysis

An interview guide was drafted to answer the research questions. Firstly, participants were asked how they observed (in)equality of opportunity in education concretely in their schools and daily classrooms. They were asked how they would describe a student in their school or classroom who experiences inequality of opportunity and how this experienced inequality affected the student in their (cognitive) development in school. Subsequently, participants were asked to reflect on what they were doing in their daily practice in order to diminish inequality of opportunity and what they would like to do more in order to further diminish it. An overview based on recent relevant literature reviews, policy documents and studies based on PISA data of school factors influencing (in)equality of opportunity was created (Agasisti et al., 2021; Badou & Day, 2021; Jonkman et al., 2021). This overview aided the focus group discussion leaders to ask follow-up questions if needed. Some participants were very aware of the school factors influencing inequality of opportunity whereas others were less aware, making the overview of school-factors a helpful tool to start the conversation and create awareness of behaviour that participants displayed to reduce inequality. The qualitative data from the focus group discussions was transcribed and summarized, organising the information in three different sections according to the three research questions. The results were summarized per school and per school department, including different tracks,

making it possible to afterwards analyse differences between school departments and school tracks. A member check was performed by two experts who were working for the partnership that included all four schools. Summaries per school were sent to the experts to verify the credibility of the results (Birt et al., 2016). Next, the data was open coded, focussing on participants perspectives on the three research questions. An overview per school was made to see how participants per school experienced (in)equality of opportunity in their schools and classrooms (RQ1), how participants tried to reduce inequality of opportunity in education in their current context (RQ2) and how participants would have liked to further reduce inequality of opportunity in their schools (RQ3). Results were analysed through thematic analysis and translated to English. Thematic analysis is a method to identify, analyse, and report data and was used to identify themes from the qualitative data, based on previous literature findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). New, emerging themes were also identified to better understand the local context. Specifically, intra-case and cross-case analyses were conducted, to look at differences between the school departments and school tracks (Miles et al., 2019).

3 Results

3.1 Inequality of opportunity in daily practice

The first column of Table 2 provides an overview of how participants observed inequality of opportunity in their daily practice in secondary education. First of all, school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants observed students from families living below the poverty threshold. These students could not afford (healthy) food, bus tickets, extracurricular activities, learning materials or clean clothes. A failure to meet these basic needs subsequently prevented these students from learning. Specifically to the region, participants reported amenities such as health care and musea to be far away, making these more expensive and less accessible for students living below the poverty threshold, creating more inequality.

Second, students with a foreign background were perceived to experience inequality of opportunity due to language deficits and cultural differences. These disadvantages made it difficult for students to understand learning material or to connect with teachers and fellow students, subsequently leading to educational disadvantages. Interestingly, participants also referred to many of the native Dutch students who grew up in this region, which is a linguistically deprived area, to experience educational disadvantages due to language deprivation.

A large group of students was perceived to experience inequality of opportunity due to lack of support from home, where parents or caretakers were unwilling or unable to support students. Support was thereby described in different forms: cognitive, social-emotional or with regard to ambition. When parents or caretakers were unable to provide students with cognitive support, they were named, for

example, to be unable to help students with their homework because of their own limited educational level. In this example, the educational level of the parents/caretakers was often more practice focused compared to the students' educational level which was more academic focused. In other examples, students were named to be responsible to take on administrative duties in the household or babysit little siblings, thus having little time for school. Other parents were unable to provide students with social-emotional support, such as attention for the student or structure and discipline at home. According to the participants, this resulted in students having low motivation, a high rate of sick leave and students staying in the same region after secondary education. Last, students were not triggered or motivated by their parents or caretakers and therefore had little ambition to develop to their fullest potential. A specific example of the region were parents who did not motivate students to go to school or to eventually move away from their village to study, but put more emphasis on more practical focused school tracks, while this did not always fit with a students' interests or capabilities. In contrast, some parents or caretakers were found to expect too much from their children. Students were pushed into academic levels which did not suit their capabilities. This type of reversed inequality was also described to play a role in the schools, though to a lesser extent than the other types.

