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LATER, I CAN STILL BE WHAT I WANT TO BE. STATUS, SELF-ESTEEM AND ASPIRATIONS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION, WITH A FOCUS ON PUPILS IN NON-ACADEMIC TRACKS

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the question whether the perceived distance between the low status of the school that is attended by the pupils, the high ambitions of these pupils, and the feasibility of achieving these goals could lead to the total evaporation of any motivation to do well at school. Is educational success of pupils in the lowest level of secondary education hampered by the realization that one’s chances to reach a highly respected social position are very limited? In this article, we, firstly, study how adolescents evaluate people in distinctive social positions and to what extent they are aware of status distinctions. Secondly, what are the expectations and ambitions of youngsters and how do they describe their own characteristics when asked to respond to questions, such as “who are you?” and “where do you locate yourself in society?” Thirdly, we analyze their views on society, their self-images and career expectations. We want to investigate whether these images and projections differ in correlation with their level and type of education.

1. Introduction

In truly meritocratic societies, everybody has the same opportunity to attain a higher level of education, income, and status. Parental class, gender, or ethnicity should have no influence at all. Only differences in ability should decide who becomes a winner or a loser in the social mobility game. The combination of the political objective of equality of opportunities and the principle that all people are of equal value creates a somewhat paradoxical situation, since, to use an Orwellian phrase, intelligent people appear to be more equal than others. Obviously, modern societies attach a higher value to academic skills than to other talents and skills. How do intellectually less-gifted pupils cope with this paradox? What is the difference in the perception of or experience with social equality between youngsters in pre-vocational schools and youngsters in higher levels of secondary education?

The tension between the ideal and the real world becomes painfully clear when children who dream of a highly respected profession are allocated to pre-vocational schools that prepare pupils for lower-level jobs. Not all children have the ambition to become a lawyer, surgeon, or professor, maybe because they prefer other types of jobs or because they have great difficulties with learning from books and mastering theoretical concepts. Yet, in many discussions with pupils at pre-vocational schools, it turns out that they would have like to be more intelligent and to be allocated to go to a school that prepares them for higher education. These talks also reveal that they tend to look down upon people that do manual labor. Unfortunately, these adolescents often show that they still hold on to aspirations that are rather unrealistic in view of their educational career. Robert Merton already pointed at the friction between the most highly valued goals and the perceived or experienced limitations to achieve these goals. Hence, he introduced his strain theory. When people can reach highly valued social goals with legitimate means, then it is easy to conform to society, but when you lack the means to realize these goals, this could engender deviant behavior in the form of (illegal) innovation, rebellion, ritualism, or retreat.

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2. Theory

2.1. The importance of status maintenance or status improvement

According to Lenski\(^3\), maintaining or improving one’s status is the second most important motivation for action, after sheer survival and health, though very few people would admit this. In our society, which highly values equal rights and opportunities, it is far from easy to discuss social status, although class distinctions play a prominent role in everyday life. Differences in pay checks and immaterial rewards are quite strongly connected with levels of education. They form an affirmation of the social value ascribed to persons who achieve upward mobility. As long as there are more winners than losers, the meritocratic system is perceived as a just social system, particularly among the winners\(^4\). In a society with an ever-growing share of people achieving higher levels of education and with a labor market that increasingly demands higher levels of education, people that fail in education are labeled as failures – full stop. In a society that hails successes, school dropouts and other low achievers have a very hard time to visualize a respectable position for themselves\(^5\).

Experiences of social exclusion and a lack of perspective for the future can engender self-exclusion. Studies show that social exclusion can produce emotional suffering, social indifference, and self-exclusion\(^6\). A negative view of one’s future can lead to dropping out from school long before the exam period. It also heightens the chance of embarking on a life of crime\(^7\). Such alternatives might be chosen because they might offer an opportunity to gain a high income and respect, albeit the respect of other criminals. “Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen – as a full human being whose presence matters. When a society treats the mass of people in this way,

singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect, as though there were not enough of this precious substance to go around. Like many famines, this scarcity is man-made; unlike food, respect costs nothing. Why, then, should it be in short supply?”

