

Track recommendation procedures and the cancellation of the school leavers' test during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands

Sara Geven¹

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract: Dutch students are allocated to different tracks in secondary school on the basis of teacher track recommendations in primary school. Usually, teachers form an initial track recommendation, and can upwardly adjust this recommendation on the basis of a final standardized test. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, this test was cancelled. During the outbreak, I collected data among Dutch teachers involved in the track recommendation procedure. Teachers varied in how they dealt with the cancellation of the final test: 50% did not consider adjustments in their track recommendations, while 40% did. Moreover, respondents mentioned different reasons for considering possible adjustments, including parental wishes and students' school development during the school shutdown. School SES was unrelated to teachers' considerations for making adjustments. However - given the criteria that teachers mentioned for making adjustments - *within* schools, students from advantaged backgrounds were potentially more likely to receive an upward adjustment in their recommendation.

***** PREPRINT, PLEASE DO NOT CITE OR REDISTRIBUTE WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM THE AUTHOR *****

1. Introduction

In almost all educational systems, students are sorted into different educational programs (i.e., tracks) on the basis of their academic ability at some point in their academic career. Countries differ in how students are allocated to different ability tracks. In some countries track allocations are determined by a student's standardized test performance (e.g., Great Britain), yet in various other countries they are based on teacher track recommendations (e.g., Belgium, France) or a combination of the two (e.g., the Netherlands) (Boone and Van Houtte 2013).

¹ Nieuwe Achtergracht 166; 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; s.a.j.geven@uva.nl. This study was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) through a Veni grant (#016.Veni.195.125) and by ZonMW through grant number 10430032010003.

Past research has found social inequality in teacher² track recommendations: teachers tend to give higher recommendations to students from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds than to their similarly achieving peers from disadvantaged backgrounds (Batruch et al. 2018; Geven, Batruch, and van de Werfhorst 2018; Timmermans et al. 2018). This inequality seems at least partly due to teacher biases (Geven et al. 2018), yet may also stem from the fact that students from advantaged backgrounds score more positively on other characteristics – such as their work habits, social-behavioral skills or home environment – that teachers take into account when forming track recommendations (Bonizzoni, Romito, and Cavallo 2016; Vanlommel and Schildkamp 2018).

Theoretically, scholars agree that, compared to teacher-based track allocations, track allocations that are (partly) based on standardized school tests reduce the role of teacher biases and therefore have the potential to decrease socio-economic inequality in track allocations (Bol et al. 2014; van Leest et al. 2020; Luyten and Bosker 2004). In light of this, it is pressing that during the COVID-19 pandemic, countries such as England and the Netherlands decided to cancel standardized tests that are usually used to allocate students to different educational programs. In this research note I investigate the cancellation of the final standardized test in primary school in the Netherlands and its potential impact on socio-economic inequality in educational outcomes.

In the Netherlands, students are sorted into ability tracks when they are 12 years old, and this allocation is primarily based on teacher track recommendations. Teachers are required to formulate an initial track recommendation before the first of March. After that, students make a final standardized test, the school leavers' test. In case students score higher on the school leavers' test than their initial track recommendation, teachers are allowed to upwardly adjust their initial track recommendation. About 20% of all students receive such an upward adjustment (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2019). Downward adjustments are not possible.

Empirical studies on how the school leavers' test impacts inequality in track allocations are still limited in number and their findings are inconsistent (CPB 2020; van Leest et al. 2020; Luyten

² For readability, I refer to all school staff members that are involved in the track recommendation procedure as 'teachers'. In practice, it may also involve other staff members, such as the school principal.

and Bosker 2004). Nevertheless, upward adjustments occur more frequently among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (CPB 2020), as this group is more often eligible for an upward adjustment (i.e., their test score more often exceeds their initial track recommendation) (CPB 2019).

In March 2020, the Dutch government decided to cancel the school leavers' test. At this stage schools had already formulated their initial track recommendation, and were officially not allowed to adjust this recommendation anymore. However, schools could still fix 'mistakes' in their track recommendations. Moreover, they could request secondary schools to enroll students in a higher level than their track recommendation. The Dutch government recommended 'warm transfers'³, which implies that primary and secondary schools were advised to discuss students and their enrollment levels. The government also developed a special form in which primary schools could share additional information about a child, including an expectation that the child would have scored higher on the school leavers' test than the initial track recommendation, yet schools were not required to use the form.

In this research note, I examine how Dutch teachers tends to perceive the role of the school leavers' test in the track recommendation procedure, and how they dealt with its cancellation. Moreover, I study variations in teacher responses by the socio-economic composition of the school. I use newly collected data among Dutch primary school teachers involved in the track recommendation procedure in the school year of 2019-2020 (86 teachers in 52 schools) (Geven 2020a; Geven 2020b). Information was collected before (October 2019 – February 2020) and after the cancellation of the school leavers' test (April 2020).

