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# Preparing to transition to secondary education: perceptions of Dutch pupils with migrant backgrounds

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The transition from primary school to secondary school is a crucial period of time for children and this may be especially the case for pupils with migrant backgrounds. While there has been considerable research on the transition from primary to secondary school, more needs to be known specifically about the experiences of this group of pupils during their final year of primary school, as they prepare for their transition to secondary school.

**Purpose:** The study investigated how Dutch children with migrant backgrounds in their final year of primary school perceive the preparatory process for the transition to secondary school. In particular, we were interested in who the children felt were the important 'actors' (e.g. pupils, parents, teachers and others) in the preparatory process.

**Sample:** We collected data from 76 primary school pupils from three schools in an urban city in the Netherlands. The sample included pupils who, according to the Dutch system, were preparing to follow an academic pathway (i.e. the tracks known in this system as 'HAVO' or 'VWO') and those who were preparing to follow a vocational pathway (i.e. the track known as 'VMBO') in secondary education.

**Design and methods:** We used photo elicitation ( $N = 76$ ) and also conducted semi-structured interviews with a subsample of the pupils ( $N = 25$ ) to examine the roles of the important actors in the preparatory process. Data were analysed qualitatively; responses were coded and underwent pattern analysis in order to identify and describe repeating structures in the data. Data were grouped according to whether the pupils received school recommendations for an academic track or a vocational track.

**Results:** Findings suggested that the pupils perceived the most important actors to be the pupil, the classroom teacher and the parents. Both teachers and parents were considered valuable resources for pupils in the preparatory process. Patterns representing the participants' perceptions of the roles of three actors – namely, (1) the child, (2) the classroom teacher and (3) the parents, were identified. Six patterns were identified with respect to the child, four with respect to the classroom teacher and two with respect to the parents. For some patterns, it was apparent that the responses of children in the vocational group and the academic group had different emphases.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Primary-secondary transition;  
preparatory process;  
migrant backgrounds; pupil  
perception; pupil voice

**Conclusions:** The study highlights the importance for teachers and parents of children in their final year of primary school to be aware of the pupils' perceptions of and feelings about their preparation for secondary school, so as to be in the best position to support them collaboratively.

## Introduction

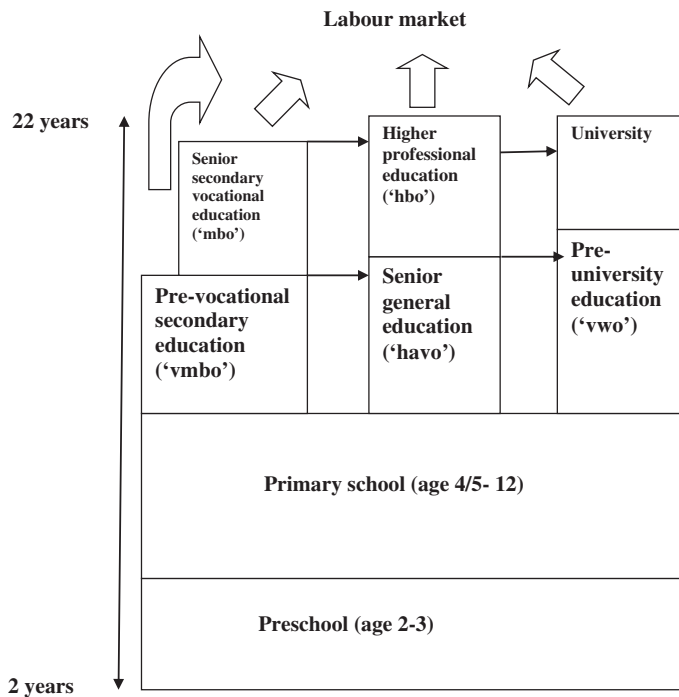
The transition from primary to secondary education is an important moment in the school career of children (Anderson et al. 2000; Ashton 2008; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006, 2008; Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Naayer et al. 2016; West, Sweeting, and Young 2010; Zeedyk et al. 2003). Pupils may experience feelings of stress and worry with regard to social relationships (e.g. friendships) (Ashton 2008; Zeedyk et al. 2003), their well-being (e.g. self-esteem) (West, Sweeting, and Young 2010) and the new school system (e.g. getting lost in a new environment) (Ashton 2008; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Zeedyk et al. 2003). Research suggests that these difficulties are greater for pupils with migrant backgrounds than for non-migrant pupils in the primary–secondary school transition (Caulfield, Hill, and Shelton 2005; Coffey 2013; Galton and Mornson 2000; Graham and Hill 2003; Gutman and Midgley 2000; McGee et al. 2003; Naayer et al. 2016; Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour 2011; Rosenblatt and Elias 2008; Topping 2011), as migrant pupils may also experience adjustment difficulties related to discrimination, language and a lack of relevant resources (e.g. Caulfield, Hill, and Shelton 2005; McGee et al. 2003; Topping 2011).