2.2. Social identity, social status, and self-respect

According to the “social identity theory”\(^9\), the upward driver is one of the strongest for the “social self” to distinguish oneself positively. The characteristics of the groups to which one belongs are reflected on oneself. Individuals derive their social identity from this group. Belonging to a socially respected category renders a positive contribution to one’s social identity. Belonging to a less respected social group has a negative effect. Lab experiments show that belonging to a high or a low status group produces different reactions under different circumstances\(^10\). Most people in a low status group will try to join a higher status group. But, in general this interest in upward mobility only arises when this appears to be feasible. We speak of relative deprivation when someone thinks that he should belong to a higher status group, but is not admitted to this group. The more significant the occurrence of relative deprivation is, the stronger the inclination to reject the norms of this group is. In the relative deprivation theory – a concept first used in The American Soldier\(^11\) – the accessibility of a higher status, is an important determinant for (dis) satisfaction with one’s social position. The essence of this concept is that feelings of deprivation emerge because a “similar other” has obtained something that you don’t have, though you think that you are also entitled to it. This generates envy and feelings of injustice. Experimental studies show that individuals are more strongly inclined to distinguish between an in-group and an out-group when they have little chance of becoming part of a high status group\(^12\). Lack of trust in the chance of becoming a respected citizen can lead to self-exclusion and a “choice” for school drop out and a career in crime. The bigger the perceived distance to the out-group of respected citizens, the bigger the preference for the members of the in-group and their illegal actions.

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12 Social Identity..., op.cit.
2.3. Self-esteem

All people need a fair amount of self-esteem. Therefore, they avoid contact with people who are better achievers. A good level of self-esteem and self-respect is needed for coping with the fact that other people seem to fare far better than you. Most people have an inbuilt mechanism to evaluate themselves positively. If some of one’s objectives appear hard to reach, most people will cope by lowering their expectations and setting more feasible goals. Nevertheless, some people have to cope with far greater setbacks than others. For them it can become very hard to uphold a positive self-image. People from lower class origins or marginalized groups can find it especially difficult to deal with this and might end up with a negative feeling about their achievements or lack thereof.

Research shows that there is a correlation between the level of social inequality and the level of crime, drug addiction, and teenage pregnancy.\textsuperscript{13} Pisa studies show a correlation with school dropout. Countries with a less skewed income distribution have lower rates of crime and drug abuse. One of the main determinants of this is the higher level of competition. In these societies, there is more to win or to lose. Only the happy few can reach and hold onto top positions. Members of the underclass have nobody to compare themselves with in a favorable way, unless they start to reject elite and middle class people, including their values and lifestyle.

Social stratification is a social fact. It exists in the perception of real people and it triggers particular emotions. It is a response to the human need for order. Traditionally, this order was a ranking order that was clear to everyone, because there was hardly any social mobility. Your ranking was determined before you were born. Children followed their parents in every way. In modern, open societies things are quite different. There is upward and downward mobility, though the upper – and middle classes are rather well equipped to mitigate downward mobility when their children are in danger of failing at school. When lower class children don’t do well or lack motivation, their parents can hardly help them, because they did not do well at school too.

3. General remarks on methods

We wanted to analyze the way in which adolescents experience their relative social position. Therefore, we opted for a qualitative approach from the insider perspective. In the Netherlands, only very few qualitative studies have been carried out that use the same insider perspective\textsuperscript{14}. Most studies in this field aim at describing and analyzing objective outcomes, developments, and facts that are deemed relevant for policymakers\textsuperscript{15}. Some studies are based on a combination of both perspectives\textsuperscript{16}.

For this study we depart from a wider scope and a more theoretical perspective in order to reveal deeply hidden social processes and factors that play a role here. Therefore, we focus on the perspective of the youngsters. Touraine\textsuperscript{17} asserts that the meaning of social actions must be explained from the social interactions of the subjects in relation to the system of norms and values that prevails in their social environment. In Touraine’s view, sociologists “[…] must give a voice to those who don’t have a voice”.

