Teachers’ Perceptions of Early Tracking

A Comparative Study between Teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden

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Abstract

Early tracking is an educational practice where students are divided into separate groups of ability. Despite many studies linking early tracking with increased inequality in education, it is a prevalent feature of education systems. This research uses a qualitative approach to study the perceptions of teachers regarding early tracking and the effects that it has on equality of education. Furthermore, it compares these perceptions between teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden. By means of thematic analysis a number of themes were identified from the interview data: the teaching-learning process; self-confidence and image forming; selection process and flexibility between tracks; labour-market transitions; opportunities for self-development; socio-economic status; and immigrant students.

Comparative analysis showed that generally, the Swedish teachers had stronger negative perceptions of early tracking. They were more worried about the possible negative side-effects of dividing students at such a young age. Moreover, they felt that by adapting their teaching methods they were able to cope with the range of abilities in their classroom. The Dutch teachers did agree that the negative sides of tracking existed, but mostly they thought that these did not outweigh the benefits that they felt early tracking has for the quality of education. A number of the Dutch teachers worried especially that if some of the low-performing students would not be able to keep up with the rest of the class, they would lose their motivation and become disruptive to the lesson. Class size was found to be an important factor here: teachers from both countries strongly expected that smaller classes might make teaching in a mixed-ability group more manageable. Increasing the flexibility between the tracks was also seen as an important factor by the teachers from the Netherlands.

Keywords

Early tracking, Equality of education, Perceptions of teachers
# Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 1  
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................................. 4  
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations .................................................................................................... 5  
List of Tables/Figures ............................................................................................................................ 6  

1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 7  
   1.1 Aims and objectives ................................................................................................................... 8  
   1.2 Research questions .................................................................................................................. 8  
   1.3 Key concepts ............................................................................................................................ 8  
       1.3.1 Early tracking ................................................................................................................ 8  
       1.3.2 Equality of education ................................................................................................. 9  
   1.4 Significance to the field of International and Comparative Education ...................................... 10  
   1.5 Limitations ................................................................................................................................ 10  

2. Literature review .............................................................................................................................. 12  
   2.1 Equality of education .............................................................................................................. 12  
   2.2 Efficiency of education .......................................................................................................... 13  
   2.3 Self-confidence ...................................................................................................................... 14  
   2.4 Labour-market transitions ...................................................................................................... 14  
   2.5 Teacher’s perceptions ............................................................................................................. 14  

3. Contextual backgrounds ................................................................................................................. 16  
   3.1 Secondary education in the Netherlands ............................................................................... 16  
   3.2 Secondary education in Sweden ............................................................................................ 19  

4. Methods .......................................................................................................................................... 20  
   4.1 Research strategy ................................................................................................................. 20  
   4.2 Research design .................................................................................................................... 20  
   4.3 Research methods ............................................................................................................... 21  
   4.4 Data collection and sampling .............................................................................................. 22  
   4.5 Method of analysis .............................................................................................................. 23  
   4.6 Trustworthiness .................................................................................................................... 24  
   4.7 Ethical considerations .......................................................................................................... 25  

5. Research findings and analysis ....................................................................................................... 27  
   5.1 Perceptions of early tracking ............................................................................................... 27  
       5.1.1 The teaching-learning process ................................................................................... 27  
       5.1.2 Self-confidence and image forming .......................................................................... 29  
       5.1.3 Selection process and flexibility between tracks ...................................................... 31  
       5.1.4 Labour-market transitions ....................................................................................... 32  
       5.1.5 Summary ................................................................................................................... 32  
       5.1.6 Perceptions of the effects of early tracking on equality ........................................... 33  
       5.1.7 Opportunities for self-development .......................................................................... 33  
       5.1.8 Socio-economic background .................................................................................... 33  
       5.1.9 Immigrant students .................................................................................................... 34  
       5.1.10 Summary .................................................................................................................. 35
5.2 Comparative analysis of the perceptions of teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden..........................35
5.2.1 Summary..............................................37
6. Discussion........................................................................39
7. Concluding remarks......................................................42

Reference List........................................................................43
Appendix A – Research Letter English..................................48
Appendix B – Research Letter Dutch....................................49
Appendix C – Informed Consent Form English.........................50
Appendix D – Informed Consent Form Dutch...........................51
Appendix E – Interview Guide English....................................52
Appendix F – Interview Guide Dutch.......................................53
Appendix G – Translated Quotations.......................................54
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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CITO – Centraal instituut voor toetsontwikkeling [Central Institute for Test Development]
HAVO – Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs [higher general continued education]
HBO – Hoger beroepsonderwijs [higher vocational education]
ICE – International and Comparative Education
MAVO – Middelbaar algemeen voortgezet onderwijs [secondary general continued education]
MBO – Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs [secondary vocational education]
OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIRLS – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment
SES – Socio-Economic Status
TIMSS – Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
VMBO – Voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs [preparatory secondary vocational education]
VWO – Voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs [preparatory academic education]
List of Tables

Table 1: Presentation of participants.................................................................23
Table 2: Example of coding process..................................................................24
Table 3: Similarities and differences in teachers’ perceptions of early tracking........37

List of Figures

Figure 1: Overview of the Dutch education system..............................................17
Figure 2: The Bray and Thomas cube..............................................................21
1. Introduction

The end of primary school is always an exciting time for children and their parents as they decide which secondary school the child will go to. For children in the Netherlands, this period has even more significance: in the final year of primary school they hear to which level of secondary education the child will be allowed to go. The secondary education system in the Netherlands is strongly characterised by early tracking: after primary school, all children are divided between separate vocational and academic levels of education. The Dutch education system is not unique in this. Many countries, especially in Northern Europe, have some form of tracking at a certain point in their education system. However, the Netherlands stands out because of the early age at which the selection takes place, and because of the high number of tracks: in total there are seven different levels between which the students are divided.

In 2007, the OECD released a report in which the Dutch system was criticised for this early tracking. According to the report, the tracking system negatively impacts students from underprivileged backgrounds (Van de Werfhorst, Elffers, & Karsten, 2015). This report was cause for some debate in Dutch society and politics about the education system and whether it is in need of reform. The Dutch Education Council started an investigation and issued a report of its own: in the end they concluded that there was not enough evidence that postponing the selection moment would increase the equality of education, and so the system has largely remained the same (Onderwijsraad, 2010). Now and again the issue is picked up again in the media and people speak out either in favour or against early tracking, but there are no concrete plans for reform (de Volkskrant, 2018).

Early tracking has been the subject of many studies by sociologists of education. Some regard tracking merely as a neutral organisational practice intended to facilitate teaching. They argue that the inequality which is often linked with tracking can be largely attributed to flaws in the way tracking policies are carried out, and that if these flaws would be addressed it would be possible to greatly reduce the negative effects of tracking (Hallinan, 2010, p.352).

On the other hand, more fervent opponents of tracking such as Jeannie Oakes believe that inequality is not merely an ‘unintended consequence’ of tracking, but that the two are inherently linked. Oakes calls attention to the normative assumptions on which tracking policies are based. She is particularly critical of the categorisation of students, which she argues leads to an oversimplified and damaging construction of ‘intelligence’ (Oakes, 2010). Some scholars who are critical of early tracking even go as far as to claim that it is a mechanism which legitimises structural inequality. For example, George Ansalone argues that instead of giving all students equal chances to succeed, tracking reinforces the achievement gap between advantaged and less-advantaged students, and in this way creates a “socially constructed framework for failure” for a group of students who are already vulnerable to begin with (Ansalone & Biafora, 2010, p.229).

In some circles, the practice of early tracking is therefore regarded as highly controversial. Nevertheless, it is so deeply entrenched in many education systems that most people might not even think to question it. Despite a long history of research about the issue, there is still a lot that is unknown or uncertain about its effects. This is partly because it is such a fundamental characteristic of an education system that it is nearly impossible to separate its effects from those of other contributing factors. Moreover, comparisons between countries are complicated by the many differences in the way every country has given form to their tracking policies.
Despite these difficulties it is a very important area for research, because of its potentially far reaching consequences for the educational experiences of children. In order to fully understand early tracking it is vital not only to understand the effects of tracking itself, but also to gain insight into the ways in which individual actors perceive it. This research will study the perceptions of a specific group of stakeholders: the teachers. Apart from the students themselves, teachers are the people who are most closely able to experience the effects of tracking. They are not only able to observe the effects that tracking has on their students, but the way in which they exercise their profession is directly influenced by whether their classes are tracked or not. When making any decisions regarding early tracking, it is therefore very relevant to understand how the teachers perceive it.

Furthermore, this research will compare the perceptions of teachers from the Netherlands and teachers from Sweden. These two countries have a very different approach to tracking: whereas the Netherlands starts tracking their students at the age of twelve, Swedish students remain together for the entire duration of lower-secondary education, and tracking only starts when the students enter upper-secondary school. By comparing the perceptions of these two groups of teachers this research will provide insight into the differences and similarities in perspectives of teachers who have experience teaching in tracked classes and from teachers who know what it is like to teach in mixed-ability environments.

1.1 Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this study is to increase understanding of early tracking and its effects on equality of education by researching teachers’ perspectives in Sweden and in the Netherlands. This aim will be split into the following objectives:
- To gain a deeper understanding of early tracking
- To explore the ways in which early tracking affects the equality of education
- To compare perceptions of early tracking between teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden

1.2 Research questions

In order to fulfil these objectives, this paper will attempt to answer the following research questions:
1. What are teachers’ perceptions regarding early tracking?
2. To what extent do teachers perceive early tracking affects the equality of education?
3. How do these perceptions differ between teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden?

1.3 Key concepts

1.3.1 Early tracking

‘Tracking’ refers to the separation of pupils according to ability. Jeannie Oakes defines it as "the practice of dividing students into separate classes for high-, average- and low-achievers; it lays out different curriculum paths for students headed for college and for those who are bound directly to the workplace" (1986, p.13).

Tracking takes a variety of shapes in different countries. There are large differences in the way in which the selection takes place; in the number of different tracks; and in the extent to which the educational content differs between tracks, to name some examples. One very
important difference is the age at which the selection between the different tracks takes place. ‘Early tracking’ is a form of tracking where the selection already happens during lower secondary education (Santa Cruz, Siles and Vrecer, 2011, p.198).

Two other terms that are similar to tracking are ‘streaming’ and ‘ability grouping’. In this report, streaming will be used as synonymous to tracking. These two terms refer to a semi-permanent division, where students are intended to stay in the track they are sorted into until they obtain their degree. The term ability grouping will not be used, because this term is most often used to refer specifically to a short-term division of students, for example when teachers put students into groups for the duration of one class, semester or schoolyear. In the case of ability grouping pupils are usually in different groups for every subject, and it is easier to switch between the groups. Whereas with tracking, the students are usually in one track-level for all of their subjects, and they often do not have the opportunity to switch during the schoolyear. Tracked systems are also called ‘stratified’ systems, and systems without tracking are called ‘comprehensive’ systems.

Since this study compares the perceptions of teachers from Sweden and the Netherlands, the section on contextual backgrounds will go into more detail about the Dutch early-tracking and Swedish late-tracking educational contexts.

1.3.2 Equality of education

One of the research questions of this paper asks to what extent teachers perceive early tracking affects the equality of education. ‘Equality of education’ is not a straightforward term, and it has been used by many different people in a variety of different ways. Since this research is data-driven, the concept of equality of education that is used in this paper has in part resulted from how the teachers themselves viewed this concept: their answers to the questions about how they would define equality of education, and the extent to which they perceived it is affected by early tracking have determined the themes that are discussed in the analysis.

However, there are also a number of aspects of equality of education that were particularly relevant to this research, based on their prevalence in previous research on the topic. Many researchers in this area write about equality of education mainly in terms of ‘equality of educational opportunity’. According to this definition, education is equal when all students have the same opportunity to receive education, no matter their socio-economic background, race or gender. This does not mean that all students should receive the same education: every student has different needs and abilities, and education should be able to respond to this (Warnock, 1975).

In regard to tracking, this would entail that every student should have the opportunity to be placed in the track that suits their ability level, irrespective of their background. However, ‘equality of educational opportunity’ is not sufficient to reach equality. For example, even if students from all backgrounds had the same opportunities to reach every track, there could still be systematic inequalities between the different tracks. Therefore, I argue it is necessary to take into account the goals of education, and to assess whether there is equality in the extent to which these goals are achieved.