While there has been considerable research on the transition from primary to secondary school (e.g. Gutman and Midgley 2000; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Newman et al. 2000; Reyes et al. 2000), less research has been conducted specifically on the perceptions of pupils in the final year of primary school (known as 'group 8' in the Dutch school system) on the *preparatory process* for the transition to secondary school (Akos and Galassi 2004; Ashton 2008; Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013), and especially on the preparatory process of pupils with a migrant background (Benner and Graham 2009; McGee et al. 2003). The present small-scale qualitative study examines how Dutch pupils with a migrant background perceive and experience this preparatory process, and how they can be encouraged and supported in preparing for the transition to secondary education in the Dutch system (i.e. involving transition to either the vocational track or an academic track). We aimed to explore the following three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Who are the important actors in the preparation process according to pupils with a migrant background in the final year of primary school (pupil ages 10–12)?

RQ2: How do these pupils perceive and assess the role of the classroom teacher, the parents, and themselves in the preparation process?

RQ3: Do pupils expecting to follow the vocational track perceive and assess the role of actors in the preparation process differently compared with pupils expecting to follow the academic track?



**Figure 1.** The Dutch educational system (Source: authors' own figure).

Notes: In pre-vocational secondary education ('VMBO'), four levels between low and high are distinguished: basic ('VMBO-basis'), cadre ('VMBO-kader'), mixed ('VMBO-gemengd') and theoretical ('VMBO-theoretische leerweg').

## The Dutch education system

In the Netherlands, it has been said that pupils have to deal with one of the most complicated secondary education systems in Europe (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013). First, the secondary educational system is strongly segregated, with strict dividing lines between six different types of secondary education (Bronneman-Helmers, Herweijer, and Vogels 2002) (see Figure 1 for an overview of the Dutch educational system). In the system, which is divided into educational pathways, called 'tracks', only the two highest levels (known by the abbreviations 'HAVO' and 'VWO') give direct access to higher education. One track (i.e. the theoretical track) in preparatory secondary vocational education ('VMBO') provides admission to the 'HAVO' and to senior secondary vocational education (middelbaar beroepsonderwijs, 'MBO'), allowing for indirect access to higher education. However, the chances of actually entering higher education via this route are three times lower than via the direct routes (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013). Secondly, in the Netherlands, children make the transition from primary school to secondary school at the age of 10 to 12. The OECD notes that the Dutch educational system groups students into tracks at a relatively young age (12) compared with most OECD countries, where students are tracked at the age of 15 or 16 (OECD 2012). Bol et al. (2014) have composed a tracking index on the basis of three indicators (age of selection, number of tracks and the period of the tracked curriculum). The index score for the Netherlands is one of the highest in Europe. Nygård (2017) compares the Dutch early and vertically tracked system (also described as multi-tiered secondary education) with the more comprehensive

system in Sweden. He notes that in the Dutch system, the educational pathways are determined at a relatively young age and so the transition from primary to secondary is a defining moment in a person's educational career. Another reason which makes the Dutch secondary school system relatively complicated is that pupils receive a school recommendation in the final year of primary school (group 8), which is needed to choose a suitable track in secondary education (i.e. the school choice). The school recommendation is based on a final test score (i.e. in most cases the End of Primary Education Test, developed by CITO and thus often referred to as 'the CITO test'), the pupil's own preference and the teacher's recommendation. This recommendation is based on the general attributes of the pupil (e.g. motivation, working attitude, homework behaviour, learning behaviour) (Driessen 2006; Inspectie van Onderwijs 2014).

Some research has suggested that selection at such a young age has a negative impact on performance in some subjects, such as language, reading and mathematics (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013; Dronkers 2007; Onderwijsraad 2010). Furthermore, Bol et al. (2014) demonstrate, on the basis of an analysis of PISA data, that socio-economic background has a relatively larger effect on learning in tracked systems than in comprehensive systems. Dronkers and Korthals (2016) provide further evidence on the basis of Dutch research that socio-economic background has an effect on track choice after controlling for early ability.

On the basis of these findings, the final year of primary school (i.e. group 8) and its school recommendation for secondary education is sometimes referred to as the 'sorting machine' (Terwel 2006), indicating that this process may imply inequality of opportunity for some pupils (Boone and Van Houtte 2013; Timmermans, Kuyper, and Van der Werf 2013), especially pupils with a migrant background or low socio-economic status (SES) (Inspectie van Onderwijs 2016; Jungbluth 2003; Terwel 2006; Van Heek 1968; Van Rooijen et al. 2017). In the Netherlands, 54% of children in group 8 go to preparatory secondary vocational education (i.e. 'VMBO') (Driessen, Sleegers, and Smit 2008; OECD 2006) (see Figure 1). Dutch children with a migrant minority background or low socio-economic status (SES) are often overrepresented in pre-vocational secondary education (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013). This, it has been argued, is possibly due to a school recommendation which does not match their general ability (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013; Dronkers 2007; Jungbluth 2003; Onderwijsraad 2010) and may disadvantage their future school career (De Boer, Bosker, and Van der Werf 2007).