Another weakness in the study of school drop out and problematic youth is that most studies focus on the persons that have actually dropped out or have shown deviant behavior. But it is just as important to study the adolescents that did not drop out and did not regress into problematic behavior despite the fact that they originate from families that sociologists usually classify as lower class, as an ethnic minority, or as families at risk. How did these youngsters cope with the experience of social inequality and limited educational opportunities? Why and how did they accept and grapple their limited chances for a successful school career? Do they have fewer ambitions and lower aspirations than pupils that are successful in school? Do they have a different view at chances and opportunities? Are they using cognitive techniques to counter the realization that they are attending schools at the lowest level of secondary education? Do they have a different view at status


\textsuperscript{17} A. Touraine, The Self-Production of Society, Chicago–London 1977.
hierarchies? We believe that studying these questions from the insider perspective renders a better insight to the factors that play a significant role in the way teenagers accept or reject their present and future social position.

In this study, we treat ethnic origin just like any other variable; we don’t assume that a foreign background necessarily implies poverty and low attainment. Also, children from lower class families and single parent families are overrepresented in statistics of negative social indicators\textsuperscript{18}. Studies that use multivariate analysis show that the direct effect of foreign origin is relatively small\textsuperscript{19}.

The Dutch school system is a highly stratified. After primary school, at the age of 12, pupils are allocated to different types of secondary education. The main divide is between vocational education and general education. Roughly stated, children with below average cognitive abilities attend a VMBO school that give them basic training in general and vocational skills. Children with above average abilities attend a HAVO or a VWO school. HAVO and VWO are more focused on intellectual knowledge and skills, such as mathematics and foreign languages. HAVO schools prepare children for further studies at a school for so-called higher vacations that don’t require academic schooling at a university level. VWO schools offer a program that prepares them for a study at a university.

The allocation of pupils to these three levels of education depends on their results on a national scholastic aptitude test in eighth grade and the recommendation of the eighth grade teacher. Based on his/her experience with a particular pupils during the last year of primary school, the teacher states what he/she thinks would be the best type of secondary education for the student. Though these test scores and the recommendations of teachers are strongly correlated and fairly good predictors, they can still lead to incorrect allocations. Therefore, the first year in secondary education acts as a trial year, after which attending a lower or higher level of education still is possible. After this year, 12.5% climbs up to a higher level and 11 percent retrogress to a lower type of secondary education\textsuperscript{20}.

For this study, we have observed and interviewed groups of adolescents, aged 15 to 17. We wanted to gauge to what extent differences in their experience with and their opinion about social status and social position are related to their type of education. In other words, do VMBO pupils have different views and personal


experiences than pupils from HAVO and VWO schools and how do they cope with these differences?

The research group consists of 177 girls and boys. 96 pupils attend various types of one VMBO in Rotterdam; 41 are HAVO students, and 40 doing VWO. All of the students attend schools in either Rotterdam or Barendrecht. The students we interviewed come from a variety of social backgrounds. In general there is strong tendency for VWO schools to attract pupils from the middle classes, whereas VMBO schools mostly attract children from lower classes. For this study, we looked for schools with a socially and ethnically mixed student body.

Basically, this study is an explorative observation study, supplemented with in-depth interviews and questionnaires with open-ended questions. The boys and girls that participated in this study had to comment on photos of people from various social classes and ethnic backgrounds that find themselves in distinctive social situations (see next section). We have transcribed all the comments, conclusions, and classifications made by these pupils when they were looking at these photos and carrying out the assignment to arrange them in a circle representing society. We deliberately opted for a circle and not for a ladder or triangle, because these latter forms would immediately trigger the idea of a top-down hierarchy. We also asked them to answer open-ended questions about the way they view themselves, their abilities and skills and how they see their future. Finally, we held open interviews with a number of these respondents in which they could discuss their school experiences and career expectations. This combination of research methods gives us a better opportunity to investigate whether and in what way VMBO students differ from the students of the other school types. In particular, we focused on statements about hierarchies and classification of humans and the criteria they used when classifying people. This could be statements about social justice and injustice, opportunities or the lack there of, remarks about ethnicity, or comments on their own status and position in society.