Based on this, this research adheres to the following definition of equality: “Education should provide students with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their lives; it should prepare students to be good citizens; it should prepare students for the labour market; and it should provide students from all backgrounds with equal opportunities in society. Education is equal when all children have an equal opportunity to receive education, irrespective of their social class, race or gender, and when all children receive education that
fulfils the four goals of education in an equitable manner, irrespective of the track they are placed in” (Hölscher, 2018).

1.4 Significance to the field of International and Comparative Education

In recent decades, large-scale international assessments on education have led to a significant increase in the availability of internationally comparable data. National governments have started to attach more and more importance to this data: increasingly, policy decisions are informed by the results of these tests (Volante, 2016, p.7).

While such quantitative studies with large amounts of cross-national data can be very useful to researchers and policy makers, it is not the only area in which the field of International and Comparative Education can contribute to the scientific literature on education. It can also be very valuable to study educational phenomena using a micro-level approach. Noah and Eckstein argue that this kind of research is underrepresented in the field of ICE: “We have few, if any, comparative studies of the attitudes, opinions and actions of samples of teachers, school officials, parents, children and politicians in the matter of changing school structures and processes” (Noah & Eckstein, 1998, p.54).

The research presented in this report will provide such a study, by taking an in-depth, qualitative approach to investigate the issue of early tracking from the perspectives of individual teachers. As will be demonstrated in the literature review, early tracking is an area of education which, while researched abundantly by means of quantitative methods, could benefit much from being further explored through qualitative research methods. Because conversations about early tracking often include issues of equality, decisions regarding tracking have normative implications as well as merely organisational ones. In order to fully understand early tracking and its effects, it is vital to understand the perspectives and experiences of individual actors. By comparing the experiences of teachers in different educational contexts, this research will contribute a qualitative perspective to the literature on early tracking which can serve to complement the large body of quantitative research that exists on the topic.

1.5 Limitations

This research project has been carried out in a relatively short time period, and it is constrained by a number of limitations. Most importantly, since my level of Swedish is not sufficient to hold in-depth conversations, I have had to conduct the interviews with Swedish participants in English. This turned out to be even more of a hindrance than anticipated. Even though all participants have a good command of the English language, for most of them, including myself, English is not their native language. Because of this, some of them were not able to express themselves as fully as they might have been able to in their mother tongue. On the other hand, the fragments from these interviews that are used in this report could be transferred verbatim, while I had to translate the fragments from the Dutch teachers. These translated fragments are all numbered, and in appendix G the original Dutch statements can be found.

Secondly, as I am currently located in Stockholm, the interviews with Dutch participants and with Swedish participants from outside of Stockholm had to be held over Skype or over the phone. The quality of these interviews was therefore dependent on the quality of the internet or phone connection. However, this quality was generally very good and I have not noticed any significant decrease in quality of the interviews as a result.
A final important limitation is related to my personal background. Since I have grown up in the Netherlands and have gone to school there, I am familiar with the education system of that country. On the one hand, this has given me an advantage when writing about it, since I already knew much about it beforehand. However, I also realise that this might make me more vulnerable to developing certain blind spots about this system. Having personally received a lot of benefits from the Dutch education system, I will not be able to take a truly impartial stand towards it. I have tried to counter this limitation by remaining aware of it and by continually reflecting on my own attitudes and biases and their implications for the research project.
2. Literature Review

Much has been written about early tracking by researchers and policy makers alike. Advocates of tracking often claim that it increases the efficiency of education by making it easier for teachers to provide all students with education suited to their particular level. However, opponents of tracking assert that it significantly increases the inequality of education, especially when the selection happens at an early age. It is therefore often assumed that tracking involves a trade-off between equity and efficiency (Pekkarinen, 2014, p.2).

A large part of the literature on early tracking, including the work of Jeannie Oakes, is written from and about the context of the United States. Since tracking takes such different forms in so many different countries, it can be hard to study its effects: not only are there differences in the way tracking itself is carried out, but the whole education system is different in every country, making it hard to isolate the effects of tracking from other context related factors. This literature review will summarise the most important studies that have been done in the field of tracking, in order evaluate if the scientific evidence supports the notion of an efficiency-equity trade-off. The review will also identify where the gaps are in the current literature on early tracking.

2.1 Equality of education

Most of the literature on tracking and equality looks primarily at the effects of tracking on intergenerational mobility. Some of these studies have used data from international assessments like the PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS in order to be able to compare data from a large number of countries. Their findings show that in countries with tracking the influence of parental background is larger than in countries without tracking (Ammermüller, 2013; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006; Ferreira & Gignoux, 2014).

However, researchers noted that it is possible that this increase in inequality is not caused directly by tracking, but that it can be explained by other, related factors (Dupriez & Dumay, 2006). In order to investigate this, a study from 2007 compares data from both primary school and secondary school in the Czech Republic; Sweden; Finland; and Canada. Of these four countries, the Czech Republic is the only early tracking country, whereas the other three are all late- or non-tracking countries. The study finds that, while the relationship between SES and student achievement is more or less similar in all four countries during primary school, this is no longer the case in secondary school: after tracking has taken place in the Czech Republic, the inequality in the Czech education system increases compared to the other three countries (Straková, 2007). A longitudinal study from Finland also concluded that tracking negatively influenced equality: data from before and after an education reform which reduced tracking showed that after the reform, the achievement gap between students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds had decreased (Kerr, Pekkarinen & Uusitalo, 2013).

The next question that researchers asked was whether the age at which tracking takes place matters for its effect on equality. The results show that it does: the earlier a country starts tracking, the stronger the relationship between parental background and student achievements (Schütz, Ursprung & Wößmann, 2008; Freitag & Schlöcht, 2009).

Looking more closely at the precise mechanisms behind tracking, a study from 2016 concludes that a large part of the inequality resulting from tracking is attributable to the initial selection between the tracks: the study shows that in countries where parents can influence
the track their child is placed in, the inequality is larger than in countries where pupils are selected purely based on prior performance (Korthals & Dronkers, 2016). A different study based on longitudinal cohort research in Germany shows that apart from initial track placement, the possibilities of mobility between the different tracks also plays an important role (Schindler, 2017).

Regarding the specific influence of tracking on equality for immigrant students, a study from 2013 concludes that second generation immigrant students in Germany do not systematically receive lower track recommendations than native students with the same level of ability. However, the study notes that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do structurally receive lower track recommendations. This inequality has a relatively higher impact on the second generation immigrant students, since they are more likely to come from lower SES backgrounds (Lüdeman & Schwerdt, 2013).

Moreover, a study using data from several international student assessments shows that early tracking negatively affects the reading achievement of non-native students who do not speak the national language at home and that the reading, maths and science achievements of newly arrived students are negatively influenced by early tracking (Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016).

Apart from negatively affecting social mobility, tracking can also increase inequality by causing systematic differences between tracks. For example, in 1986 Jeannie Oakes carried out a study in 38 schools in the US which showed that students in the higher tracks of these schools were presented with significantly more opportunities to learn than those in the lower tracks: the academic students got more varied assignments and more opportunities to be creatively engaged with their schoolwork, while in lower level tracks the students were expected to follow instructions rather than to be creative or critical. However, this study has not been repeated outside the United States, or in a more recent timeframe.

2.2 Efficiency of education

The previous section has shown that scientific evidence largely supports the claim that tracking, and especially early tracking, increases inequality in education. This section will take a closer look at the research that studies the second claim: whether tracking increases educational efficiency.

When researching the effects of tracking on student performance, it is again very difficult to isolate the direct effects of tracking from other country-level factors. The results are somewhat mixed, but most of the studies do not find a significant effect on student performance. Hanushek & Wößmann use a differences-in-differences method based on data from six international student assessments. They find no consistent evidence to support the theory that tracking increases efficiency in education: although their study shows a slight positive effect of tracking on science performance, it also indicates negative effects on reading and mathematics performance (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006). An older study from 1982 consisting of a meta-analysis of 52 studies in secondary schools concludes that tracking has little effect on student achievements, both for the high- and low-performing groups (Kulik & Kulik, 1982).

There is some evidence supporting a small positive effect on the achievements of the highest performing students, but only when the higher tracks provide a more challenging curriculum (Onderwijsraad, 2010). However, two other studies indicate that tracking causes a widening of the achievement gap between high and low performing students: their results show that in countries with tracking, the variability between students is larger than in countries without tracking (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; Montt, 2011).
Since there is no consistent evidence that tracking increases efficiency, scientific findings therefore do not support an equity-efficiency trade-off. It is possible that tracking increases the performance of the highest-performing students, but even for this group the results are not conclusive.

2.3 Self-confidence

Apart from equality and efficiency, the literature on early tracking has also focussed on a number of other areas. One of these is the effects that early tracking could have on the self-confidence of students.

Houtte, Demanet & Stevens (2012) have researched the difference between schools in Belgium which offer more than one level, and schools which offer only one track. They find that most academic students have a higher self-esteem than vocational students. They also find that the self-confidence of academic students is higher in schools with multiple tracks than in schools with only one track, while for vocational students it remains the same for both school types.

A study from 2015 compares the mathematics self-beliefs of students in the Netherlands at the end of primary school, and of those same students at the end of lower secondary school. The results showed that the mathematics self-beliefs of the academic students went down after tracking, while they went up for vocational students (Reed, Kirschner & Jolles, 2015). These results correspond to a study from 2016, which concludes that the immediate environment to which students compare their achievements matters more for self-confidence than the status that a particular school-type has (Salchegger, 2016).

Overall, most of the studies on the effects of tracking on self-confidence therefore show that tracking can have a negative impact on the self-confidence of high-level track students, while the self-confidence of lower-level students either remains the same or increases slightly. However, there are no studies which look specifically at the negative image that might be attached to lower-level tracks or stereotypes that could result from tracking.

2.4 Labour-market transitions

Another important benefit that advocates of tracking often bring up, is that it would improve transitions from school to the labour-market by better preparing students for future employment. The two studies that researched whether this is the case showed that students leaving school in tracking countries do find jobs more easily than those in non-tracking countries (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013; Iannelli & Raffe, 2007). However, none of these studies looks specifically at the difference between early- and late tracking countries.

2.5 Teachers’ perceptions

Only one study looks specifically at the perceptions of teachers, although this research focusses on elementary school teachers, not secondary school. Based on self-completion questionnaires from 124 teachers in 3 New York state public schools, it concludes that the teachers were generally in favour of tracking. Although they did believe that tracking had a positive effect on the achievements of high-performing students, they also thought that it would be better for low performing students to be taught together with their more able peers, so that they could learn from them. Moreover, they also felt that grouping according to ability
would have negative effects on the self-confidence of low performing students. The reason that they still favoured tracking had less to do with student outcomes, and more with managerial issues: the teachers spoke about difficulties of responding to the needs of diverse learners. They felt that tracking made their job more manageable (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004).

Considering the central position of teachers when it comes to early tracking, a lot more research is needed about their perceptions of the topic. The study by Ansalone and Biafora applies only to the context of the United States, where tracking differs largely per state or even per school. The perceptions of teachers from other contexts might differ. Moreover, almost all literature about early tracking is quantitative in nature. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a qualitative, in-depth perspective on the perceptions of lower-secondary school teachers in the Dutch and Swedish contexts.
3. Contextual backgrounds

The following two sections will describe the secondary education systems of the Netherlands and Sweden, so as to provide context to better understand the experiences of the participating teachers.

3.1 Secondary education in the Netherlands

The Dutch education system took its current shape in 1968, after a law which became known as the ‘Mammoth act’ introduced extensive reforms to secondary education. Before that time, there was already a separation between academic and vocational schools: Latin grammar schools with a heavy focus on classicism taught the children of the elite who would go to university, while technical schools provided job specific training. After the Second World War, these technical schools increasingly included general development courses in their curriculum, and there was more focus on theory (Stellwag, 1967, p.360-363). The ‘Mammoth act’ merged these different schools into three general levels: MAVO, HAVO and VWO. Some years later the MAVO was transformed into the current VMBO.