### Actors in the preparatory process in the final year of primary school

Various actors play a role in children's school life, especially at the time of the transition to secondary school. These actors, such as learning mentors or other persons from inside or outside the family, can form a strong social network to support a smooth transition process (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Martínez et al. 2011; Newman and Blackburn 2002; Zeedyk et al. 2003). In order to identify the actors in the preparatory process of the transition to secondary school, we reviewed studies on educational transitions (e.g. Ashton 2008; Benner and Graham 2009; Caulfield, Hill, and Shelton 2005; Graham and Hill 2003; Jindal-Snape 2010; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006, 2008; Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Korpershoek et al. 2016; McGee et al. 2003; Newman and Blackburn 2002; Zeedyk et al. 2003). The pupils themselves are the main actors, as they deal with changes in their lives facing the transition process,

developing self-discipline and building good relationships with others (i.e. internal attributes) (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Zeedyk et al. 2003). The pupils' family (e.g. parents) (Coffey 2013) can be important actors, as families have the task of teaching pupils the culturally relevant skills to survive in new settings and helping them develop coping strategies to deal with stress (Jindal-Snape 2010). The attitude and experiences of the family (i.e. parents or siblings) affect how children deal with the transition (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008). Finally, the community, or 'significant others', such as peers, teachers, friends and acquaintances, may play an important role in the preparation process. These 'significant others' can stimulate pupils to explore their new environment by helping them settle into secondary school, by being role models and by giving them support and advice (e.g. Ashton 2008; Benner and Graham 2009; Caulfield, Hill, and Shelton 2005; Graham and Hill 2003; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Terwel, Rodrigues, and van de Koot-Dees 2011; Zeedyk et al. 2003). According to Caulfield, Hill, and Shelton (2005), the community and 'significant others' should help pupils with a migrant background in their linguistic and cultural needs during the transition process because many of these children may lack some of the resources which are needed for the transition process. The community and 'significant others' can provide other assistance such as advice, support and resources that they need for a successful transition to secondary education (Caulfield, Hill, and Shelton 2005; Nanhoe 2012).

In the present study, we distinguish between pupils with a migrant background who have been advised to follow the vocational track of secondary education (i.e. 'VMBO') and those who have been advised to follow an academic track. (i.e. 'HAVO' or 'VWO'). The distinction is quite relevant in the Dutch context because a 'VMBO' recommendation is often considered to be 'bad news'. This is because the vocational track is regarded as offering relatively low career opportunities, and VMBO schools tend to have a negative image (e.g. perceived to be offering a lower quality education and having many social problems) (Onstenk 2008). We were particularly interested in this distinction because in the present research context (i.e. children in schools in poor urban areas with large migrant populations), it is generally expected that large percentages of pupils will go to a 'VMBO' school. By examining the differences between children in the expected route to vocation education and children who – despite the generally low levels of expectations – aim for the academic track (i.e. 'HAVO' or 'VWO'), we hope to shed light on the specific roles of the key actors in the preparation process. Differences in the roles of the important actors in these two groups of pupils may, we hope, provide insight into how best to support children in these circumstances to achieve their full potential.

## Method

The study was conducted using a qualitative research design. Further details of the data collection and analysis methods are given below.

## Ethical considerations

Any requisite approvals needed from the University of Applied Sciences in Rotterdam were obtained. Schools were informed about the study, after which they could agree on participation. After the school's agreement had been secured, parents of pupils at the participating

schools were informed about the study and were asked for permission for their child to participate in the research project. Data protection measures were undertaken for the data collected and used in the current study; for example, computers on which the data were stored were password protected and participants' personal data were converted to pseudonyms prior to the analysis of the data.

## Participants

We approached six primary schools for participation based on three criteria: 1) location (an urban area); 2) percentage of pupils with a migrant background (more than 50%) and 3) use of the 'CITO test' in group 8 (i.e. the final year of primary school). Three primary schools agreed to participate in the research project and we asked parents' permission for their child to participate in the research project.

These schools were located in an urban area in the Netherlands (i.e. in the south and in the west of Rotterdam). In total, 76 pupils from five group 8 classes (i.e. the final year of primary school) of these three primary schools took part. Of the 76 pupils, 25 pupils participated in small group interviews, equally divided by gender, socio-economic status (SES) and pre-secondary school recommendation (i.e. a school recommendation by the classroom teacher before the final test). Aggregated participant background information ( $N = 76$ ) is provided in Table 1. Fifty-eight per cent of the pupils were female and all pupils had a migrant background. We used the broad definition of migrant background from Statistics Netherlands (2017): a child has a migrant background if at least one parent was born outside the Netherlands. Pupils' SES (low versus high) was defined by the educational level of their parents as registered in the school administration.