4. The photo elicitation method

The relative social position is the status one experiences in comparison with other humans. Who those others are depends on one’s level of aspirations and the status assigned to the position of others. The attribution of status is often a subconscious process, which is difficult to talk about since the social hierarchy is a loaded topic. It can easily arouse embarrassment. However, we want to check whether adolescents use hierarchies when classifying people even when they are not explicitly
asked to do so. Therefore, we needed to develop an indirect method that would not automatically steer them to a hierarchical approach. Yet, it was necessary that they would create some model of the social structure when asked to compare various categories of people.

The choice for using photos is based on the idea that photographs offer more clarity than text, but also because photos give more room for personal interpretations and descriptions. Visual images have a more direct impact on the ability to generate associative thought than the mental images that are generated by written text. Another argument for making this choice is that some of the participants have quite some difficulty with reading long and complicated texts. This might produce bias. Looking at photos and orally verbalizing an interpretation of their meaning does not raise these kinds of problems. Thus we can make more valid and reliable comparisons, despite different levels of education. Students can deduce several aspects with one view, whereas in verbal descriptions all different aspects have to be read in the sequence that is presented by the text. With photos, pupils can simultaneously see that the people on the photo are old or young, poor or rich, lazy or active, friendly or unfriendly, belong to the same race or not, and so on.

The photos have been selected by a small group of people from Rotterdam. In order to create an objective set of photos that offers a cross section of society. We started with a set of 90 photos of well-known and anonymous people of Rotterdam that find themselves in different situations. We asked 8 men and 9 women of different ages and social positions to indicate whether a photo belonged to the economic, cultural, or political dimension of society and whether they were representative of the lower, middle, upper class, or social status group. We then chose 23 photos, which most observers agreed about their dimension and social class or status. These photos clearly represent a wide range of familiar people, situations, and scenes from Rotterdam. These photos with familiar scenes from their local society might have enhanced the relevancy of the research for the participants in our study.

The subjects were told that they could arrange these photos in a circle, on a large piece of paper, representing society, wherever they thought best. They were even allowed to put the photos outside the circle. One by one, the photos were presented to groups of three pupils of the same school type. Further explanations of how they were supposed to arrange the photos haven’t been given. It was entirely up to them. We only instructed them to look at the photos and to put them somewhere on the sheet of paper. Later we asked why they arranged the photos in a particular way. Their answers have been recorded on tape, transcribed and analyzed.
The methods developed and combined for this study were inspired by the following methods: the Self-Anchoring Scale\textsuperscript{21}, the Twenty Statement Method\textsuperscript{22}, and Hardop Denken\textsuperscript{23}. The photo elicitation method has been tested in a small group of 25 adolescents. This evocative method stimulates and structures discussions about the issue at hand without steering them in a specific direction. To enhance the validity of our study, we also did open interviews with 20 students that participated in the photo elicitation. During these interviews, we once more discussed several matters that had been raised during the photo elicitation and in the individual questionnaires.

5. Outcomes

5.1. Hierarchy

Our first research question was whether the pupils would arrange the photos in a hierarchical way, and if so, how?

![Figure 1. Hierarchical aspects (percentages)](image)

We found a significant difference between the students from the three school types or educational levels. Almost half the VMBO students (47%) did not construct


a hierarchical order. For HAVO and VWO students, these percentages are only 34 and 28. Is it possible to interpret these variations by a disparity in social awareness or does this hint at selective perception? Further inspection of our data revealed that VMBO students were well aware of the existence of social hierarchy. They knew which factors influence one’s social position. Later, when asked to locate their own position in this hierarchical context, they often referred to social status. But when they first had been asked to describe their own social position within the context of a social circle, they ignored hierarchical concepts. Therefore, we think that the distinction between the students of different educational levels is produced by selective perception. Social psychology describes selective perception as a mechanism that helps to maintain one’s self esteem. This boils down to the fact that one perceives the world in such a way that it does not reflect you in a negative and unflattering light. VMBO students have little to gain from social hierarchies, because they know that their type of education is held in low regard and will not lead to a highly respected profession. VWO students, on the other hand, know that their educational career opens up very good opportunities to achieve a high status and income. They have nothing to fear from the existence of a status hierarchy. As long as they do well at school, they will be positively regarded. The selective perception hypothesis is supported by the outcomes of our analysis of the remarks made by the students during the photo elicitation session and the in-depth interviews. VMBO students who referred to a hierarchy often showed little respect for or even strong animosity against persons that appeared to be highly educated. Actually, some VMBO pupils consciously arranged the photos in a reversed hierarchy; they made clear that manual laborers with tough physical jobs deserved more respect and a higher status than the people with university degrees and an apparently easy job.