In the current secondary education system of the Netherlands, all children are divided between these three levels: VWO, HAVO and VMBO. In the final year of primary school all pupils take the national ‘CITO-test’ and get an advice from their teacher. Until recently the decision about which track children could go to was split evenly between the result of the test and the advice of the teacher. However, now it is completely dependent on the advice, although the primary school teachers do base their judgements on the results of the tests the children have taken throughout their primary school years (Nuffic, 2015).

VWO, or ‘preparatory academic education’ consists of two tracks, athenaeum and gymnasium. These two tracks both last six years, after which the pupils can continue to university. The gymnasium track is the remnant of what were originally the Latin grammar schools, and so in this track students still have to take their final exams in either ancient Greek or ancient Latin. This is the only difference between the gymnasium and athenaeum tracks (Nuffic, 2015).

HAVO, or ‘higher general continued education’ consists of only one track. It lasts five years and afterwards pupils can go to a ‘HBO institute’, also called a ‘university of applied sciences’. After the fifth year of HAVO pupils can also choose to stream into the fifth year of VWO and then go to regular university. They can also take the first year of HBO, and then go to university (Nuffic, 2015).

VMBO translates as ‘preparatory secondary vocational education’. It is divided into four different tracks: VMBO-B, VMBO-K, VMBO-GL and VMBO-TL. These all last four years. VMBO-B and -K (Basis and Kader) are the vocational tracks. In the third year, these students choose between ten different vocational profiles and on top of a small number of general subjects, like Dutch and English, they take vocational subjects in their chosen profile. For example, one of the profiles is ‘Construction, Living and Interior’. Pupils who choose this profile can take courses in roof or floor construction; masonry; or other related courses (Nieuw VMBO, n.d.). VMBO-GL is a ‘mixed learning path’, which combines vocational and theoretical courses. VMBO-TL (also called VMBO-T or MAVO) is a ‘theoretical learning
path’. The students here still choose between the ten different profiles, but their courses are focussed on theory, not practice. With a VMBO-B, -K or -GL diploma students can go to an MBO programme, which is a form of ‘senior secondary vocational education’. These MBO programmes can last one to four years, and prepare the students for a specific vocation. VMBO-TL students can also go to MBO, or they can choose to continue to the last two years of HAVO (Thijs, Van Leeuwen & Zandbergen, 2009, p.7-8). It is therefore possible for students to obtain a diploma at a higher level than the one they were sorted in, but since this involves completing extra years, it takes a lot longer for them to finish their education. On top of this, individual schools can determine additional requirements such as a certain grade average that students need to have if they want to continue to the higher track (NOS, 2017).

For the HAVO and VWO tracks, lower and upper secondary education are taught at the same school, and there is not much difference between them except that during upper secondary education, students get to choose the subjects in which they want to do their final exams. Since VMBO is only four years it is officially only lower secondary education, and the continued education at an MBO institute forms the upper secondary education. Compulsory education does not end after VMBO: children are required to stay in school until they have obtained a ‘starting qualification’ (at least MBO level 2) or until they turn 18.

Most schools in the Netherlands offer more than one track, or even all of them. This makes it easier for students who decide they want to continue in a different track. Some of these schools also offer mixed ‘bridge-classes’, where students from two or more tracks are taught together during the first one or two years, after which the selection is made. There are also schools offering only one track (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011, p.45). Of all the Dutch students that obtained their diploma in the schoolyear 2015/16, 55,8% went to VMBO, of which 29,6 went to VMBO-TL. 26,3% went to HAVO, and 17,9% to VWO (OCW, 2017, p.91). Figure 1 shows an overview of the education system of the Netherlands.

![Diagram of the Dutch education system](image)

Figure 1: Overview of the Dutch education system (Source: NCEE (n.d.))

On international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Dutch education system has generally performed well. It consistently
scores above the OECD average on reading, maths and science performance (PISA 2015, n.d.). However, in recent years the science and reading performance of the VMBO levels has gone down, and the maths performance of HAVO and VWO as well (Rijksoverheid, 2016, p.2-3). Moreover, while the Netherlands has a relatively low percentage of low performing students, it also has a relatively low percentage of top students in the areas of reading and science (OCW, 2016, p13).

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the Netherlands have less chance of ending up in the HAVO and VWO tracks, irrespective of their level of ability (OECD, 2016a, p.69). However, despite this the Dutch education system still performs relatively well when it comes to equity compared to other OECD countries. Moreover, the achievement gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students in the Netherlands is smaller than in other OECD countries with a comparable number of immigrant students (OECD, 2016a, p.66). In 2010, the Dutch Educational Council investigated whether the age of selection between the tracks in the Netherlands should be postponed. They concluded that there is not enough evidence that this reform would actually increase the equality of education (Onderwijsraad, 2010, p.69). Similarly, the OECD report ‘Foundations for the future’ is hesitant to advise radical reform to the system. They argue that since it cannot be certain that abolishing early tracking would improve outcomes, reforms should be approached with caution (OECD, 2016a, p.41-42).

However, in recent years the socio-economic inequality in Dutch education has increased (OECD, 2016a, p.69). Simultaneously, a number of trends are occurring in the early tracking system: an increasing number of schools offer only one of the tracks, and the number of mixed ‘bridge-classes’ is also decreasing. This is making it harder for students to switch to different tracks. In order to increase equality, the OECD report advises three measures: first of all, it recommends merging a number of the tracks, so that students who want to continue to higher tracks have less steps to take. Secondly, when it comes to the initial selection process, the report advises making the decisions mostly, or even entirely based on the result of the nationally standardised test. Since it is possible that teachers are biased when they make their decision, the test is seen to give a more objective picture of the student’s ability. And finally, the report strongly recommends increasing the flexibility between the tracks, primarily by reversing the decrease of schools which offer more than one track (OECD, 2016a).

In order to increase this flexibility, an initiative was proposed where students would be able to take some of their courses at different levels. In some schools it is now possible for students to take one or more of their best courses in a higher track than the one they are in. Of course this is only possible in schools that offer more than one track. Moreover, due to a fear of decreasing the value of diplomas, the state secretary for education decided that it would not be allowed for students to take a subject at a lower level (NOS, 2016).

Another issue concerning tracking that has been given much attention in the Dutch media recently is the negative image of VMBO institutes. In recent years the number of students in these tracks has dropped, according to many due to the low prestige that is attached to vocational education (NOS, 2018). However, despite this image within the Netherlands, the Dutch vocational education actually has a very good reputation internationally. Especially the MBO institutes perform very well, partly due to strong connections with the labour-market and a heavy focus on work-based learning though internships (OECD, 2016a, p.39).
3.2 Secondary education in Sweden

At the start of the 20th century, the Swedish education system was also tracked to some extent: there were different forms of secondary education, not all of which gave access to university. In an attempt to make the education system more equal and to reduce the influence of parental background, the 1960’s the Swedish government carried out a large-scale reform that abolished tracking during lower secondary education: they introduced a comprehensive compulsory school (grundskola) for all children aged 7-16 (Erikson, 2017, p.139-141). Grundskola is divided in three stages: lågstadium, mellanstadium and högstadium. Högstadium is the stage of lower secondary education, for students around age 13 to 16 (Nuffic, 2013).

Swedish students of all ability levels are therefore taught together during compulsory lower secondary education. If they obtain this degree, they can continue to upper secondary education at gymnasium (not to be confused with the Dutch gymnasium), where they can choose between 18 different three-year programmes. Of these programmes, 6 are theoretically oriented and prepare students for continued education at university. The other 12 programmes are vocational and provide professional training in a specific area (Skolverket, 2017). After obtaining a gymnasium diploma all students are in principle eligible for university admission, no matter which programme they completed. However, specific university programmes may have certain additional requirements as to the courses that a student needs to have completed before they can enrol (Nuffic, 2013, p.8).

Traditionally the Swedish education system had been known to perform well, but after 2003, the performance of the Swedish students in international assessments has decreased significantly. In the 2006 PISA, Sweden ended up below the OECD average and in the PISA of 2012 they experienced the worst decline in performance of all other countries in the study (Wikström, 2016, p.98-101). These results have led to a number of further investigations and reforms to the Swedish system. The results of the 2015 PISA have shown improvements in performance: in both reading and mathematics the results have gone up, and in the area of science the decline has halted. The results in all these three areas are now above or on the OECD average (OECD, 2016b, p.1). However, regarding equality the results have decreased. The performance gap between students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds have increased, and the gap between the highest and lowest performing students is higher than average compared to other OECD countries (OECD, 2016b, p.1).
4. Methods

The following sections will describe the research methods that were used during this project. The research strategy and design will be set out, as well as the interview methods; data collection; sampling strategies; and methods of analysis. Finally, the trustworthiness and ethics of this project will be considered.

4.1 Research strategy

This research is qualitative in nature. According to Alan Bryman, while quantitative research “embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective reality”, qualitative research often focusses on “how individuals interpret their social world”, and “embodies a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals’ creation” (Bryman, 2012, p.32-33). Since this research focusses on the perceptions of teachers, a qualitative approach is more suitable. Its primary focus will not be on the objective effects of early tracking, but on the experiences, expectations and opinions of teachers about this topic. It will not consist of a large sample of randomly selected participants, but instead it will focus on a small group of individuals, and take a deeper look at their experiences.

Moreover, the research takes an inductive approach. While deductive research is concerned with the testing of existing theories, inductive research aims to draw “generalizable inferences out of observations” (Bryman, 2012, p.24-27). In the case of this research, there is no general theory about early tracking which the study aims to prove or disprove. While some of the questions that were asked during the interviews are based on themes that came up during the study of previous research in this area, most questions were of a broader nature, meant to explore what teachers’ ideas and views were about the topic. The thematic analysis of the interviews is ‘data-driven’: instead of starting with pre-conceived themes and categorising the fragments of data that fit into these themes, the themes of this study were arrived at by coding the data and combining these codes into broader categories. This will be explained further in section 4.5 which deals with the method of analysis.

4.2 Research design

This research follows the structure of a comparative research design: it seeks to compare the perceptions of teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden regarding early tracking. Alan Bryman argues that a comparative research design consists of “studying two contrasting cases using more or less identical methods. It embodies the logic of comparison, in that it implies that we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations” (Bryman, 2012, p.65).

In order to make the units of comparison more clear, it is useful to make reference to the Bray and Thomas Cube. This cube is frequently used in the field of international and comparative education to provide a framework for comparative designs. As seen in figure 2, it categorises the comparative units of analysis along three axes: geographic/locational levels; non-locational demographic groups; and aspects of education and of society (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2007, p.9). For the first axis, this research falls under the level of ‘countries’ (namely the Netherlands and Sweden). For the second axis it falls under the category of ‘other groups’, namely teachers. And for the third axis it falls under the category of ‘other aspects’, namely perceptions regarding early tracking.
The Dutch and Swedish national contexts share many similarities: both are affluent countries in Northern-Europe, with education systems scoring above the OECD average in international rankings (PISA 2015, n.d.). Therefore it is reasonable to assume that the experiences of Dutch and Swedish teachers are similar in some respects. However, the point where the experiences of these two groups ‘meaningfully contrast’ is where it comes to early tracking. While the Dutch teachers know what it is like to teach in a system characterised by early tracking, the teachers from Sweden are used to teaching in a system where the pupils are not separated according to ability during lower-secondary education. By comparing and contrasting the perceptions about early tracking of these two different groups of teachers, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the subject.

![Figure 2: The Bray and Thomas cube (source: Bray et al., 2007, p.9)](image)

4.3 Research methods

The research itself consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with participants from the Netherlands and Sweden. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher starts from a pre-made list of questions to guide the interview. However, they do have a measure of freedom to vary the order in which they ask the questions and in asking follow-up questions to the participants (Bryman, 2012, p.201). They also have the flexibility to add some questions to later interviews about issues that have come up during earlier interviews (Bryman, 2012, p.469). This method of interviewing was particularly suitable for my research because it has allowed me to start with a standard framework of questions on the basis of which the answers of the different groups of teachers could be compared. However, it also enabled me to keep an open mind about the issues of interest that came up during the course of the research and to incorporate these in the results.