In many situations, these different types of inequality of opportunity were reported to coincide. An example was a student living below the poverty threshold, growing up in a language deprived area and receiving little cognitive support from their parents or caretakers. Furthermore, students were named to respond differently to inequality of opportunity. Some students were invisible for the teachers, ashamed to talk about the situations they experienced at home, whereas other students asked for a lot of help. In certain cases, inequality of opportunity was only experienced by a student for a short time, for example when an incident such as a fire at home occurred. In other situations, students were affected for a longer time, such as a divorce or a parent in prison. These incidents led to (temporary) issues such as students not having learning material, lacking parental support or showcasing internal or external problem behaviour subsequently preventing them from learning.

Lastly, and hardly mentioned, inequality of opportunity was named to result in some students becoming late bloomers. Early selection into educational levels then resulted in more inequality because students are being placed on an educational level that eventually does not fit with their capabilities.

In sum, there are many ways of how inequality of opportunity for students in these four secondary schools was experienced. The students that have a disadvantage because of their background varied strongly in circumstances, but also in the way they appeared to experience inequality of opportunity. For most of them, their background hindered them to learn at school, only some of them seemed to be placed in educational tracks that did not fit their capabilities. This makes it difficult for the schools to work with an overarching strategy to reduce inequality of opportunity in daily practice.

3.2 Reducing inequality of opportunity

Giving attention and time to students who experience inequality of opportunity was perceived, by all participants, to be most crucial to reduce inequality. Mentors were thereby described to be the leading actors, having contact with the network around the students such as teachers, parents, care institutions and sometimes the government. Some departments had extra plus mentors available for students experiencing inequality of opportunity, other departments offered two mentors per classroom or had a mentor who was teaching every first hour of the day. Participants working in practical training (praktijkonderwijs) mentioned their small classes of eight to ten students to be a necessary advantage, because they needed to give their students a lot of attention, but were also able to do so.

How participants acted to reduce inequality of opportunity can be organised in three different themes: financial, social-emotional and cognitive support. All three themes can be seen as a form of support or attention, given by teachers, school leaders or teaching assistants. First of all, financial support was given in different ways to students who experienced inequality of opportunity. Participants described most basic financial support to be donations of food, clothes, menstrual products and learning materials. For example, some students came to school without breakfast, missed a pen or a calculator, or did not have a computer at home. When teachers became aware of this, they gave students a sandwich or learning materials. Laptops were provided through a special fund. Other organised funding was given for extracurricular activities, learning materials, tutoring, general education or transportation, for example from governmental institutions. Lastly, financial coaching was named in one school where the school offered financial coaching for parents and students.

Second, social-emotional support was given to students by teachers or teaching assistants through different ways. For example, students received extra mentoring, mentors conducted individual conversations, played board games after school, raised students ambitions or gave career orientation, some teachers would even respond to urgent calls from their students around midnight. In some situations, the mentor was able to take over support outside of school, which was lacking from parents or caretakers. For example, helping students to get their swimming diploma or being the contact of care institutions. Some mentors had close contact with parents, helping them through certain situations such as tax returns. Larger support structures included time for extracurricular activities, after school study rooms, smaller classrooms, home visits by teachers or the time-out; a special class for students who could not focus in regular classrooms. Some departments offered absence consultation hours to reduce sick leave.

Cognitive support focused more on the (cognitive) capabilities and finding the right educational path for a student. Participants described how correct determination and re-evaluation of determination remained an important factor to reduce inequality in their schools. Therefore, one school offered growth models, where students can be placed on a different school track than what they were originally advised.

Another school worked with transitional classes and a third with customized education, offering a student subjects on different school tracks. The fourth school offered apprenticeships programmes, which are more practice based. Participants also mentioned offering students extra remedial teaching, spring, summer and winter schools, elective working times, an evening academy (for parents), free tutoring, extra explanation in the classroom and extra attention for technical reading, vocabulary and learning strategies. One school had a specific reading policy, reading every day for half an hour throughout the whole school, including all departments. Two schools even had a subsidiary of the local library within the school.