Only a few of the HAVO students and not anyone of the VWO students made this kind of negative reactions towards persons in high status jobs and academic professions. HAVO students form an in-between group. This corresponds with their intermediate status in the educational hierarchy. Whenever HAVO students mentioned a social hierarchy, it was in relation to income and level of education. 73% of VWO students produced a model of the social hierarchy that most people have in mind when thinking about the structure of society, using the degree of responsibility or importance usually ascribed to certain social, economic, or political positions. Students in pre-university education (VWO) see themselves as the future elite. For them, the political dimension appears to be most relevant. Often, they also mentioned education and income, but always in connection with the perceived social importance of specific professions. When asked to arrange the
photos in a circle, most of them managed to turn it into a simple hierarchy, creating a top segment, a middle range, and a bottom segment. In some cases, the photos were arranged in a concentric way, with the most important people in the center and the people or functions they deemed less important in the outer fringe of the circle.

5.2. Aspects of work situations

The photo arrangements regarding work situations show a significant difference between types of education. These variations are in line with our selective perception hypothesis. The graph below shows which aspects have been mentioned and discussed by the students.

![Figure 2. Aspects of work situations (percentages)](image)

VMBO pupils often mention aspects related to the execution of work, such as working with your brain or your hands, or doing physically heavy or light manual labor. HAVO pupils talk less about work and its social function. VWO students focus on the social importance of jobs and, secondly, on the level of income. These patterns clearly show which issues are most relevant for these three types of students. VWO students take it for granted that they will go to university and become successful. Many VMBO pupils are in denial that their prospects for having a good job and a high income are bleak. These pupils more frequently make remarks about the hard work demanded by certain jobs. They also mention that you need diplomas to attain a good job that doesn’t require a lot of elbow grease. When looking at a photo depicting manual labor, they often made the assumption that this person
hadn’t finished his education or did not have any school diploma. We did not re-
ister similar remarks with HAVO and VWO students. This may be because they
don’t fear that they might end up doing “donkey work”.

5.3. Personal social position

We were also interested in the way pupils located themselves in the social spec-
trum. Therefore, in the second round, pupils were individually given the same se-
ries of photos, now in the form of small stickers. They were asked to arrange them
again. Finally, we asked them to put a specific sticker, representing them, on the
sheet. Then, we asked them to write down why they placed themselves in that
particular spot. This revealed how they view their own social position, now or in
the future. With which group, class, or type of people do they associate themselves?
To what degree are they aware of their social position? We learned that there cer-
tainly was a clear awareness of their position as they saw this.

![Figure 3. Personal social position (percentages)](image)

Strikingly, HAVO and VMBO pupils associate themselves more strongly with
being students than the VWO pupils, though the latter are clearly on the fast lane
to university (photo 2 and 16; see appendix). For example, one VMBO respond-
ent (39) said: “Because I am still at school I deliberately placed my self near the
teacher and the students; for later I can still be what I want to be”. Respondent
41 (VMBO): “I have chosen this location because I am the future of this country,
just like the other students”. Respondent 49 (VMBO): “I have put myself in the
center of the school for I still am at school and that is my future. After that, I will
decide where I want to end up”. Respondent 68 (VMBO) said: “For I want to have a good job later and want to go on studying”.