In Table 1, aggregated and grouped national test scores, known as 'the CITO scores' (College voor Toetsen en Examens (CVTE), 2015) of all 76 participants are given. This End of Primary Education Test, known as 'the CITO test', used to take place in February each year and since 2014–15 has taken place in April. It is a multiple-choice test which is designed to measure aptitude in Dutch, maths, comprehension skills, study skills and world orientation (which includes history, geography, and biology). The test is scored on a scale of 500–550; scores of 536 and below tend to point a pupil towards a vocational track ('VMBO'), while scores above 536 tend to lead to an academic track ('HAVO' or 'VWO') (College voor Toetsen en Examens (CVTE), 2015). As can be seen in Table 1, 53 (71%) of the pupils in the study scored between 500 and 535 on the test, which points towards a vocational track in secondary education.

In addition to the test scores, pupils' school recommendation is reported in Table 1. In the Netherlands, school recommendation in the final year of primary school is determined by the classroom teacher based on two aspects: the formal End of Primary Education Test and the teacher's assessment of the pupil's attributes, as mentioned above. These two aspects are used to recommend a suitable track, either a vocational ('VMBO') or an academic track ('HAVO' or 'VWO') (see Figure 1). As presented in Table 1, 51 (67%) of the pupils received a school recommendation for vocational education (i.e. practical training or pre-vocational secondary education).

**Table 1.** Participant background information.

	Participants (N = 76)		Interviewees (N = 25)	
	No	%	N	%
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	32	42.1	11	44.0
Female	44	57.9	14	56.0
<i>Migrant Background</i>				
Non Dutch background	76	100.0	25	100.0
<i>Socio-economic status (SES)<sup>a</sup></i>				
Low	29	38.2	11	44.0
High	47	61.8	14	56.0
<i>End of Primary Education Test score ('CITO test score')</i>				
500–535	53	71.1	17	68.0
536–550	23	30.3	8	32.0
<i>Pre-school recommendation<sup>b</sup></i>				
Practical training	[not collected by study]			
Pre-vocational secondary education	[not collected by study]		15	60.0
Senior general education/pre-university education	[not collected by study]		10	40.0
<i>School recommendation</i>				
Practical training	5	6.6		
Pre-vocational secondary education	46	60.5	15	60.0
Senior general education/pre-university education	25	32.9	10	40.0

<sup>a</sup>Low SES defined as one, or both, pupil's parents having followed only primary school education or one parent having obtained a degree at the lowest vocational learning track (VMBO basic or cadre). High SES defined as both parents having a minimal degree at the lowest vocational learning track education (VMBO basic or cadre)

<sup>b</sup>Pre-school recommendation is the school recommendation given by the classroom teacher prior to the End of Primary Education Test score (the 'CITO test score').

## Overall Data Collection Procedure

The research project started in September 2012, with six research assistants conducting research activities in the classes (two research assistants in each class), based on the research protocol. In the first month, the researchers observed the pupils in their classroom and talked with them to get to know them. The photo elicitation method, which took place in October of that year, covered approximately one hour for each class. It was carried out in presence of the classroom teacher. In December, we held semi-structured interviews in 12 small groups of two or three pupils (see also Stevens et al. 2004; Terwel, Rodrigues, and van de Koot-Dees 2011). The interviews occurred in a separate room and took approximately one hour. The classroom teacher was not present during these interviews. In the following March and April, after the pupils had taken their 'CITO test', we received the test score information, the final school recommendation and the pupils' school choices from the classroom teachers.

## Details of data collection methods

Data collection were carried out using photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews in groups. Furthermore, the 'insider perspective' (Van Den Bulk 2011) was used to gain thorough insight of the actors in the preparation process from the pupil's perspective. Below, we describe the measures and instruments that were used.



### Photo elicitation

We used photo elicitation (Van Den Bulk 2011) (see also Kilpatrick and Cantril 1960; Shohel 2012; Vermunt, Lodewijks, and Simons 1986) to examine the importance of actors in the preparation process from the children's perspective (RQ 1). A pilot study in a similar setting and previous studies on the transition to secondary school (Ashton 2008; Jindal-Snape 2010; Zeedyk et al. 2003) were used to select photos about school recommendation and about school choice. Each pupil received six images representing actors in the *school recommendation* process (i.e. classroom teacher, parents, pupil, different teachers, counsellor and friends) and three images representing actors in the *school choice* process (i.e. counsellor, parents and new friends). If a pupil considered an image important, (s)he placed it in one of two circles (either the school recommendation circle or the school choice circle). If the child did not consider the image important, (s)he placed it outside the circle.