3.3 Further reducing inequality of opportunity

Lastly, participants were asked what they would like to do more to further diminish inequality of opportunity. The last column of Table 3 gives an overview. As mentioned before, participants named attention for students who experience inequality of opportunity as most important, where more attention reduces inequality. To reduce inequality of opportunity, participants suggested it is necessary to make school a space where these students are always welcome, either to make homework, or to talk with fellow students or teachers. This would result in students having less homework and less need for tutoring, which is currently only available for families who are able to pay for it. Participants suggested to decrease the class size, so a teacher would be able to pay attention to how each student learns, which was hardly possible in large classes. Another related suggestion was to increase the time students spent with their mentor in order to increase the individual attention available for students experiencing inequality. By increasing the time that can be spent on students who are experiencing inequality, teachers would be able to give attention to improving students' basic skills such as technical reading, students' self-reliance, and students' motivation or ambition to learn. Additionally, in some school departments it was necessary to care for students' basic needs such as investments in learning materials, breakfast and/or laundry service before or after school.

Furthermore, participants suggested to further tighten the network around the student, by ameliorating relationships between the school, parents, care institutions and the government, creating a school community. By tightening the network, it would be possible to monitor students better, signal problems earlier and refer students to care institutions quicker if necessary. Close contact with parents through home visits, as some departments already did, or a visit hour at school could give information to teachers or mentors about their students. Closer contact between different school tracks would make it easier for students to switch between tracks or to create personal learning plans for students. This would give students the opportunity to learn every subject according to their own abilities. Closer contact with care institutions and the government would provide more continuity for students and (hopefully) reduce waiting lists. This relates to a broader, regional problem because of the declining population, resulting in

the care infrastructure (care institutions and amenities) to be increasingly limited. Participants suggested that next to investments in education, investments in the care infrastructure are needed as well, as inequality of opportunity is a broader issue in the region.

Regarding teacher characteristics, participants found it important that teachers were aware of their student population and would know how to respond to a population with disadvantaged students. Most importantly, teachers should be aware of the population of students in their schools and actions that need to be taken to reduce inequality of opportunity. This was named to be especially relevant for the schools where the issue of disadvantaged students was relatively low; in case of the one school with a high percentage of disadvantaged students the awareness was very high. In order to create more awareness, participants suggested they needed more time for intercollegiate consultation, continuity in teams and stimulation to create awareness of their population of students.

Lastly, school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants made some suggestions regarding larger policy decisions in education. Students experience inequality of opportunity on many different levels. It is therefore important to provide students with personalized solutions, making it difficult to reduce inequality through one overarching policy. Participants name the current grading system to be restrictive when trying to reduce inequality. Perceptions on the advice of the Education Council regarding later allocation and more differentiation in one single large classroom were diverse. Most participants felt that later selection of students into school tracks could be helpful for only some disadvantaged students. However, many students seemed to be placed on a suitable school track, which subsequently also gives them affirmation of their abilities and motivation to learn. Participants from more practice focused school tracks named that some of their students, for the first time, had the feeling they were able to achieve high grades, or to do well in school. Previously these students had the feeling they were not good enough or did not fit in the current school system. Rather than later selection, participants would like to be able to provide more personalized school careers for students, offering students personalized diplomas, or in Dutch: “maatwerkdiploma’s”. This would make it possible for students to follow school subjects from different school tracks, giving the student a chance to excel in some school subjects while following other subjects on a suitable track. Instead of uniform diplomas and later selection, students would benefit more from affirmation of their abilities through “maatwerkdiploma’s”.