The strongest trend in the statements of VMBO pupils is: “Later, I will still have many options”. They like to identify with students in higher education and see getting their VMBO diploma as the first step towards further and higher education. This perception was also reflected in the way they reacted to the photo with the man behind the machine (photo 11). They often assumed that this man had not finished his education with a certificate. For them this photo depicted a doomsday scenario – it exemplified what would happen if you completely failed education. This is because VMBO pupils see more examples of educational failure and dropouts. Moreover, there are quite a few VMBO pupils who have experienced educational failure the hard way – by being demoted from a higher level of education. For VMBO pupils, failing school is a very realistic image. They know that VMBO is the lowest level of secondary education. If you fail here, you are doomed to land on the bottom of society. So, it is understandable that they want to look the other way and strive for upward mobility. They fully realize that the only route in that direction is by prolonging their career as a student. VWO pupils don’t share this fear. They just expect to be successful in higher education. The statements of HAVO pupils are more moderate and more neutral than those of their VWO peers. They often mention a specific job type or level. Their teachers told us that quite a few HAVO pupils still fear being demoted to VMBO. Such a setback would also shock many parents. A Dutch-Afghan pupil told us that he had hidden the fact of his demotion for almost a year. However, the truth was revealed when his parents saw the new books for the new school year. His parents demanded that he would never tell this to his younger brother and the rest of the family.

Life is different at the top. Many VWO pupils mention that they will “contribute something to society”, that they “will improve society”. Respondent M (R. 123, gymnasium, a Dutch-Turkish boy) writes: “I think that I belong to the group with high status jobs, because I am at a gymnasium school (= VWO, plus courses in Latin and Greek). Later, I might even end up in the top-layer of society”. Further on, he also stated that he wanted to change the world; that he wanted to turn all present-day negative points into positive ones. None of the VMBO students expressed such a challenging ambition.

Some VWO students chose a more modest position for themselves and refer to their present status, like respondent 125 (gymnasium, Dutch-Turkish boy): “I have

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placed myself with the largest group in society, because we are not rich and I recognize my neighborhood in some of the pictures”. What he really meant became clear when we checked what he said when he arranged the photos together with two other pupils.

(R 125): “You will always meet this kind of people when you walk around (he points at the lower stratum). You don’t often see these other ones when you look out of the window (he points at people at the top stratum). You don’t see these rich ones very often; not here in Rotterdam”. Question from the researcher: “Do you see that group (pointing towards photos with “the lower ones”) more often than that group (pointing at the “higher status ones”)?”.

R 123 says: “In wealthy suburbs like Hillegersberg, Schiebroek, and Kralingen, there is no place for us. That’s why we don’t see these kind of people very often, because here the majority is black, to put it that way”.

At the school where we did our research, there are quite a few pupils who will be the first member in their family that will be attending university. They are strongly aware of the sharp distinction between the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy. It is the other way around for VMBO pupils that come from families with parents, brothers, or sisters with a high level of education. For that reason, these social descenders said, sighing deeply, that they found themselves “stupid”.

Some VMBO pupils manifested hostility towards academic people or persons in high status jobs. These feelings might be aroused by the idea that they form a threat against their self-esteem. Goffman refers to such mechanisms as “cooling the mark out”.25 This American expression was used by conmen to comfort their victims so that they would not take revenge. “Cooling out the mark” means that the victim learns to accept his/her loss. These mechanisms can also be observed in the school system. Many pupils have to cope with strong disappointments when they learn that they don’t have the ability to succeed in higher levels of education, which might imply that they will not be able to get the job they had been dreaming of. Some strategies to protect the level of self-esteem are:

- Glorification of one’s group and rejecting the other group that disparages the members of your group.26
- Act as if your marginalized position is your personal deliberate choice.
- Believe that this lower position is only temporary.
- Emphasize the negative sides of the better social position as well as the positive sides of the inferior position.


– Euphemize your unfavorable position so that it appears to be less problematic.
– Exit or dropout\(^{27}\).
– Rebel\(^{28}\).
– Strongly exaggerate the few successes you have achieved\(^{29}\).