On the basis of the results of the first interview I conducted, I amended my interview guide somewhat to improve its effectiveness. However, since the topics that were discussed in this first interview are largely the same as in later interviews, I felt I could still include this interview in the results. After this first amendment the research guide remained the same throughout the rest of the interviews. In line with the semi-structured nature of the interviews, I did sometimes change the order of the questions depending on the conversation. Moreover, when a question had already clearly been answered previously, in some cases I omitted asking it. Both the Dutch and English translations of the final interview guide are included in appendix E and F.
After some general questions about the professional background of the participants, I started by briefly explaining the differences between the education systems of Sweden and the Netherlands when it comes to early tracking. So to the Dutch teachers I explained the system of later selection in Sweden, and to the Swedish teachers I explained the system of early tracking in the Netherlands. Of course, since the time was very limited, I was only able to outline the differences on a general level. However, I felt it was enough to give them a basic idea of how the different systems work.

I then proceeded to ask them the questions according to the research guide. I started with some broader questions, in order to see which topics first came to their mind when talking about early tracking. I asked them both about their experiences teaching in their own system, and about what they thought it would be like in the other system, based on what they knew of how the system worked. I then proceeded by asking after some more specific topics if they had not been discussed yet during previous questions.

4.4 Data collection and sampling

The ten interviews were held in February and March of 2018. The participants for the interviews have been approached through a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling where participants are not selected randomly, but strategically based on their relevance to the research in question. Since the participants are not chosen randomly, the results cannot be generalised to the population as a whole (Bryman, 2012, p.418). In the case of my research, this means conclusions can be drawn about the perceptions of these ten individual teachers, but not about the perceptions of Dutch and Swedish teachers in general. All teachers were approached via email. The email addresses were collected from the websites of schools, or in some cases through mutual connections.

In order to ensure comparability between the two groups of participants, I have approached only teachers with experience in lower-secondary education. In the Netherlands, I have contacted teachers who teach or have taught in the ‘onderbouw’, and in Sweden I approached teachers from the level of ‘högstadium’. All teachers therefore have experience teaching children from the same age group, but whereas the Dutch teachers have experience teaching in a system where these students are separated according to ability, the teachers from Sweden have experience teaching them in a mixed-ability system.

Since the subject in which the teachers teach is not related to the subject of my research, this was not a factor in the selection. When possible I have tried to approach teachers in a variety of different subjects, in order to obtain a broader range in the data. Eventually I ended up with two history teachers; one maths teacher; one biology teacher; two English teachers; one Swedish teacher; one Swedish/English teacher; one geography/civics/history/religion teacher; and one music teacher. Most of the Dutch teachers have taught groups from VMBO, HAVO and VWO, and work at schools where all these levels are offered. One teacher works at a school with only the highest level, gymnasium, and has taught only those students.

I also tried to achieve variety in the gender of the participants and the area in which they are located. However, since it was quite difficult to find teachers who were willing to be interviewed, this was not always possible. Four of the Swedish participants are located in Stockholm, three of them at the same school. Moreover, all five of the Dutch participants are female and one of them is a personal connection, since she was one of my teachers for several years during secondary school. One of the teachers who teaches in Sweden is originally from Ireland. However, since I am not comparing nationalities but perceptions based on experience of teaching in a particular system, this is not an issue for my results. Table 1 shows the
participant codes and details about the interviews. Since some of the teachers know each other I have kept the table limited to information that cannot be recognised, in order to ensure anonymity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Code</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Interview method</th>
<th>Length of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N1</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>29 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N2</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>30 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N3</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>37 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N4</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>23 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N5</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>28 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>38 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Phone/Skype</td>
<td>52 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>28 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>54 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Presentation of participants

4.5 Method of analysis

The collected data has been analysed by means of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun, 2006, p.79). They identify six phases that a researcher has to go through when carrying out a thematic analysis: familiarising yourself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

After the interviews have been transcribed verbatim, the researcher organises individual items of the dataset into groups by means of coding. A code is a label which is applied to fragments of data that have a similar meaning. These codes will then be reviewed and organised into larger categories, or ‘themes’. This organisation into themes allows the researcher to understand the relationships between the different codes, and to identify patterns within the dataset. It is the task of the researcher to interpret why these patterns are significant and what they imply (Braun, 2006). In order to show how I arrived at the themes from the data I collected, table 2 shows an example of the coding process. It shows the codes that I attached to the individual fragments of the data, and the larger themes into which I divided these codes.
4.6 Trustworthiness

Thematic analysis is by nature an interpretive process: there is no truly objective way to analyse meaning in a dataset. The themes that the researcher identifies are not inherently present in the data itself, but are created by the interpretation of the researcher. (Braun, 2006, p.80). Analyses might therefore differ depending on the researcher. Because of this, the criteria that are often used in order to assess the quality of quantitative studies cannot always be applied to qualitative studies. However, this does not mean that the researcher has no standards by which to judge the quality of their work. In qualitative research, these standards are often referred to as the ‘trustworthiness’ of the research, which is comprised of the following four concepts: credibility; dependability; confirmability; and transferability (Bryman, 2012, p.390-393).

Credibility asks how believable the findings of the study are: whether the account of social reality that is provided by the researcher is a credible one. Dependability is determined by how the findings of the research are arrived at from the collected data, and if other researchers would draw similar conclusions from the same data. Credibility and dependability can be increased by checking the findings with the participants in order to make sure that the findings represent their intentions. Moreover, other researchers can be asked to check the data and findings in order to verify whether the conclusions are supported by the data (Bazeley, 2013, p.408-409). However, since these checking mechanisms are very time demanding for all those that are involved, this was not possible during this research project. Instead, I have tried to remain as transparent as possible throughout this report about the research methods.
and the steps and decisions that were taken during the data analysis. This transparency will make it easier for readers to understand how the conclusions in this report were drawn from the collected data, and to judge whether this research is trustworthy.

Confirmability demands that while complete objectivity cannot be achieved, the personal values of the researcher have not inordinately influenced the research (Bryman, 2012, p.390-393). In the case of this research, I have attempted to avoid this by being open about my personal background in the limitations section, and by being mindful of this during the research.

Finally, transferability asks whether the findings can be transferred to other contexts (Bazeley, 2013, p.410-411). Since this is a small-scale study using a non-representative sample, the findings cannot be used to make statements about the larger population, and the results will not be generalisable. However, the themes that emerge from the data could have a broader applicability. The issues that are raised by the participants of this interview might be worth exploring in other contexts too, in order to increase understanding of early tracking even further and to understand how different contexts influence these findings.

4.7 Ethical considerations

In all research, but especially research involving participants, it is important that the researchers keep the ethical and moral implications of their work in mind. The Swedish Research Council has compiled a document regarding ‘good research practice’, which sets out a number of important standards for researchers to consider in their work. Eight main principles are identified:

1) “You shall tell the truth about your research.
2) You shall consciously review and report the basic premises of your studies.
3) You shall openly account for your methods and results.
4) You shall openly account for your commercial interests and other associations.
5) You shall not make unauthorised use of the research results of others.
6) You shall keep your research organised, for example through documentation and filing.
7) You shall strive to conduct your research without doing harm to people, animals or the environment.
8) You shall be fair in your judgement of others’ research.” (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017, p.10).

These eight principles largely correspond to the four ethical principles that are identified by Bryman. According to him, the four most important things that researchers should avoid are: harm to participants; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception (Bryman, 2012, p.135).

During the research described in this report, these principles have been considered throughout the entire research process. All possible precautions have been made in order to ensure that the participants experienced no negative consequences from their participation in the interview. To my knowledge, no harm has been caused to the participants as a result of this research. All participants were informed about the goals and procedures of the project by means of a research letter sent to them via email. Moreover, all participants have read and signed a consent form, whereby they have given their consent for me to record the interview and to use the data in my report. Both the research letter and the form that was used for the informed consent are included in the appendix. In order to protect the privacy of the interviewees, all data has been anonymised from the first moment of transcription. All the
names of the participants have been replaced by a code, starting with N for the Dutch teachers and with S for the Swedish teachers. All names of schools have also been removed and the collected data will be used for the purposes of this research only.
5. Research findings and analysis

The following sections will present an analysis of the collected data and answer the three research questions:

- What are teachers’ perceptions regarding early tracking?
- To what extent do teachers perceive early tracking affects the equality of education?
- How do these perceptions differ between teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden?

Sections 5.1 and 5.2 will answer the first and second research questions respectively. The analysis of data provided in this report will be a progressive analysis, in that the results from the analyses of the first two research questions will be combined and subjected to comparative analysis in order to find an answer to the third research question. The result of this comparative analysis will be presented in section 5.3.

5.1 Teachers’ perceptions of early tracking

Through thematic analysis, a number of overarching themes were identified from the interview data. Since the analysis was data-driven the themes were not established in advance, but where instead identified through the coding of the data and the categorisation of these codes. Because the interview questions were partly based on previous literature on the subject, the themes that are identified show some overlap with issues discussed in the literature review. The connections between the findings and previous research will be considered further in the discussion section of this paper.

The themes relating to the first research question are: the teaching-learning process; self-confidence and image forming; selection process and flexibility between tracks; and labour-market transitions. This section will discuss each of these four themes and conclude with a summary of the findings.

5.1.1 The teaching-learning process

When asked about the benefits of early tracking, all of the Dutch teachers agreed that they felt it makes teaching easier for them. They argued that because of the more homogenous groups in terms of ability, they are more quickly and easily able to assess the different levels of their individual students:

“I think you are able to look properly at the individual pupil, and are immediately able to offer him those chances, you have the individually tailored methods to help them on their level, so that is good. You quickly see the qualities of pupils because they enter at a certain level so I already know what they can do and where they need to go.” – teacher N4 (1)

Because in the Dutch system the students have already broadly been divided between different levels, the teachers felt that they had the possibility to focus more on the smaller-scale differences between the students, while in a non-tracked system they expected they would have difficulty providing this same attention if the range of abilities was so much wider. Teachers N1 and N2 noted especially that, since they only see most of their students for one or two 50-minute periods per week, they feared they would not be able to respond to the different capabilities of their students in such a short time period if the pupils were not already separated into the levels. All of the Dutch teachers therefore expected that teaching in

1 The original quotations of all fragments that are translated from Dutch can be found in appendix G
an untracked or a late tracking system would be more challenging for teachers, and that as a teacher you would need to be more creative in order to reach every pupil:

“The benefit [of early tracking] according to me is mainly for those pupils who are not as good or the students who are very good, because I think that if you teach when everything is together, that as a teacher you are more or less forced to teach at a middle-level. And then the students who are below that, for them it is frustrating because for them it is too difficult, and the students for who it is too easy they are not challenged” - teacher N1 (2)

These teachers therefore saw some concerns about the educational outcomes for the highest and lowest performing students in late tracking systems. Teacher S4 did indeed experience this as a challenge in his classes, and thought that early tracking might benefit the educational outcomes for these groups:

“I’m not sure but I think so, it would be better for what I’m doing in the classroom. Now I have to think of everyone and I have to maybe put myself on a level that’s quite low. And the fast ones and the smarter ones they’re going to be finished: ‘what can I do now?’” – teacher S4

Two other teachers from Sweden also indicated that the wide range of ability levels in their classes could be a challenge and that they sometimes experienced doubt about whether they were able to give every student the amount of attention they needed. However, while most of the Swedish teachers agreed that as a teacher in a mixed-ability group you had to be more creative, not all were convinced that early tracking would be the right response to this problem. They felt that most of the time they were able to cope with the wide range of abilities, for example by adjusting their teaching methods:

“I suppose it depends on how the teaching is structured, what level of interaction you have with the kids. And also the balance between... I’m not sure what the phrase in English would be, but kamrat lära, that’s something that we do a lot of where I work, where we encourage, or we design the teaching so that the students work in pairs or in groups together to solve problems or to discuss what they’re working on, so certainly compared to any more traditional, old-fashioned teaching where the teacher holds a lecture for 50 minutes and the kids do their best to keep up, I think in that model it is very difficult to understand the kids’ different needs and to meet them. But in a model where the children... pupils are working much more by themselves, then it frees up time to look around, check on everybody; check that everybody is moving forward. They’re all moving forward at different levels and at different speeds, but I think with a well-designed sort of lesson, with that structure it is still possible to make contact with everybody.” – teacher S1

Some of the teachers expected that early tracking would be beneficial for the learning outcomes of the highest performing pupils, since in a mixed system the attention of the teacher would be taken up so much by helping the students who were not performing so well, that the top students would receive less attention. However, teachers S1, S5 and N5 brought up the point that those students would most likely manage fairly well in any system. Since greater ability is often linked with higher motivation, they argued that these students are better able to work individually, which allows the teacher to focus on the students who need more help.