### Semi-structured interviews

From within the sample of 76 pupils, 25 pupils were selected on the basis of an equal division by gender, socio-economic status (SES) and pre-secondary school recommendation (i.e. a school recommendation by the classroom teacher before the final test) to participate in semi-structured interviews. These were organised in to small groups of two or three pupils. During the interviews, we asked the pupils questions such as: How do you prepare yourself for the transition to secondary school? How do the classroom teacher and your parents prepare you for this transition? Who do you feel are the most important people in the preparation process? The aim of these interviews was to answer the first research question on the important actors in the preparatory process according to the pupils, and to answer the second and third research questions on how children perceive and assess their own role, the role of their classroom teacher and the role of their parents in the preparatory process, and whether there are differences between the two groups of children: those preparing to follow the vocational track ('VMBO') and those preparing to follow the academic track ('HAVO' or 'VWO').

## Data analyses

### Photo elicitation

We counted the photos that the pupils had placed in the circles of school recommendation and school choice. To determine pupils' perceptions of emphasis and importance of the various actors in school recommendation and school choice, we counted the images of the actors (e.g. pupil, classroom teacher and parents). We used counting as an indicator for the importance attached to each of the actors by the pupils.

### Semi-structured interviews

All 25 semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. The pupils' responses about the important actors in the preparation process were coded with labels referring to these actors in the preparation process. Their responses about their own role, the role of their classroom teacher and the role of their parents in the preparation process were coded and

subjected to pattern analysis (Terwel, Rodrigues, and van de Koot-Dees 2011). According to Terwel, Rodrigues, and van de Koot-Dees (2011), a pattern is a formal description of a repeating structure in protocols of social interactions. Pattern analysis can identify patterns in interviews and interactions. In the present study, the patterns that were found were checked by a research group member. Agreement was reached in 89% of the patterns.

### Findings and discussion

In this section, we present the findings of the photo elicitation analysis ( $N = 76$ ) and the analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the 25 pupils (i.e. the 15 pupils preparing to follow the vocational track (i.e. 'VMBO') and the 10 pupils preparing to follow the academic track (i.e. 'HAVO' or 'VWO') in order to determine the pupils' perceptions of the important actors in the preparation process. We accordingly describe: the important actors in the preparatory process, as perceived by the pupils with migrant backgrounds (RQ1); how these pupils perceived and assessed their own role, the role of their classroom teacher and the role of their parents in the preparation process (RQ2); and whether there were any noteworthy differences evident between the perceptions of children preparing to follow a vocational track or those preparing for an academic track (RQ3). Illustrative anonymised quotations from the data are included to support the descriptions of the findings. These quotations have been translated into English by the authors.

### Participants' perceptions of important actors in the preparation process

The results of photo elicitation indicated that pupils considered themselves ( $n = 67$ ), their parents ( $n = 66$ ), the counsellors ( $n = 60$ ), classroom teachers ( $n = 59$ ), their friends ( $n = 58$ ) and different teachers from the secondary schools ( $n = 53$ ) as important actors in the school recommendation process (Table 2). In the process of school choice, parents ( $n = 68$ ), new friends ( $n = 61$ ) and classroom teachers ( $n = 55$ ) were considered important. As can be seen in Table 2, differences in importance of the various actors in the school recommendation and school choice processes were small.

In the interviews, though, it was interesting that it appeared that pupils considered both their classroom teacher and their parents as the most important actors in the school recommendation process, rather than themselves. A pupil with an academic recommendation said: *'My teacher is important, because he gives the recommendation. But so is my mother. If my teacher recommends a vocational track and my mother is not around, I'll go to VMBO. But if my mother is around and says 'I think he could do the academic track, well then ... '.*

**Table 2.** Results of photo elicitation ( $N = 76$ ).

Participants ( $N = 76$ )	School recommendation		School choice	
	No.	%	No.	%
Pictures of important actors				
Pupil	67	88		
Parents	66	87	68	90
Counsellor	60	79		
Classroom teacher	59	78	55	72
(New) friends	58	76	61	80
Different teachers	53	70		

In the process of school choice, photo elicitation suggested that pupils considered their parents as the most important actors. However, during the interviews, it is important to note that they also mentioned the importance of their teachers, themselves, other family members and friends.

In sum, according to the participants, it appeared that the most important actors in the preparation process (i.e. school recommendation and school choice) were the pupils themselves, their parents and their classroom teacher. Further, findings across the photo elicitation and the interviews did not necessarily reflect identical emphases.

### *Participants' perceptions and assessment of the roles of actors in the preparatory process*

In the interviews, we identified patterns representing the roles of three actors, namely (1) the child, (2) the classroom teacher and (3) the parents. Within each pattern, we compared children with a vocational recommendation and those with an academic recommendation to explore to what extent these two groups of pupils may have different role perceptions (RQ3). Where relevant, we also distinguished patterns in the school recommendation process and those in the school choice process.

#### *The pupil*

We identified six patterns in the children's statements about their role in the preparation process (Table 3). These were: (1) 'To know what my school recommendation or school choice is', (2) 'To do nothing extra', (3) 'To study hard', (4) 'To make use of available resources', (5) 'To behave as the teacher wants' and (6) 'To talk about it at home'.