### 5.4. Expectations and goals

The question “What do you want to achieve?” generated different answers from the pupils of the various types of education. It stands to reason that most opt for a job or profession that fits their present or prospective level of education. But, it was quite a surprise to learn from several interviews that many VMBO pupils opt for further education at a school for higher vocational training and a job that fits this high level of education. To reach this goal they not only have to do well at VMBO, but also at MBO, the middle level of vocational education, before they can enter HBO, the highest level of non-academic vocational education. Educational research shows that the odds are against them.

![Figure 4. What do you want to achieve? (percentages)](image)

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\(^{29}\) E. Goffman, On Cooling the Mark…, op.cit.
VMBO pupils mention personal or social objectives less frequently than HAVO and VWO students. Why is that? And why are VMBO students more often opting for starting their own business or for the development of a very specific talent? We coded the following type of answers as a personal objective: a nice life, a nice family, does not matter what as long as I enjoy it, or a job in which I can interact pleasantly with other people. The “using my talents” responses, such as “I want to become a professional soccer player”, “I want to play in a theatre”, or “I want to become a fashion designer” have been coded as a “talent”. The category “starting your own business” speaks for itself. We have merged this latter category with the category “talent”. We have coded all answers in the category “a good job” as long as they did not mention elements such as “sociable”, “nice”, or “fun”. The core meaning is a reference to the importance of the status of a job. For instance, “Later, I want to have a job that has a high status or that gives you power”. Also included are referrals to a good income. The category “social objective” contains statements like: “helping people in poor countries”, “I want to become the prime minister”, et cetera.

Envisioning your future as an owner of a business or as a top talent in sport, music, or theatre could also be interpreted as a personal or social objective. The difference between the answer patterns arises because HAVO and VWO students argue from the good educational position they already have, a position that promises economic welfare. VMBO students realize that they haven’t achieved much, yet. Their answers reflect the idea that they first have to attain a good social position, before they can be “someone”. This requires perseverance and initiative. To the question “What is required to achieve this?” VMBO pupils respond: “that I give what it takes”, “That I do my utmost best” or “That I have to take the right steps”. VWO pupils respond as follows: “That I get my diploma and go on studying”. Though there is no statistically significant difference between the responses of both categories; the slight difference in nuance is understandable in view of the most probable position these groups will attain.

5.5. Who are you?

There is a great deal of overlap between all of the educational levels in response to the “Who are you?” and “Please write down 10 things about yourself” questions. In all three categories, there is a strong emphasis on positive traits and behavior. Only 1 in 7 mentions ethnic origin as one of the answers to the question, “Who am I?”. This outcome did surprise us. About half of the adolescents that filled out the questionnaire have parents that were born abroad, which reflects the demograph-
ic situation of Rotterdam. Later, when asked about the lack of references to their ethnic origin the answer always was, “But, the issue is who you are and not what you are”. Or, “If you wanted to hear that then you should have asked us directly about our religion or national origin”. Often, these answers were given with a reproachful undertone, or gave a hint of wariness, boredom, and irritation. It was as if the respondents wanted to say, “Do we have to discuss that old issue again?”. Apparently, they are fed up with being judged by these labels, even when they are meant in a positive way. A Dutch-Surinamese HAVO student (R 106) told us that she felt insulted by a hospital doctor when he said that she was a smart girl because she attended a HAVO school. “He would not have made that remark if I had been white”, she said. Being of foreign descent is a sensitive thing, but, at the same time, it is also the most common thing, especially in Rotterdam. There, half of the youngsters come from a migrant family. The only burden felt is caused by the comments and judgments of other people. This affects their self-esteem.

As far as we could tell, ethnic origin did not play a significant role in the way respondents reacted to our study or survey questions. By contrast, there was a striking difference between the three levels of education. To the “Who am I?” question, three quarters of VMBO pupils (74%) could not produce 10 different answers. Only one third of the HAVO pupils and less than a quarter of VWO pupils failed to do so. A quarter of VMBO pupils could only provide five answers.