Moreover, teachers S1, S3 and S5 specifically mentioned the benefit of being in a mixed-ability group for the top students, because they can learn from helping and explaining the material to students who are struggling. These teacher felt that this benefits everyone, since the students can learn a lot from each other, which again frees up some time for the teacher to walk around and help pupils.

Regarding the low performing students, almost all of the Dutch teachers expected that early tracking might be beneficial both for their individual learning outcomes and for the general level at which the teacher would be able to teach. They thought that if the lower performing students would not be able to keep up with the lesson, they would slow down the pace or would become frustrated and start to disrupt the lesson. Three of the Swedish teachers did indeed mention disciplinary problems as one of their major challenges, and said that they had to spend a lot of their teaching time and attention on these matters. One teacher even said
that sometimes she felt a little bit like a circus director, having to be very active in making sure that everyone was occupied with their tasks. Another teacher said:

“But very much energy goes to other things. To keep someone: ‘please, please calm down’. You have like 5 or 6 in every class. That takes so much good energy for doing these things. If you just could teach and have a good discussion, that would be fantastic” – teacher S4

The influence of the number of students per class was an issue that came up in more than half of the interviews, both Dutch and Swedish. The Dutch teachers argued that in a system like in the Netherlands, where it is very common to have 30 students or more in one class, it would be very difficult to cope with a wider range of abilities. Whereas if this number was smaller, like 20 students, it would be more manageable. These expectations do seem to conform to the experiences of the Swedish teachers. Most of them reported that on average, their classes contained around 25 pupils or less, and that smaller classes made it easier to deal with differences in ability. Two of the Swedish teachers talked about previous experiences with teaching in a class of 30 students or more, and they agreed that when you are alone, 30 is too many to manage if the range of abilities is so broad.

When naming some of the disadvantages of early tracking, teachers N2 and S1 both referred to the concept of ‘growth mind-set’. In their opinion, early tracking promotes a fixed mind-set, where people believe that ability is a natural talent that you are born with, instead of something that you can develop through hard work (Dweck, 2007):

“I think if you stream people then you are pushing them towards a sort of fixed mind-set idea which I think shapes much of the education system in many countries over a long time. But with the idea of growth mind-set then it’s more… you try to get the kids to understand that they can actually affect their outcomes and that’s easier to do in a mixed ability group I would imagine.” – teacher S1

These teachers believed that early tracking could reinforce differences in student outcomes, since being put in a lower group might lead students to become less motivated to work hard if they feel their level of ability is already predetermined.

However, teacher N3 reasoned that late tracking could also be demotivating for low-performing students, if they feel they are not able to keep up with the level of the others. She worried that in that case those students might give up entirely, and that it would become very difficult for teachers to handle these students while also keeping the rest of the class engaged.

Three of the Swedish teachers did discuss having problems with low motivation among some of their students, and the difficulties of engaging these students with the coursework. Teacher S4 said that sometimes, he had one or two students who just did not want to learn, and that it could be very hard to get these students to pass the minimum level that they need to graduate.

5.1.2 Self-confidence and image-forming

One of the questions in the interview dealt with the self-confidence of students, and the extent to which teachers perceived that early tracking might affect the self-confidence of different types of students.

Teachers S1 and S2 questioned the effects of the kind of ‘labelling’ that is inherent in early tracking: they reasoned that if a pupil is told at the age of 12 that they have to go to a certain level, that this could hurt their self-confidence.

Almost all of the Dutch teachers indicated that they felt that students in the lower-levels did indeed experience negative effects from this sorting. However, they all agreed that this was due primarily to the negative image of these lower levels that is put forward by society. Most importantly, in their experience this is caused by the expectations of parents:
“well, you know… of course it is also a little bit part of society, and that is very bad. I think it also depends on how the primary school and the parents handle it. There are… there are of course a lot of parents who are very happy when the child goes to VMBO, who are proud of the child and with good reason. But of course there are also parents who… the child gets a VMBO advice and they do everything to turn it into a HAVO advice. And then you are already giving off the message: VMBO is not really good enough.” – teacher N1 (3)

Teachers N1 and N2 stated that this negative image was also reinforced by the criteria that the national school inspectorate in the Netherlands uses to assess schools. In schools that offer more than one level, the inspection looks at how many pupils in the third grade are still in the track of the advice that they got in primary school. If a school has too many pupils that have switched to a lower level, this is seen as a sign that a school is not performing well. The teachers that were interviewed were very opposed to this kind of inspection, because they felt it motivates schools to keep students at a level that might not fit their capabilities. They said this kind of judgement promotes a view of changing levels as negative and going ‘down’, while it should only be about giving students education on the level that is best suited to them.

Three of the Dutch teachers were convinced that pupils, especially in schools with more than one level, are very aware of the level they are in and the status that is attached to these levels. While some mentioned this goes both ways and that pupils in VWO can be seen as ‘nerds’, mostly the consequences that were discussed were for the VMBO students: the teachers noticed that sometimes the VMBO levels are looked down upon by students in HAVO or VWO. They said that the VMBO students themselves are also very much aware that they are in the ‘lowest’ level and that they expected less from themselves because they were ‘only’ in VMBO. Moreover, one teacher N4 stated that this was sometimes even an issue among teachers: at a school where she taught where VMBO T was the lowest level, she noticed that some teachers expected less from these students than what she felt they were capable of.

However, some of the Dutch teachers expected that this awareness of the different levels might exists even in a mixed ability system, because students will always compare their achievements to those of the people around them. Teachers N3 and N5 argued that it might even be better for the self-esteem of low-performing students to be taught in an environment where everyone around them has the same level, and that this is better than being in a mixed ability environment where they are constantly performing worse than their classmates. Even though they might be sorted in a vocational level, this still gives them a chance to perform at the top of their class within this group, which they might never be able to do in a mixed ability class.

Two of the Swedish teachers responded to this concern that they consider it part of the teacher’s job to inspire self-confidence in all students by giving them positive feedback. They also thought that it very much depended on the individual student whether their self-confidence was affected or not.

For the students who are sorted into the VWO track, teacher N3 argued that early separation might have negative consequences if they go to a school with only that level, such as the school where she works which offers only gymnasium. She said:

“we have a lot of children that leave the school thinking: ‘sure, I am smart, but not as smart as half of my class’. We have a lot of children leaving the school with a self-image that is way too low for what they are really capable of” – teacher N3 (4)

The children at this school who are at the bottom of their class might lose sight of the fact that the abilities of the group they are comparing themselves with are exceptionally high.
5.1.3 Track selection and flexibility between tracks

When asked about the possible drawbacks of early tracking, four of the teachers from Sweden were especially concerned about the risk of pupils being selected into the wrong tracks. Three of the Dutch teachers also talked about this, and confirmed that such misdiagnoses do happen. They said that this risk has increased now that the judgement of the teacher has more weight than the CITO-test, because they have noticed that whether a child has a good relationship with their primary school teacher or not can have a significant impact on the advice that a pupil gets.

Teachers N2, N5, S1, S2, S3 and S5 all expressed their doubts about holding the selection moment already at the age of twelve, due to the different rates at which pupils develop. They argued that when a child matures, their levels of ability can vary significantly, and this can have very negative consequences for late-bloomers:

“that I think is maybe a negative aspect of that.. I mean, because so much can happen in a short amount of time. You can be on this level at the start, but after just a month you might have risen here. And then you might be above some other.. so that… for me it sounds like a flaw in the system.” – teacher S2

“No they’re too young. At the age of 12, you’re not developed. If I look at myself as a 12 year-old, I was nothing like when I was 15. […] I don’t know. I would say the best thing to do would be to give everyone a chance, and then after the three or four years, then you can really see who actually did well” – teacher S5

In order to postpone the selection somewhat, many schools in the Netherlands that offer more than one level also offer mixed ‘bridge-classes’, where two of the levels are offered together for the first one or two years of lower secondary school. Three of the Dutch teachers that were interviewed had experience working in such mixed bridge-classes, and all of them were positive about them. They felt it gave the children a little more time to develop and to show what their true abilities are. However, teacher N4 was conflicted about whether the benefits of this postponement weighed up against being less able to offer individually tailored approaches in these more mixed-ability environments.

The possibility for students to move up to the next track after obtaining a diploma was seen as very important by the Dutch teachers. They felt that in a lot of cases, students who might not immediately manage a certain level could benefit a lot from completing the level below it first. They experienced that when the pupils are a year older, they are able to decide more consciously whether they want to continue their education at a higher track, and if they do they are better able to handle the material. Teacher N3 worried that especially for VMBO-TL students it has become harder to make this transition, since there are less and less places in the Netherlands which offer VMBO-TL and HAVO at the same school. This makes it harder for pupils to transition between the two. Teacher N1 had also experienced that the transition between tracks can be difficult for students, because the different levels do not always connect seamlessly to each other. This means the pupils have to work harder to make up for things they have missed. However, teacher N5 did not experience these difficulties, she felt that quite many students decide to make the transition and that after a few weeks of initial adjustments, they generally manage.

All of the Dutch teachers stated that the system in the Netherlands should introduce measures to make it more flexible. One measure that many of them were particularly enthusiastic about was the proposal where pupils would be able to follow subjects at different levels:
“what a gift it would be if a student who, for example, is really good at maths, that they could do maths at VWO level, or for example maths A and B, faster, so that they have more time to finish English or for French. I think that’s the greatest gift you could give a student” – teacher N2 (5)

They felt that if students had this opportunity, it might also help against the negative image and stereotyping around the lower-level tracks, since students would identify themselves less as a ‘VMBO-student’, but instead there would be more focus on everyone’s individual strengths and talents. However, they did admit that there were many practical difficulties that had to be overcome if this proposal was to be included in the system as it is in the Netherlands right now.

5.1.4 Labour-market transitions

Most teachers were not immediately able to answer if early tracking would have any effect on transitions from school to the labour market. Teacher N3 stressed the importance of self-confidence:

“Every child deserves it, I think, to find confidence in something that they can do well. And for some children this means practical work: being able to solder, to measure, to do carpentry. For some children that means that. I think that if you want to connect to the labour-market, then you want people who are doing something they enjoy; in which they are confident; and about which they feel good. Very often they look at the intellectual level of children, but very seldom they look at: is this child happy here at school? […] A child who has learnt with confidence will also confidently adapt to their work environment.” – teacher N3 (6)

Two other Dutch teachers did think that the point where children in vocational education have to decide on their direction comes too early in the Netherlands. Teacher N2 experienced that at that age, children are not really ready yet to make a well-informed decision, and so sometimes they end up regretting their choice. Teacher N4 suspected that in Sweden, where children have a longer time to decide which direction they want to go, they would be better able to make this decision and to find something that truly fitted them.

5.1.5 Summary

The previous sections have tried to find an answer to the question ‘what are teachers’ perceptions regarding early tracking?’ by focussing on four thematic areas that were discussed during the interviews: the teaching-learning process; self-confidence and image-forming; track selection and flexibility between tracks; and transitions to the labour-market.

While the perceptions of the teachers about these topics differed from teacher to teacher, there were some points on which many of them agreed. Most of the Dutch teachers saw a lot of benefits in early tracking. They felt that early tracking makes teaching easier for them, and helps them to assess more quickly what a student’s capabilities are. They worried that in a mixed-ability group the low performing students might not be able to keep up with the level of the other students, and that they would become disruptive. Some teachers from Sweden did experience this as a challenge, but felt that by adapting their teaching methods they were able to manage most of the time.

Teachers from both countries agreed that a very important factor in this is the number of pupils in a class. In the Netherlands it is very common to have classes of at least 30 students, and many teachers agreed that this number is too high for one teacher in a mixed-ability environment. In Sweden the classes are often smaller, which makes it easier for teachers to manage a wider range in abilities.

Both Dutch and Swedish teachers were concerned about the effects of early tracking on the self-confidence of pupils. Two Swedish teachers worried about the effects of being ‘labelled’ at such an early age, and this was supported by Dutch teachers who discussed the
negative stereotypes that are attached to VMBO-level tracks. However, regarding self-confidence two of the Dutch teachers also argued that it might be better for low-performing students to be able to compare their achievements to a more equally levelled group of peers.