Table 2*Disadvantaged students and reducing inequality of opportunity: what is done now and what should be done further*

Disadvantaged students in daily practice	Reducing inequality – what is done now	Reducing inequality – what should be done further
Below poverty threshold No money for basic needs/ No money for extracurricular activities/ Little amenities such as healthcare	Attention and time Given to disadvantaged students	Attention and time Available for disadvantaged students
Language and culture Language deprivation/ Cultural differences	Financial support Individual support/organized funding	Financial care for students' basic needs Basic needs, extracurricular activities, amenities
Lack of support from home (parents/caretakers) Cognitive/social-emotional/ambition	Social emotional support Extra mentoring/ in school support/out of school support/larger support structures Language enriched teaching	School community Smaller classrooms/more mentoring/tighter network around student: school community
Reversed inequality Too high standards	Cognitive support Correct determination/additional remedial teaching/extra attention for (technical) reading, vocabulary, learning strategies	Teacher awareness Time for personal development and intercollegiate consultation
		Policy changes Track mobility/personalized school career Investments in amenities in the region such as health care

3.4 Differences between school departments

School leaders, teachers and teaching assistants showed different levels of awareness when trying to explain how they perceived inequality of opportunity in their daily practice, which seemed to be dependent on the department they worked in. In departments with a high percentage of disadvantaged students, participants were very aware of how inequality of opportunity was experienced by their students. While all departments were located in the Northeast of the Netherlands, differences between the departments could be observed. It became apparent that departments responded to the perceived inequality of opportunity of their population. More awareness also resulted in school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants to be more involved in reducing inequality of opportunity. Participants mentioned that school size also played a role in the awareness of inequality of opportunity. Participants from smaller departments named their school size as an advantage because they could more easily make stronger connections with the students in the school. Having these stronger connections and knowing students better gave participants more knowledge on how students were experiencing inequality of opportunity.

3.5 Differences between school tracks

Participants from different school tracks, ranging from more practice focused school tracks to more academic focused school tracks, were interviewed. Much like the differences between schools, school tracks seem to have different populations of students and subsequently respond differently to the experienced inequality of opportunity. In three out of four schools, practice focused school tracks (praktijkonderwijs, vmbo) seemed to experience more inequality of opportunity in daily practice compared to academic

focused school tracks (havo, vwo); most students with a disadvantaged background were found at the practice focused school tracks. For one school, this was not the case because 80% of their student population came from a disadvantaged background.

Participants working in more academically focused school tracks questioned why they perceived less inequality of opportunity compared to participants who were working in practice focused school tracks. Whether they were not aware of the inequality of opportunity of their population or their students experienced less inequality. They also hypothesized some students might be more ashamed to talk about the inequality they experienced or that a selection of students was already made where students who experience more inequality went to more practice focused school tracks.

Considering how to reduce inequality of opportunity, participants working in academic focused school tracks seemed to focus more on cognitive support. Examples are helping a student with their homework or offering extra tutoring classes for free. Overall, participants working in practice focused school tracks seemed to focus more on social-emotional support. Some teachers took care of parental tasks such as making sure that students had breakfast in the morning or making sure a student was safe during the evening by texting with them. Teachers were very involved in students' lives, they would help students to get a job or play board games with them after school. Differences were found in the network around the student. Overall, participants in practice focused school tracks seemed to play a larger role in the network around the student, being in closer contact with parents, care institutions and the government. This was often related to a higher need of closer contact. Lastly, financial support was named to be important across all school-levels. For example, by offering financial help or aiding parents to apply for subsidies.

4 Discussion

4.1 Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand how school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants perceive (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education in their daily practice, how they act to diminish it and what they perceive as important factors in order to further reduce inequality of opportunity in education. In order to look at the situational context of (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education, this study focused on qualitative data collected from focus group discussions with participants from four different schools, including 18 different departments, in rural areas in the Northeast of the Netherlands.

First of all, how school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants perceive (in)equality of opportunity in daily practice differs strongly per school and even per department. Every region, and subsequently every school and every department has a different population of disadvantaged students, which has many similarities but also differ strongly in the underlying issues. Next to that, it is hard to define when a

student is disadvantaged as there is no cut off point of when a student is experiencing inequality of opportunity. Overall descriptions of disadvantaged students were in line with previous findings. Students with low socio-economic status or migrant background were often perceived to experience inequality of opportunity (Agasisti et al., 2021; Badou & Day, 2021; Bol, 2020; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2021; Jonkman et al., 2021; Lazenby, 2016; Westen, 1985). Furthermore, support from parents was perceived to influence students' (in)equality (Badou & Day, 2021). Nevertheless, contrary to what previous studies may suggest, (in)equality of opportunity is difficult to be described as one overall construct, as situational contexts play a role on how (in)equality is experienced.