**Table 3.** Analysis of the semi-structured interviews: patterns identified ( $N = 25$ ).

Actors	Patterns	All pupils ( $N = 25$ )		Vocational group ('VMBO') ( $N = 15$ )		Academic group ('HAVO'/'VWO') ( $N = 10$ )	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
Pupils	1. To know what my school recommendation or school choice is	23	92	13	87	10	100
	2. To do nothing extra	17	68	12	80	5	50
	3. To study hard	16	64	10	67	6	60
	4. To make use of available resources	16	64	8	53	8	80
	5. To behave as the teacher wants	9	36	6	40	3	30
	6. To talk about it at home	8	32	4	27	4	40
Classroom teacher	1. Serves as a resource	20	80	12	80	8	80
	2. Labels pupils	15	60	9	60	6	60
	3. Does nothing	14	56	7	47	7	70
	4. Provides a lot of training and learning	11	44	6	40	5	50
Parents	1. Considers it our preparation process	15	60	7	47	8	80
	2. Wants the highest recommendation for us	9	36	5	33	4	40

The first pattern, labelled 'To know what my school recommendation or school choice is', is related to statements of pupils about their knowledge of their school recommendation or school choice well in advance. More specifically, pupils reported their *pre-school* recommendation or they reported the name or type of their secondary school. This pattern was observed in both school recommendation as school choice processes and was found in the answers of 23 pupils ( $n = 13$ , vocational group;  $n = 10$ , academic group) (Table 3). One of the pupils with an academic school recommendation reported: '*[I expect] Senior general education or pre-university education. Last year my teacher said that I was one of the five best pupils in class. She said we all have high scores and that we could go to the academic route in secondary education.*'

The second pattern, labelled 'To do nothing extra', is related to statements about not doing anything *extra* to prepare for the transition to secondary school. More specifically, statements referred to thinking it was too early to think about the preparation process, or thinking there was no point in doing anything extra. The pattern was found in the responses of 17 pupils ( $n = 12$ , vocational group;  $n = 5$ , academic group) (Table 3). Statements of pupils reporting no extra activities included, for example, '*it's too early*' (academic group), '*I don't pay much attention to it*' (vocational group) and '*you can't prepare for the recommendation*' (academic group). This pattern was mostly observed in the school choice process.

The third pattern, labelled 'To study hard', is related to statements about the instructional process in the final year of primary school. More specifically, statements referred to studying and practising for 'the CITO test', learning how the test is structured and what kinds of questions it includes, and taking previous 'CITO tests'. This pattern was found in the answers of 16 pupils, more specifically in the answers of 10 pupils in the vocational group and in 6 answers of pupils in the academic group (Table 3). One of the pupils with an academic recommendation reported: '*I'm really going to study a lot, I'm not going to play much, in fact, I'm not going to play at all.*' This pattern was only observed in the school recommendation process.

The fourth pattern, labelled 'To make use of available resources', is related to statements about the opportunities to get information from teachers, parents, other family members and acquaintances (e.g. '*a few days ago, a boy told me a few things about secondary school, I like that*'). More specifically, statements referred to going to secondary school open days, getting information from the Internet and getting information from others and support from resources (i.e. actors who give support and help) in the preparation process. This pattern was found in the responses of 16 pupils, specifically 8 pupils in the vocational group and 8 pupils in the academic group (Table 3). Some statements of pupils that illustrate this pattern include: '*There is a school orientation day. My mother is going with me to register for secondary school*' (vocational group) and '*I look for information on the internet, but in January, there's an open day and I'm going there*' (academic group). This pattern was mostly observed in the school choice process.

The fifth pattern, labelled 'To behave as the teacher wants', is related to statements about being insecure about how to behave in class. More specifically, statements referred to wondering about how to behave so that the teacher would have a good opinion about their general ability, which would lead to an accurate school recommendation. This pattern was mostly found in the responses of nine pupils ( $n = 6$ , vocational group;  $n = 3$ , academic group) (Table 3). One pupil in the vocational group said: '*I'm really nervous. I'm afraid I'll have a low score. I can't help it.*' Only a few children in the academic group mentioned that they were

nervous and insecure about their academic behaviour in the classroom. One of these pupils said: *'I try to pay attention in class and try to do my best'*. This pattern was mostly observed in the school recommendation process.

The sixth pattern, labelled 'To talk about it at home', is related to statements about the interaction between the pupil and his or her social resources. More specifically, statements referred to being able to discuss school recommendation and school choice with parents or others (e.g. siblings, acquaintances). This pattern was found in the comments of eight pupils: four pupils in the vocational group and similarly four in the academic group (Table 3). One of the children in the vocational group said: *'My parents say that I can do it, so I'll just have to show them I can do it'*. This pattern was mostly observed in the school choice process.