Although the numbers of answers differs significantly between school types, this is not so for the type of answers. The large majority of answers, such as “I am a nice person, etc.” reflect a positive self-image. Therefore, we will not discuss this issue any further and delve deeper into the possible reasons for the striking difference in the number of answers given. The most likely explanation is that VMBO pupils are less skilled at expressing themselves in writing, but it could also be interpreted as a lower level of self-confidence and self-esteem. We observed that thinking about and writing down these answers did take a lot of effort for VMBO pupils. Several of them asked whether they really had to think of 10 different descriptions of themselves. When asked to answer “What are your abilities?”, many VMBO pupils sighed heavily and asked whether it was permissible to mention things they could not do. Some pupils expressed the feeling of not being able to do anything.

5. Conclusion

We conclude that adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17 are well aware of the phenomenon of social stratification. In their view, the level of education and the
degree to which people add something to society are the two dimensions that are most important. Cultural differences and differences in lifestyle are deemed to be less significant and, if mentioned, then always in connection to economic position and social status. Our study showed that there was a significant difference in the way students from different types of schools approached and valued social stratification. VMBO students classify people in hierarchical ways less frequently than HAVO students. The latter meanwhile do this less often than VWO students. This holds true when VMBO students describe their position. They appear to be more strongly focused on what people do and under which circumstances they find themselves. It is our hypothesis that this is caused by selective perception and the proclivity to maintain one’s self esteem.

People need to see themselves in a positive way. Therefore, students in lower levels of education distance themselves from other people who achieve more at school or in society at large. Psychologists have shown that the need for a positive self image and self-respect is a universal human characteristic. Enhancing one’s self esteem and self-respect is necessary to cope with a potential negative self-awareness by observing other adolescents that achieve more in education. One way of coping is selective perception. We found that VMBO and HAVO pupils were more strongly inclined to see themselves as students, now, or in the near future. VWO pupils have a 100% chance of becoming university students. They described their future position as somewhere “in the center of society”, meaning that they are going to render a valuable contribution to the wider society. They have a very positive self-esteem and are quite sure that they will achieve a good social position. HAVO and VMBO pupils show greater insecurity. VMBO pupils know that successfully graduating from a VMBO school does not suffice for successful upward mobility. It is a first step only. Hence, they put their hopes in further education or in setting up their own business. For them, classifying themselves as students is a nice way of making clear that they have the intention to achieve a higher social status without having to position themselves in the elite or the upper-middle class. HAVO pupils already show that they most probably will achieve a good job, albeit just below the academic level. Meanwhile, VMBO pupils don’t seem to be willing to accept that they will find themselves in a low-status job. Therefore, they put their hopes on other trajectories to upward mobility.

Quite a number of VMBO pupils feel the burden of the low status of their education. We did not study dropouts from VMBO, of which there are quite a few, but rather the pupils that are still attending classes. Merton would classify them as ritualists. Maybe it is better to describe them as ritualists in denial. They put high hopes on a further career in education. In theory and in practice, this might be-
come true, but most studies show that very few of them will succeed in reaching the highest level of education via the long and cumbersome trajectory of stepping-stones that could bring you from VMBO to MBO. And, in case it has been successfully accomplished, there exists another, more difficult, big step to HBO. Finally, there is admission to university, but by then over 95% will have given up. A few others will become successful in business by starting their own firm or shop, or by using other talents, such as their talent for sports, music, dance, or other forms of art. But, the majority of pupils at VMBO will have to adjust their expectations to things that are within their league\(^{30}\). For the time being, they believe that starting your own business or starting a career in music or sports is within their capabilities. These alternatives are not mentioned or are mentioned only rarely by respondents from HAVO, and not at all by their peers at VWO.

REFERENCES:


APPENDIX:

Photos\textsuperscript{31} used for the photo elicitation method

1. People in a butchery  
2. Students  
3. Businessmen leaving airplane  
4. Women in a street  
5. People at an office  
6. Mayor of Rotterdam

\textsuperscript{31} © Joop Reijngoud, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.
7. Reading woman  
8. Doctor (GP)  
9. Postman  

10. Man in sportscar  
11. Worker at a machine  
12. Greenpeace demonstration  

13. Dancing girls  
14. Couple in a street  
15. Drug addict  

16. Teacher  
17. Roofers  
18. Coffee house
19. Painter

20. Boys on quads

21. Fruit picker

22. Professors

23. Policemen