A number of Swedish teachers were concerned that early tracking might come with a big risk of misdiagnosis, especially since the abilities of pupils might still develop a lot during lower-secondary education. The Dutch teachers confirmed that mistakes in the selection process do happen. They stressed the importance of increasing the flexibility in the system, so that it would be easier for students to transition between the tracks. They would greatly support the initiative that pupils would be able to take different classes at different track-levels.

5.2 Perceptions of the effects of early tracking on equality of education

Concerning the second research question, three themes were identified from the interviews that relate to the effects of early tracking on equality of education: opportunities for self-development; socio-economic background; and immigrant students.

5.2.1 Opportunities for self-development

When asked about how they defined equality of education, many of the teachers thought first about equality in terms of the opportunities that students have to discover and develop their talents. They believed school should provide every student with these same chances. Both teachers N4 and N5 felt that in the Netherlands, students across all the levels of education broadly speaking have these same opportunities. However, teachers N1 and N2 did see some disparities between the levels: while VWO and HAVO students have more opportunities to develop themselves on a theoretical level, for example by taking extra language courses, VMBO students have a lot more opportunities to develop their practical skills. VWO and HAVO students almost never have those options, so they might never discover those skills. These teachers therefore thought that if there was a little more flexibility between the tracks, that all students would have more equal opportunities to discover their range of talents.

The Swedish teachers that spoke about this did not necessarily think that earlier or later selection would impact equality in terms of opportunities for self-development.

5.2.2 Socio-economic background

When initially asked about equality in education, equality related to socio-economic background was generally not the first thing that the teachers thought about. However, when I specifically asked them about it, nearly all of them were convinced that in their respective countries, a student has a higher chance of reaching academic education if their parents are also academically schooled. Teacher N1 said:

“well, without a doubt it is true that if you come from a lower socio-economic environment, your chances are lower. Because of course the Dutch school system is very much focussed on language. Language matters a lot, and your general knowledge is very important. So if you grow up in an environment where they do not read the newspaper, where there is no talk about general development issues, where children get little support from their parents because there are all kinds of problems or the parents are not able to help or whatever [...] you see that for those children it is more difficult. In that case a child needs to be capable of more to be able to reach the same level.” – teacher N1 (7)

Teacher N3 especially encountered a lot of this inequality in her work-experience: the school that she teaches at only offers gymnasium, the highest level, and she said it is very
clear that the vast majority of students have parents with academic backgrounds and that these children clearly have an advantage.

When it comes to whether early tracking influences this equality, teachers N5 and N1 did not feel that it would make a large difference. They expected that the influence of parental background was so strong that it would remain present, both in early or late tracking systems.

Teachers N2, N3, S1 and S5 disagreed, they expected that early tracking might increase the influence of parental background. Teacher S5 said that she thought the role of the school was very important here, in helping children from lower socio-economic backgrounds to catch up with their peers.

Another, related issue that was discussed in the interviews is the social effects of early tracking, and its possible effects on the equality in society at large. Teacher S1 said:

“And another aspect is, well a question I suppose, is: what is the role of the school, is it to teach the pupils about geometry and the First World War or is it to prepare students for being well integrated citizens. And the Swedish approach would be quite a lot of the second. Socialisation. And if socialisation is one of the goals, then I think tracking is a bad idea, because you end up creating a tiered society and the idea you create in the minds of the 12 year olds, the idea that there are different types of people, and different groups of people which I think could lead to a less egalitarian society.” – teacher S1

Teacher S2 and S4 also remarked upon the importance of the social function of education. Teacher S2 noted that any group that a student comes into contact with will affect the kind of person that they will become. He said that even though this might not be the goal of early tracking, an unintended consequence could be that the social lives of students would be affected by the separation. Teacher N2 also stressed the importance of peer groups for the student’s view on life, and said that keeping all students together for longer could have a positive impact on society. However, teacher N1 argued that for the connection that the children will maintain during their later lives, the connections they form during upper secondary education and during tertiary education were more decisive than those formed during lower secondary education. She therefore thought that postponing the tracking decision until upper secondary education would not have a significant effect.

5.2.3 Immigrant students

All of the teachers who were asked about equality in education for immigrant students agreed that these for these students it was significantly more difficult to receive the same level of education, primarily due to language issues.

“when you have migrants, they have two obstacles: they have to learn a language, and every subject is offered in that language. Undoable. So then maybe you have students who just need a lot more time to get where they want to get, and sometimes they just don’t manage within the high-school period and that is very sad to see.” – teacher N4 (8)

The majority of teachers expected that for these students, later selection would be better, since the students would have more time to adjust before they are streamed into a particular direction:

“if pupils are together for longer than they also learn from each other. So a foreign student who lags behind with their language, they can more slowly grow into the level that fits with their intelligence. Sometimes we have children of whom you think: they understand… you have the feeling that really they understand it, but then they immediately get 12 subjects, 5 languages and a lot of homework, and then they do not grow to their potential.” – teacher N3 (9)

However, two of the Swedish teachers talked about the difficulties for immigrant students in the Swedish, late tracking context. They mentioned that since all children have to reach the same level, it can be very hard for immigrant students to reach the minimum level
of E that they need in order to pass lower secondary education and be allowed to go to
gymnasium. Teacher S4 experienced that for these students, starting at a high level could be
very demanding, and that it might be better if they could start at a level where the pace is a
little lower, or where they have to take less subjects. Even though this might mean it will take
them longer to get to the same level, he thought it might reduce the risk of them dropping out
entirely.

5.2.4 Summary

The previous sections have tried to find an answer to the question ‘To what extent do
teachers perceive early tracking affects the equality of education?’ by focussing on three
thematic areas that were discussed during the interviews: opportunities for self-development;
socio-economic background; and immigrant pupils.

Regarding opportunities for self-development, some Dutch teachers felt that the
different curricula that result from early tracking do not give every student the same
opportunities to discover their talents. However, most of them did not think this equality was
significantly affected by early tracking.

Nearly all teachers were aware that a student’s socio-economic background has a
large influence on their chances of reaching certain levels of education. Many teachers
expected that earlier tracking would increase the influence of socio-economic background.
However, two Dutch teachers thought this influence was so strong that it would remain
present both in early and late tracking systems.

Moreover, a number of teachers expected that early tracking might have a negative
effect on the socialising function of education, since the academic and vocational students are
separated at such a young age.

Regarding immigrant students, all agreed that language was a large hindrance for
these students. Most teachers expected that early tracking would have a negative impact on
the equality for these students, because children in an early tracking system would have to
adapt faster or risk being sorted into a level that did not match their abilities. On the other
hand, one teacher argued that it might also be good if these students had the option to start at
a level where the pace is slightly lower, since it might reduce the risk of them dropping out
entirely.

5.3 Comparative analysis of the perceptions of teachers from the Netherlands
and Sweden

At the end of the interview, all teachers were asked which system they preferred:
early tracking like in the Netherlands or late tracking like in Sweden. Of the five teachers
from Sweden, only teacher S4 said that he might prefer early tracking. He felt that in such a
system the students might be more motivated, and that it would be easier for him as a teacher.
The other four Swedish teachers were all fairly decisively in favour of the Swedish system,
although they all emphasised that they did not know that much about the Dutch system, and
that if they would have experience in that system their opinions might change. Based on their
understanding of the Dutch system at that point, they said:

“But this.. to divide people in different groups, it’s a bit.. I don’t know. Not unethical but I think it’s
like.. at such an early age to do it I think it’s.. not good.” – teacher S3

“well again it is not based on any experience, but my instinct would be to say that tracking kids as early
as you do in the Netherlands is probably not the right thing to do for the kids so I would land more in favour of
the Swedish model.” - teacher S1
The Dutch teachers were somewhat more hesitant about which system they preferred. After some doubt only teacher N2 said that if she could redesign the system from scratch, she might prefer a late tracking system, so that children have more time to develop before they have to decide. Teacher N4 agreed with this, but also saw the benefits of the system in the Netherlands where she felt that teachers might be better able to work towards the optimal results for every individual student. The other three teachers all eventually decided that they thought early tracking was better for the quality of education:

“Differentiating is just one of the most difficult things, as a teacher. I have never seen a method that does it well. Most of the time it is just more of the same, but the depth… it is just very difficult. I am very curious how they do this in Sweden, this differentiating” – teacher N5 (10)

However, teachers N1, N2 and N3 did express their concern about the unintended consequences of early tracking for the equality of education. They thought that at least in theory, the Swedish model might be more socially just, although they wondered whether this was also true in practice. Table 3 shows a summary of the most important findings of sections 5.1 and 5.2. It shows where there were similarities between the perceptions of the teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden, and where their perceptions differed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The teaching-learning process</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teachers from the Netherlands</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teachers in comprehensive systems have to be more creative in order to reach every student</td>
<td>- Early tracking makes it easier for teachers to assess the level of individual students and to respond to their specific needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- High-performing students will probably perform well in any system</td>
<td>- Teachers in a mixed-ability group might be forced to teach at a middle level, which could have negative effects for high- and low-performing students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Early tracking can promote a fixed-mind set instead of a growth-mind set</td>
<td>- Smaller class sizes make teaching in mixed ability groups more manageable</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Smaller class sizes make teaching in mixed ability groups more manageable</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-confidence and image forming</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teachers from the Netherlands</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Being sorted in a lower-level group might have negative consequences for the self-esteem of these students</td>
<td>- Negative influence on self-confidence is mainly caused by the negative image that lower-level tracks have in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection process and flexibility between tracks</strong></td>
<td>- Early tracking brings a big risk of misdiagnosis, especially considering that students develop at different rates and that their abilities and interests can still change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labour-market transitions</strong></td>
<td>- Unsure if earlier tracking would have an effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities for self-development</strong></td>
<td>- All students should get opportunities to discover both their theoretical and practical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-economic status</strong></td>
<td>- Earlier tracking will increase socio-economic inequality - Early tracking might also negatively affect the socialising function of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigrant students</strong></td>
<td>- Immigrant students have more difficulties in reaching the same levels of education, mainly because of language issues. Early tracking most likely increases this effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: *Similarities and differences in teachers’ perceptions of early tracking*

**5.3.1 Summary**

Section 5.3 has tried to find an answer to the third research question: ‘How do these perceptions differ between teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden?’ Overall, the Swedish teachers had stronger negative perceptions of early tracking. They were more worried about the possible negative side-effects of dividing students at such a young age. Moreover, they felt that by adapting their teaching methods they were able to cope with the range of abilities
in their classroom. The Dutch teachers did agree that the negative sides of tracking existed, but mostly they thought that these did not outweigh the benefits that they felt early tracking has for the quality of education. A number of the Dutch teachers worried especially that if some of the low-performing students would not be able to keep up with the rest of the class, they would lose their motivation and become disruptive to the lesson. Class size was found to be an important factor here: teachers from both countries strongly expected that smaller classes might make teaching in a mixed-ability group more manageable.

Regarding the selection process, the Swedish teachers were especially concerned about the risk of misdiagnosis, where early selection would cause children to be placed in a track that did not match their abilities, especially since children still develop and change a lot during these early years. The Dutch teachers agreed that this was sometimes an issue. However, where the Swedish teachers saw this as a strong argument against early tracking, the Dutch teachers instead put more focus on introducing measures that would make it easier for students to switch between the tracks or to continue with a higher level after obtaining their diploma. The Dutch teachers felt that this would go a long way towards making the system more just, while maintaining the benefits of early selection.
6. Discussion

This study has aimed to increase understanding of early tracking and its effects on equality of education by researching teachers’ perspectives in Sweden and in the Netherlands. It has attempted to achieve this aim by answering the following questions:

- What are teachers’ perceptions regarding early tracking?
- To what extent do teachers perceive early tracking affects the equality of education?
- How do these perceptions differ between teachers from the Netherlands and Sweden?

In the following section the findings will be discussed and connected with previous research in the area of early tracking. The implications of these findings will also be considered and areas for further research will be identified.