In sum, almost all pupils in group 8 reported on their expected start in secondary education by knowing their school recommendation or school choice (pattern 1). Pupils appeared to practise a lot (pattern 3) to hope to get high test scores and to use resources (pattern 4) to get information about choosing a secondary school. In terms of group emphases, it seemed from the analysis that pupils in the academic group tended to make use of their resources a little more often and seemed to be more active in the preparation process than those in the vocational group (pattern 2). It appeared that pupils in the vocational group seemed to be more insecure about their academic behaviour in class and its effect on their school recommendation (pattern 5). Finally, almost a third of the pupils talked about the preparation process at home (pattern 6).

### **The classroom teacher**

We identified four patterns in the children's perceptions about the role of the classroom teacher in the preparation process (Table 3): (1) 'Serves as a resource', (2) 'Labels pupils', (3) 'Does nothing' and (4) 'Provides a lot of training and learning'.

The first pattern, labelled 'Serves as a resource', is related to statements about the teacher giving information. More specifically, it refers to informing pupils about a particular school, going to open days with them, informing them about how to deal with the test and giving them tests to practise it and giving information about their school recommendation. This pattern was observed in the comments of 20 pupils; specifically, 12 pupils in the vocational group and 8 pupils in the academic group (Table 3). For example, children in the vocational group reported that their teacher told them stories about daily life at secondary school, about her/his own experiences with a particular secondary school and his/her own experience with the transition to secondary school. Some pupils in the academic group mentioned that their classroom teacher went to open days with them. This pattern was observed in both the school recommendation and the school choice process.

The second pattern, named 'Labels pupils', refers to the children's perceptions of how the classroom teacher appeared to identify them regarding their working attitude and cognitive abilities. This pattern was observed in the answers of 15 pupils ( $n = 9$ , vocational group;  $n = 6$ , academic group) (Table 3). A pupil in the vocational group said: *'if you have a low score, the teacher works less with you, because the teacher thinks that you cannot handle the educational track'*. Another pupil stated: *'the teacher assesses us and tells us whether our grades have improved or not'* (academic group). Some pupils in the academic group thought that classroom behaviour and gender played a role in the process of school recommendation or school choice: *'if you are mean or unkind to the teacher and the other kids, the teacher won't recommend*

a specific educational track' and another pupil stated *'I now have a vocational recommendation, but the teacher says that I'm a girl with brains, and she thinks that I can do better. She thinks I can do the academic track'*. This pattern was mostly observed in the school recommendation process.

The third pattern, called 'Does nothing', is related to perceptions about teacher inactivity in this regard. More specifically, it refers to perceptions of not giving any information about the characteristics of different secondary schools and not talking about school recommendation or school choice. This pattern was observed in the answers 14 pupils, more specifically in the answers of 7 pupils in the vocational group and in the answers of 7 pupils in the academic group. For example: *'the teacher hasn't said anything about the process. She only gives information to pupils with low educational tracks'* (vocational group) and *'we only get our school recommendation and we have to look for a school by ourselves'* (academic group). This pattern was observed more often in the school choice process than in school recommendation process.

The fourth pattern, labelled 'Provides a lot of training and studying', is related to extra activities. More specifically, it refers to perceptions related to giving homework and practicing for the test. This pattern was observed in the responses of 11 pupils: 6 pupils in the vocational group and 5 pupils in the academic group (Table 3). For example, one of the children stated: *'The teacher uses old CITO tests and gives us difficult questions to prepare'* (academic group). This pattern was mostly observed in the school recommendation process, as the test is used to determine the secondary track.

### **The parents**

As mentioned previously, during the photo elicitation and the interviews, children acknowledged that their parents were important actors in the preparatory process for the transition to secondary school. It is therefore interesting that so few pupils (see Table 3) seemed able to explain the role of their parents in this process in detail. Only two patterns were observed in the stories of the pupils, namely (1) 'Considers it our preparation process' and (2) 'Wants the highest recommendation for us'.

The pattern labelled 'Considers it our preparation process' is related to parental attitude. More specifically, it refers to statements that parents want the best for their children and allow them to choose a secondary school themselves. This pattern was observed in the comments of 15 pupils: 7 pupils in the vocational group and 4 in the academic group (Table 3). One pupil reported: *'My mother said that I can choose my own school, but I want to know how the school looks like inside and whether class sizes are large or not'*. This pattern was observed in the school choice process.

The pattern labelled 'Wants the highest recommendation for us' was observed in the responses of nine pupils, of whom five were in the vocational group and four in the academic group (Table 3). This pattern referred to parents' high expectations of their children. According to the participants' comments, most parents preferred their children to follow an academic track rather than a vocational one. For example, one of the pupils reported that their mother said the following: *'I hope you don't get a school recommendation for vocational education (VMBO), because that's bad'*. This pattern was observed in the school recommendation process.