Based on the issues they are facing, the schools in this study employed many different ways to reduce inequality of opportunity in their schools. Giving attention to disadvantaged students for their well-being and learning styles, was perceived to be most important, where teachers and mentors were perceived as crucial actors, which is in line with current approaches (Bosker et al., 2021). The latest social and political debate about educational equality in this regard was often experienced by the participants in our study as understating or ignoring all their daily efforts. In their view, making time for teachers and mentors to connect with students who experience inequality should be given highest priority when trying to reduce inequality.

In order to further diminish inequality of opportunity, participants gave several suggestions. Schools should be seen more as a community where students are able to go, even if they do not have classes. Consequently, it would be possible for students to make homework at school, or to make connections with teachers or fellow students, eventually reducing inequality of opportunity. Furthermore, the network between the school and several amenities, such as the government and health care institutions, should be tightened, forming a net around the student, with the school as a centre point of contact. Especially in a region with a declining population, having close contact with several amenities is important. Closer relationships can make sure a student is seen and aided, ultimately helping to reduce inequality. Regarding policy decisions, participants named the current grading system to be restrictive. Rather than later selection, participants would like to be able to provide more personalized school careers for students, offering students personalized diplomas. This could students give the feeling that they are good at what they do, the feeling of motivation for school and confirmation of their abilities.

All in all, it became apparent that schools and departments strongly respond to the perceived (in)equality of opportunity of their specific student population. Schools and school tracks seem to have different populations of disadvantaged students and subsequently respond differently to reduce inequality. Therefore, an overarching policy to reduce inequality of opportunity is not appropriate; a regional or even a school specific approach seems more effective.

4.2 Limitations and implications

This study focused on school leaders', teachers' and teaching assistants' perceptions of (in)equality of opportunity in their schools in practice through focus group discussions. These discussions provided vast quantities of information on the research questions including participant's views and opinions. However, results only included views of a small selection of participants who were contacted through convenience sampling, making it difficult to generalize the results. Nevertheless, as this study has shown, taking a specific situational context into account is of utmost importance to include specific situational conditions of institutions when developing policy to increase equality of opportunity.

Second, inequality of opportunity does not occur in secondary education only but can be seen as a societal issue. As mentioned before, the question arises how much education can compensate for society (Bernstein, 1970; Gorard, 2010; Pring, 2011). Regarding the results, it is possible to see (in)equality of opportunity is not only experienced in education, but is a result of a large combination of factors, including deeply rooted individual and societal influences on the experienced (in)equality of opportunity of a student. Therefore, one may wonder whether focusing only on schools influencing (in)equality of opportunity can grasp the whole construct or whether a larger perspective including the whole network of a student should be taken into account.

How (in)equality of opportunity is perceived in secondary schools is different for every school department due to differences of student populations in every region, institution and on every school track. Policy makers should focus more on what different student populations who are experiencing inequality of opportunity look like, and how solutions could be more tailored towards specific institutions to further reduce inequality. Moreover, the schools in our study already do a lot in order to diminish inequality of opportunity. Policy makers can take this into account when trying to reduce inequality of opportunity by drawing on institution focused solutions. Moreover, time and attention are seen to be at the cutting edge when trying to reduce inequality. Thus increasing school leaders', teachers' and teaching assistant's awareness of the population of students in their schools and which actions can be taken to reduce inequality of opportunity is especially relevant, as with awareness, time and attention can be given to students experiencing inequality. Specifically to the Northeast of the Netherlands, the impact of the declining student population should be taken into account. To create more awareness of their population, Dutch schools could use existing research which is often already available, for example due to national cohort studies on student populations in the Netherlands (Nationaal Cohort Onderzoek, 2021).

In order to get more understanding of regional and school specific influences on (in)equality of opportunity, future research could take a contextual perspective, including regional, and school specific influences on (in)equality of opportunity in secondary education. Finally, future research could look into

students' whole network regarding (in)equality of opportunity, instead of only taking the situational context of secondary education into account.

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