Most of the literature on early tracking connects it with increased socio-economic inequality. Studies based on the data of large-scale international student assessments show that intergenerational mobility is lower in countries with early tracking, and smaller scale studies using differences-in-differences techniques show that this difference is most likely the direct result of tracking itself (Ammermueller, 2013; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006; Ferreira & Gignoux, 2014; Straková, 2007; Kerr, Pekkarinen & Uusitalo, 2013). Almost all of the teachers that were interviewed from both countries were aware that students from privileged backgrounds have higher chances to reach certain levels of education than equally able students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Most of them expected there was some kind of connection between this inequality and tracking, although some of them were unsure about it. Two teachers thought parental background would be so influential that postponing tracking would not make a significant difference.

If teachers are not aware of the negative consequences of early tracking, it is reasonable to assume this could affect their perceptions on the issue.

The research also shows that the relationship between early tracking and socio-economic equality is strongly affected by the methods of initial selection between the tracks, and by the possibility to move between the tracks (Korthals & Dronkers, 2016; Schindler, 2017). The teachers from the Netherlands had observed this in practice: they perceived that ever since the track decision in the Netherlands has become less dependent on the CITO-test and more on the judgement of the primary school teacher, more students end up in tracks unsuited to their level of ability. Moreover, the Dutch teachers felt that the flexibility of the tracking system was very important in order correct such ‘misdiagnoses’, and they were in favour of increasing the flexibility.

Regarding immigrant students, almost all teachers expected that early tracking would make it harder for these students to reach the levels of education suited to their abilities, mainly because of language difficulties. The teachers assumed that when the selection was earlier, these students would have less time to ‘catch up’ with the rest of the students before the selection was made. These assumptions are supported by the existing studies which show that early tracking negatively impacts learning achievements of newly arrived students and those who do not speak the national language at home (Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016).

There is little research on the effects of early tracking on equality of opportunities for self-development. A study by Jeannie Oakes finds that students in lower-level tracks had systematically fewer opportunities to learn (1986), but research in this same area has not been done more recently or in contexts outside of the US. Some of the Dutch teachers did think it would be better if all students had more opportunities to take both theoretical and practical courses. They felt this might help against negative stereotypes and give every students the chance to explore and develop their talents.
Researchers have come up with two opposing theories about the effects of early tracking on self-confidence: either it negatively affects the self-confidence of low-performing students to be placed in a vocational level because of the lower status attached to these levels, or it positively affects their self-confidence to be placed in a group that is more equal in terms of ability, so that they can compare their achievements to peers that are on the same level. Studies that have been done in this area mostly support the latter theory. They find that tracking primarily results in a drop in self-confidence for the high performing students, because they now only compare their achievements to the top level group. This is especially true in schools that offer only that one track (Reed, Kirschner & Jolles, 2015; Salchegger, 2016). One of the Dutch teachers from the interview teaches at a school like this, and very clearly noticed this effect on her students. The literature finds little or no effects on the self-confidence of low performing students (Houtte, Demanet & Stevens, 2012). The Swedish teachers either were not sure or expected negative results for low performing students, while some of the Dutch teachers also saw the possibility for positive effects. However, they did raise concerns about the negative image that vocational levels have in Dutch society. There is no research about such stereotypes and their effects. Since they are very much dependent on the particular national context it is likely that there will be large differences from country to country, but more research in this area is needed.

The literature suggests that tracking improves labour-market transitions, by making it easier for students to find employment after they leave school (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013; Iannelli & Raffe, 2007). The teachers in the interview generally did not have much to say about this topic. Most were unsure if early tracking would have an effect on these transitions. Possibly they were unable to say much about it because almost all students go on to some form of continued education after lower secondary education, and so the point where they enter the labour-market is relatively far removed from the direct experiences of the interviewed teachers. Some of the Dutch teachers did mention that they sometimes experienced that the moment where vocational students in the Netherlands have to choose a course profile comes too early, and that they sometimes ended up regretting their choice. This could have a negative effect on their successful entry to the labour-market, if they experience delays because they have to switch profiles, or if they end up in a field that is not a good match for them. The literature did not specify whether there is a difference between early and late tracking countries in labour-market transitions. Therefore, it is possible that these negative consequences of early selection could be avoided by postponing the decision, without affecting the positive effects of tracking on labour-market transitions.

Previous studies have found no consistent evidence that early tracking improves student achievements. Some results show a small increase in the achievements of students in the highest tracks, but they also show that tracking can widen the achievement gap between high- and low performing students. Most studies find little effect on the performance of either of the groups (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; Montt, 2011; Onderwijsraad, 2010). The Dutch teachers did feel that early tracking improved the quality of education, because it made it easier for them to assess the level of individual students and to respond to their specific needs. They expected that it would be more challenging to teach in a mixed-ability environment. They were not unwilling to take on this challenge, but they did fear that it would be difficult to maintain the same quality of education. Many of them expressed curiosity about how the Swedish teachers coped with this challenge.
These findings seem to match the findings of the only other study which has looked specifically at the perceptions of teachers. Ansalone and Biafora found that the teachers in their study were in favour of tracking, mainly because they felt it made their jobs more manageable. However, in their study they only interviewed teachers who taught in a stratified system. The findings of the research presented in this report showed that the teachers from Sweden, who have experience teaching in a comprehensive system, had more negative attitudes towards early tracking. While they agreed that teachers in mixed ability environments had to be more creative, they also felt that this was manageable with the right teaching methods.

Ansalone and Biafora conclude from their findings that if school organisations want to consider abolishing tracking, they first have to “provide learning opportunities for their faculty to become familiar with pedagogical techniques that enable them to restrict the range of differences within the respective classes and provide academic development for the entire class” (2004, p.256). Their conclusion does not conflict with the findings of this report: the curiosity of the Dutch teachers about the teaching methods in Sweden suggests that they might have a positive view towards such professional development opportunities. However, the findings in this report suggest another important contributing factor which did not come up in the study by Ansalone and Biafora. The participants agreed almost unanimously that smaller class sizes would make it significantly more manageable to teach in mixed-ability environments. The teachers from Sweden were mostly used to class sizes of about 20-25 students, while the Dutch teachers often had classes of 30 or more students. If de-tracking would be considered, decreasing class-sizes might therefore be an even more effective measure to ensure that teachers are able to cope with the broader range of abilities than the measures suggested by Ansalone and Biafora. There are currently no studies which have specifically looked into the relationship between class size and the effects of early tracking, and so this hypothesis needs to be backed up by more research in this area.
7. Concluding remarks

This report will conclude with a brief reflection on the methods that were used in the study. The perceptions of teachers regarding early tracking were studied by means of semi-structured interviews. During the interviews with the teachers from Sweden it was explained briefly how early tracking works in the Netherlands, after which they were asked to reflect on the benefits and challenges of the Swedish, late tracking context, and on what they expected the benefits and challenges would be of an early tracking system like the Netherlands. During the interviews with the Dutch teachers the Swedish ‘late-tracking’ system was explained briefly, and the Dutch teachers were also asked to reflect on the benefits and challenges of both systems.

Asking the teachers to compare between the two national contexts provided some difficulties. Considering the short time that was available for the interviews and the need to cover all the questions during that time, it was not possible to go into much depth when explaining how the two education systems functioned. While the teachers’ perceptions of their own system were based on experience, their expectations about the other system were based only on a short description of the main features of that system. This of course affected what they were able to say about that system. If this study would be repeated it could be an option to send a more detailed, written explanation of the education systems to the teachers so that they could read this before the interview. However, this would increase the time that the teachers would have to free up for the research, and it would only partly resolve the problem: even with a more detailed explanation the teachers would never be able to understand the system to the same extent that they know their own system, and their perceptions would still be based on expectations rather than experience.

However, this unfamiliarity also added a valuable perspective to the research. It might be difficult for people to take an objective view towards a system that they are a part of: certain features might seem so ‘normal’ that they do not even question them anymore. Someone who has been part of a certain system for a long time, both as a teacher and as a student, might not notice some features that people with an ‘outside’ perspective might find strange or even problematic. Of course, the people who are not as familiar with the system are not objective either, since they are influenced by their own context. Nevertheless, their perspectives can be a starting point for further discussion on the topic.

Research in the field of International and Comparative Education provides valuable insights into how different countries have different ways of tackling challenges related to education. This research has attempted to contribute to this body of literature by investigating the notion of early tracking and by seeing how people from different contexts view this particular education practice.
Reference list


Appendix A – Research Letter English

Dear sir/madam,

I am a 24 year old student from the Netherlands and I am currently in the second year of the master’s programme ‘International and Comparative Education’ at Stockholm University. This programme is focussed on comparing the characteristics of different education systems. These comparisons can teach us a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of an education system, and can hopefully help us to make improvements to them. In order to complete my studies I am carrying out a research project for my master’s thesis.

My thesis will be about the separation of students into different groups of ability. In the Netherlands, after primary school all children are divided into different levels of education: at the age of 12 there is already a difference between academic and vocational tracks. My research project will compare the Dutch system with the Swedish system, where children of all levels are taught together for longer. The focus of the research will be on the perspectives of the teachers and their experiences with teaching in these education systems. Hopefully, this research project will increase our understanding of the benefits and challenges of teaching in these respective systems.

In order to achieve this I will conduct interviews with teachers in both the Netherlands and Sweden. I am looking for teachers who teach in Högstadium, it does not matter which subject they teach. The interviews will take about 30-40 minutes apiece. Since I have only a basic level of Swedish the interviews will have to be conducted in English. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis, but all data will be anonymised in English. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis, but all data will be anonymised in the report so that no personal information will be recognisable. All participants will be able to read the paper when it is completed.

Please let me know if you would be willing to assist me in this project. Or, if you know of someone else who would be willing to participate in this research I would be very grateful if you could provide me with their contact information or if you could send this information to them directly. Thank you so much for considering my request, please don’t hesitate if you have any further questions. You can reach me at robinholscher@gmail.com or call me at 0790268274.

My sincere thanks in advance,

Kind regards,

Robin Hölscher
Beste meneer/mevrouw,

Ik ben een 24-jarige studente en ik ben momenteel bezig aan het tweede jaar van het masterprogramma ‘International and Comparative Education’ aan de universiteit van Stockholm. Deze master is gericht op het vergelijken van verschillende onderwijssystemen, met het doel om meer te leren over de positieve en negatieve kenmerken van het onderwijs in bepaalde landen. Om mijn studie af te ronden ben ik bezig met een onderzoek voor mijn masterscriptie.

Mijn scriptie gaat over het scheiden van leerlingen tussen verschillende onderwijsniveau’s op de middelbare school. Terwijl in Nederland de leerlingen al meteen na de basisschool worden onderverdeeld tussen VWO, HAVO of VMBO, gebeurt dit in andere landen pas veel later of helemaal niet. In Zweden bijvoorbeeld, worden de kinderen pas in de bovenbouw van elkaar gescheiden. Mijn onderzoek zal de ervaringen en meningen van docenten in Nederland en Zweden hierover met elkaar vergelijken. Mijn hoop is dat dit onderzoek ons meer kan leren over de voor- en nadelen van vroege of late scheiding van leerlingen.

Om dit te onderzoeken zal ik interviews afnemen met zowel Nederlandse als Zweedse docenten. Om de twee groepen goed te kunnen vergelijken ben ik op zoek naar docenten die lesgeven op de middelbare school in de onderbouw. Het maakt niet uit als ze óók in de bovenbouw lesgeven, en docenten uit alle vakgebieden zijn welkom. De interviews zullen ongeveer 30-40 minuten duren. Aangezien ik het grootste deel van de tijd in Zweden ben zal ik een deel van de Nederlandse interviews via skype moeten afnemen. Als dit niet mogelijk is kunnen we ook proberen een afspraak te maken op een moment dat ik in Nederland ben. De interviews zullen worden opgenomen en uitgeschreven voor analyse, maar alle data zal worden geanonimiseerd zodat er geen persoonlijke informatie herkenbaar is.

Ik hoor graag van u of u bereid zouden zijn om mij te helpen met dit onderzoek. Of, mocht u nog iemand anders weten die geïnteresseerd zou zijn, zou ik het erg op prijs stellen als u mij hun contactgegevens zou kunnen geven of deze informatie door zou kunnen sturen. Als u nog verdere vragen heeft laat het me alstublieft weten, ik ben bereikbaar op robinholscher@gmail.com of op het nummer +46790268274 (let op, dit is een Zweeds nummer).

Bij voorbaat dank!