## Further discussion

The current study aimed to provide insight into the experiences of children with a migrant background as they prepare to transition to secondary education in a context of relatively poor urban areas. The primary goal of this study was to examine how Dutch pupils with a migrant background perceive preparation for the transition from primary school to secondary school. The study seeks to contribute to the research area of educational transitions from primary to secondary by focusing on this particular group of pupils and describing their experiences and feelings in the preparation process.

### *Actors in the preparatory process: pupils, teachers and parents*

Chiming with earlier studies (Coffey 2013; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Zeedyk et al. 2003), our findings suggest that, according to the pupils, the most important actors in the preparation process for transition to secondary school are the pupils themselves, their parents and their classroom teacher. It seemed that the preparation process brought about mixed feelings for pupils. Focusing on the pupil as an actor, the pattern 'to know what my school recommendation or school choice is' was apparent in both the vocational and the academic groups. Evidently, pupils used their own personal resources by studying hard (pattern 3) or making use of available resources (e.g. teacher and parents) (pattern 4).

Our findings show that teachers are important actors in the preparation process. In our study, children with an academic recommendation seemed to be more aware of this fact: the patterns 'does nothing' and 'provides a lot of training and learning' were more dominant among this group; however, the scope and nature of this small-scale qualitative study mean that generalisation is not possible: further research would be necessary to determine whether the dominance of these patterns points to substantive differences between groups.

In the current study, it was not easy to grasp the pupils' perceptions of the role of parents. Although children considered their parents to be important in the process, it was difficult for them to explain their role in detail. Only two patterns emerged: one related to the recommendation process, the other related to the school choice process. We observed a difference in emphasis between the two groups in the pattern 'Considers it our preparation process'. Children in the academic group tended to say that their parents thought it was important that they made their own secondary school choice. Both groups said that their parents did not want them to go to a vocational school ('VMBO') because of the negative image associated with this track.

In the Netherlands, the preparatory process distinguishes between the recommendation process and the school choice process. However, our analysis suggests that this distinction was not always that clear cut from the pupils' perspective. It seems that the recommendation and choice process is an interactive process in which various actors influence each other. This interactive process can be seen as the social-cultural context of children where the relevant actors (themselves, teachers and parents) give meaning to the preparation process. Therefore, this draws attention to the need to reflect on the interactive nature of the preparation process and to include the perspectives of the other relevant actors as well (cf. Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2006).



## *Implications for research and practice*

To support children in the preparation process, it seems important to maximise the number of resources. Teachers and parents could play a crucial role in this: however, they may not be the only actors in the preparation process. A report of the Education Council (Inspectie van Onderwijs 2014), for example, mentions the importance of the school leader and the special educational needs coordinator. The fact that the children did not mention these actors does not, of course, necessarily imply that they were not important or considered to be so. Children are unlikely to have a complete overview of the activities and the relevant actors in the preparation process. To obtain an integral view of the preparation process, it is, therefore, necessary for research to not only consider the child's perspective, but also the perspectives of other actors in the process. This will also provide information to help understand how best to organise support in the preparation process. The importance of these actors has been suggested in other research as well (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; Newman and Blackburn 2002).

Because children view themselves as one of the most important actors, a future study on personal and social factors (e.g. motivation and self-efficacy) may bring valuable insights. A study on how children see themselves, on their personal interests and on their ideas regarding the future may add to our understanding of children's motives and need for support in the preparation process.

## *Limitations*

An important limitation of the current small-scale, qualitative study concerns the role of migrant background and the generalisability of the results. The aim was to provide insight in the experiences of children from migrant backgrounds in the recommendation and choice process. Because our sample was small and only included pupils from migrant backgrounds, generalisation and also the comparison of the preparation process of pupils from migrant backgrounds and those from non-migrant backgrounds was not within its scope. A future study, set up as a comparative study examining migrant and non-migrant pupils in schools in relatively poor areas and in more affluent areas, would be a valuable area of exploration.

It is also important to be mindful of the importance of teachers of secondary schools as actors (Ashton 2008; Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Newman and Blackburn 2002; Zeedyk et al. 2003). Further research in this regard may uncover ways for secondary schools to help pupils develop a realistic image of what life is like at secondary schools.

## *Conclusion*

This small-scale qualitative study suggests that pupils with migrant backgrounds in their final year of primary school perceived the important actors in the preparation process for the transition to secondary education to be the pupils themselves, their parents and their teachers. Children described their own role in the preparatory process as practising and studying hard to enter secondary school at the highest possible level. Both teachers and parents were considered valuable resources for pupils in the preparatory process. Although the study design does not permit generalisation, it was evident that some patterns in the



data were more dominant amongst the pupils preparing to follow an academic track, whilst other patterns were more evident amongst pupils preparing to follow a vocational track; further large-scale investigation of these patterns is recommended. The study highlights the need for all children to experience optimal support in their preparatory process for the transition to secondary school.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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