Met vriendelijke groet,

Robin Hölscher
Appendix C – Informed Consent Form English

Master’s Thesis Research Project on Tracking in Education,
January 2018

Dear sir/madam,

My name is Robin Hölscher and I am writing a Master’s Thesis at the University of Stockholm. You are invited to participate in my research project on the separation of students into different levels of ability. The aim of the Thesis is to increase understanding of the different perceptions that teachers have about the effects of this separation, and to compare these perceptions between the Netherlands and Sweden. The research will consist of a series of interviews of around 30/40 minutes with Dutch and Swedish teachers. The interviews with the Swedish teachers will be conducted in English.

Participation in this project is voluntary, and I will not be able to reimburse you for your time. In order to be able to analyse the interviews, I will record them and transcribe them afterwards. However, all data from the interviews will be completely anonymised, so no names, places or other personal information will be recognisable. You can withdraw your participation at any moment and you will be able to read the report once it is finished. The data will be used for my Master’s Thesis only.

By signing this document you give your consent for your participation in this project. You agree that I can record the interview and use the anonymised information in my report. If you have any questions or concerns about the project you can email me at robinholscher@gmail.com or call me at 0790268274.

My sincere thanks in advance,

Robin Hölscher

Place and Date of consent

Name participant Signature participant Place and Date of consent
Appendix D – Informed Consent Form Dutch

Onderzoeksproject masterscriptie over differentiatie in het onderwijs, januari 2018

Geachte heer/mevrouw,

Mijn naam is Robin Hölscher en ik ben bezig aan mijn masterscriptie aan de universiteit van Stockholm. U bent hierbij uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan mijn onderzoeksproject over het scheiden van leerlingen tussen verschillende onderwijsniveau’s op de middelbare school. Het doel van mijn scriptie is om meer te weten te komen over de verschillende ervaringen van leraren over deze scheiding, en om deze ervaringen te vergelijken tussen Nederland en Zweden. Het onderzoek zal bestaan uit een serie interviews met leraren in zowel Nederland als Zweden.

Deelname aan dit project is vrijwillig, en ik kan u geen tegemoetkoming aanbieden voor uw tijd. Om de interviews te kunnen analyseren zal ik ze opnemen en achteraf uitschrijven. Alle data van de interviews zal echter worden geanonimiseerd, zodat namen, plaatsnamen en andere persoonlijke informatie niet herkenbaar zal zijn. Het is op elk moment mogelijk om uw deelname terug te trekken, en u kunt de scriptie lezen zodra deze af is. Alle informatie van de interviews zal alleen voor deze scriptie worden gebruikt.

Door dit formulier te ondertekenen geeft u toestemming voor uw deelname aan dit project. U gaat ermee akkoord dat ik de interviews mag opnemen en dat ik de geanonimiseerde informatie mag gebruiken in mijn scriptie. Als u nog vragen heeft kunt u mij per email bereiken op robinholscher@gmail.com, of u kunt me bellen op +46790268274 (let op, dit is een Zweeds nummer).

Bij voorbaat dank voor uw medewerking,

Robin Hölscher

Plaats en datum van toestemming

Naam deelnemer Handtekening deelnemer Plaats en datum van toestemming
## Appendix E – Interview Guide English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1. Professional background participant** | - How long have you been a teacher?  
- What subject(s) do you teach?  
- Which age groups do you (normally) teach?  
- Have you taught in Sweden only? |
| **2. Benefits and challenges** | - From your experience, can you name some benefits of a system where students of all levels are taught together during lower secondary education, like in Sweden?  
- From your experience, can you name some challenges of such a system?  
- What do you think the benefits would be of a system where students are separated into different levels after primary school, like in the Netherlands?  
- What do you think the challenges of such a system would be?  
- For the high-performing students, do you think it is better to have the separation earlier or later?  
- For the low-performing students, do you think it is better to have the separation earlier or later? |
| **3. Effects of tracking on equality of education** | - What do you understand under ‘equality of education’?  
- Do you think that early or late selection influences this kind of inequality?  
- Equality of education is also often measured by the influence that parental background has on where the student ends up. Do you think early or late selection influences this kind of equality?  
- Do you think early or late selection influences equality for children from migrant backgrounds? |
| **4. Further comparison** | - When it comes to self-confidence, do you think it is better to have earlier or later selection?  
- When it comes to the social function of education, do you think it is better to have earlier or later selection?  
- When it comes to labour-market transitions, do you think it is better to have earlier or later selection?  
- All things considered, which system would you choose: early selection like in the Netherlands or late selection like in Sweden? |
| **5. End** | - Is there anything more you would like to add on this topic? |
## Appendix F – Interview Guide Dutch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Onderwerp</th>
<th>Vraag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Professionele achtergrond deelnemer | - Hoe lang geef je al les?  
- Welk vak/welke vakken geef je?  
- Aan welke klassen geef je (meestal) les?  
- Aan welke niveaus geef je les?  
- Heb je alleen in Nederland lesgegeven? |
| 2. Voor- en Nadelen | - In jouw ervaring, wat zijn de voordelen van het Nederlandse systeem waar leerlingen dus al meteen tijdens de onderbouw worden ingedeeld op niveau?  
- In jouw ervaring, zijn er ook nadelen aan dit systeem?  
- En als jij je zou indenken hoe het zou zijn om les te geven in een systeem zoals dat in Zweden, waar aan leerlingen van alle niveaus samen les wordt gegeven tijdens de onderbouw, wat denk je dat daar de voordelen van zouden zijn?  
- En wat denk je dat de nadelen zouden zijn van dit systeem?  
- Voor de leerlingen die het best presteren, denk je dat het voor hen beter is om vroeger of later te selecteren?  
- Voor de leerlingen die het minst goed presteren, denk je dat het voor hen beter is om vroeger of later te selecteren? |
| 3. Het effect van differentiatie op gelijkheid | - Als jij denkt aan het begrip ‘gelijkheid in het onderwijs’, hoe zou jij dit definieren?  
- Denk jij dat het moment waarop de selectie plaatsvindt invloed heeft op deze vorm van gelijkheid?  
- Een maatstaaf die vaak wordt gebruikt als er gesproken wordt over gelijkheid, is de mate waarin de achtergrond van de ouders bepalend is in het niveau waar het kind uiteindelijk terecht komt. Denk jij dat vroegere of latere selectie invloed heeft op deze vorm van gelijkheid?  
- Denk jij dat vroegere of latere selectie meer of minder ongelijkheid veroorzaakt voor kinderen van een migrantenafkomst? |
| 4. Verdere vergelijking | - Als het gaat om het zelfvertrouwen van de leerlingen, denk je dat het beter is om vroeger of later te selecteren?  
- Als het gaat om de sociale functie van het onderwijs, denk jij dat het beter is om vroeger of later te selecteren?  
- Als het gaat om de doorstroming naar de werkvloer, denk je dat het beter is om vroeger of later te selecteren?  
- Welk systeem zo jij uiteindelijk kiezen? Vroegere selectie zoals in Nederland of latere selectie zoals in Zweden? |
| 5. Afsluiting | - Is er nog iets dat je graag over dit onderwerp kwijt wilt? |
Appendix G – Translated Quotations

Fragment 1
Docent N4: “ik denk dat je dan gewoon echt goed kan kijken naar de individuele leerling en hem ook echt die kansen meteen kunt aanbieden, je hebt meteen het maatwerk klaar om die leerling op niveau te bedienen dus dat is fijn. Je ziet heel snel de kwaliteiten van leerlingen omdat ze toch al op het niveau binnenstromen dus ik weet al, oke ik weet wat ze kunnen en waar ze naar toe moeten”

Fragment 2
Docent N1: “het voordeel volgens mij ligt vooral voor de leerlingen die wat minder goed zijn of de leerlingen die juist erg goed zijn want ik denk dat als je lesgeeft als alles bijelkaar zit dat je dan als docent wel min of meer gedwongen bent op het middenniveau les te gaan geven en dat dan de leerlingen die eronder zitten daar is het eigenlijk frustrerend voor want daar is het dan te moeilijk voor, en voor de leerlingen die het te makkelijk vinden die worden niet uitgedaagd.”

Fragment 3
Docent N1: “nouja weetje dat zit natuurlijk ook een beetje in de samenleving dat is natuurlijk heel vervelend dat ligt denk ik ook wel heel erg aan hoe een basisschool en ook hoe ouders daarmee omgaan. Je hebt ook.. je hebt natuurlijk heel veel ouders die heel blij zijn als een kind naar het VMBO gaat, die trots op het kind zijn en terecht. Maar je hebt natuurlijk ook wel ouders die... het kind krijgt een VMBO advies en die doen er alles aan om er een HAVO advies van te maken. En dan geef je al de boodschap van ja, VMBO is eigenlijk niet goed genoeg.”

Fragment 4
Docent N3: “En bij ons komen er heel veel kinderen van school die eigenlijk denken, ja ik ben wel slim maar ik ben niet zo slim als de helft van mijn klas. Er komen best wel veel kinderen bij ons van school die een veel te klein ego hebben, voor wat ze eigenlijk kunnen.”

Fragment 5
Docent N2: “wat zou het een cadeau zijn dat een leerling bijvoorbeeld die echt steen steen goed is bijvoorbeeld in wiskunde, dat die wiskunde op VWO niveau kan doen of bijvoorbeeld wiskunde A en B kan doen, sneller, waardoor die meer tijd heeft voor Engels of voor Frans om af te ronden. Nou dat vind ik het grootste cadeau wat je een kind kunt geven.”

Fragment 6
Docent N3: “elk kind verdient het vind ik om dat zelfvertrouwen te vinden in iets wat die wel kan en voor sommige minderen betekent dat gewoon praktijkwerk, betekent dat gewoon letterlijk kunnen solderen, kunnen uitmeten, kunnen timmeren. Voor sommige kinderen betekent dat dat. En ik denk dat als je wilt aansluiten met de werkvloer wil je graag mensen hebben die iets doen wat ze leuk vinden, waar ze vertorruwen in hebben, en waar ze zich goed over voelen en bij kinderen wordt heel vaak gekeken naar het intellectuele niveau en er wordt
eigenlijk zelden gekeken naar is dit kind wel gelukkig hier op school. [...] een kind dat met vertrouwen heeft geleerd zal ook met vertrouwen zich aanpassen aan zijn werkomgeving.”

Fragment 7
Docent N1: “Nou het is ongetwijfeld zo dat als je uit een lager milieu komt dat je kansen lager zijn. Want het schoolse systeem in Nederland is natuurlijk heel erg gericht eigenlijk op taal. Het is heel talig, je algemene kennis is heel erg van belang en de steun van thuis is heel erg van belang dus als jij opgroeit in een milieu waarin de krant niet wordt gelezen, nooit wordt gepraat over algemene ontwikkelingsdingen, kinderen he, weinig steun van hun ouders krijgen omdat er allerlei problematiek is of dat ouders dat ook niet kunnen of wat dan ook [...] dan zie je dat het voor kinderen gewoon moeilijker is, en dan moet het kind dus eigenlijk meer al zelf in zijn mars hebben om op hetzelfde niveau te kunnen komen.”

Fragment 8
Docent N4: “op het moment dat je migranten hebt die hebben twee obstakels: ze moeten een taal leren en ieder vak wordt aangeboden in die taal. Niet te doen. Dus dan heb je misschien leerlingen die hebben gewoon veel meer tijd nodig om uiteindelijk te komen waar ze willen komen, en dat lukt soms ook niet in zo’n middelbare schooltijd en dat is heel erg jammer om te zien.”

Fragment 9
Docent N3: “als je leerlingen wat langer bijelkaar zet dan leren ze ook van elkaar. Dus dan zal een allochtone leerling met wat taalachterstand die kan wat langzamer in het niveau groeien dat bij zijn intelligentie hoort, we hebben soms echt kinderen waarvan je denkt, ze snappen het.. eigenlijk heb je het gevoel, ze snappen het wel, maarja dan krijgen ze meteen 12 vakken, 5 talen heel veel huiswerk en dan groeien ze eigenlijk niet naar hun potentie toe.”

Fragment 10
Docent N5: “differentieren is gewoon een van de moeilijkste dingen. Als docent zijnde. Ik heb ook nog geen goede methode gezien die dat goed doet. Meestal is het meer van hetzelfde en de diepgang... het is gewoon heel moeilijk. Ik ben wel benieuwd hoe ze dat dan in Zweden doen, die differentiatie.”