Findings show that, before the cancellation of the school leavers' test, about 30% of the respondents indicated that they (very) often adjust their track recommendations on the basis of the school leavers' test. After the test was cancelled, teachers varied in how they were planning to deal with the track recommendation procedure: about 50% of the respondents indicated that they would not consider adjustments in the track recommendations anymore, while 40% did

³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/brieven/2020/04/17/brief-aan-po-en-vo-scholen-over-overstap-van-primair-naar-voortgezet-onderwijs-in-2020>

consider such adjustments. Respondents who considered adaptations also varied in the reasons they provided for making adjustments. The most frequently mentioned reasons included: (1) the development of student work habits and performance in the past period (during school closure), (2) parental requests or wishes, and (3) requests or wishes from secondary schools.

I find that teacher responses hardly varied by the socio-economic composition of their school. In schools with a higher share of disadvantaged students, respondents were more likely to think that the cancellation of the test would affect students' educational trajectories. However, the socio-economic composition of the school was unrelated to whether respondents considered adjustments in their track recommendations and the reasons for making such adjustments.

2. Data

I collected two waves of data: one just before the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Netherlands (between October 2019 and February 2020) (Geven 2020a), and one during the school shutdown (April 2020) (Geven 2020b). Data were collected among school staff members who were involved in the track recommendation procedure in the school year of 2019-2020. Respondents were mostly upper-grade teachers, but also included (among others) principals and support coordinators. Some respondents were not involved in formulating track recommendations in the final school year (sixth grade), yet were involved in formulating preliminary track recommendations in fifth or fourth grade⁴.

225 teachers in 70 schools participated in the first wave before the COVID-19 outbreak. During the school shutdown, a subgroup of these respondents – those that had indicated that they were willing to participate in a follow-up study – were invited for a second survey. In total, 94 teachers from 56 primary schools participated in both surveys. In both waves the school sample was representative of primary schools in the Netherlands with respect to denomination, urbanity, region, socio-economic student composition, and the track recommendations of students in the school year of 2018-2019 (for more information see Geven, 2020a and Geven 2020b). Eight

⁴ All schools provide track recommendations when students are in their final grade of primary school, yet some schools also provide preliminary track recommendations one or two years in advance.

respondents were excluded from the analyses due to missing observations (final N = 86).

3. Variables

I examine different outcomes. First I study the extent to which respondents usually rely on the school leavers' test in their track recommendation procedure (as indicated before the cancellation of the test). Second, I study respondents' opinion about the impact of the cancellation of the test on students' educational trajectories. Third, I examine whether respondents considered adjustment in the initial track recommendations after the cancellation of the school leavers' test, and their reasons for making such adjustments.

To measure the extent to which respondents *usually rely on the school leavers' test*, I use a question from the first wave in which respondents were asked about the extent to which they upwardly adjust track recommendations when the school leavers' test is higher than the initial track recommendation. Respondents could answer on a five-point scale ranging from never to very often.

Respondents' *opinion about the impact of the cancellation of the school leavers' test* was measured in the second wave with a scale consisting of three items. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with the following statements (5-point-scale ranging from completely disagree to completely agree): “the cancellation of the test hardly affects the secondary school entrance level of my own students”, “the cancellation of the test hardly affects the school entrance level of students in the Netherlands”, “the cancellation of the test enhances inequality in track recommendations”. These items loaded on one factor (CA 0.62). I calculated a respondent's average score on these three items.

I rely on various questions to measure whether respondents considered making *adjustments in their track recommendations after the cancellation of the school leavers' test*. After the cancellation of the test, respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed with two statements: “the track recommendations that students received before the Corona crisis are final” and “the track recommendations for some students can (possibly) still be adjusted”. Both questions were included, as the exact procedure at the time of the fieldwork was ambiguous. For example, it was possible that respondents adopted the narrative of the Dutch government and

would indicate that track recommendations were final, yet, at the same time, would still make exceptions for some students. Respondents answered on a five-point scale.

When respondents did not fully agree that track recommendations were final, or did not fully disagree that track recommendations could still be adjusted, they received a follow-up open-ended question in which they were asked to write down under which circumstances they would (possibly) adjust the track recommendations of some students. In this question some respondents indicated that they would not change any track recommendation this year due to the cancellation of the school leavers' test.

I combined the information from these three questions into one variable that indicated whether a respondent considered an adjustment in (some of) the track recommendations this year. Only respondents who were directed to the follow-up question and who provided clear reasons for a possible adjustment scored "yes" on this questions. Respondents who were not directed to the follow-up question or indicated in the open answer question that they would not make adjustments to their track recommendations scored "no", and respondents who provided unclear answers to the open answer question were coded as "unclear". When analyzing respondents' (reasons for) adjustments in the track recommendations, this latter category was coded to missing (n=7).

Finally, I analyzed the three most frequently mentioned reasons for making track adjustments: (1) the work habits of the student in the past period, (2) influence of the parents (e.g., parental requests), and (3) influence of the secondary school (e.g., requests made by the secondary school). Some teachers mentioned multiple reasons, so these outcomes are not mutually exclusive.

I measure the socio-economic composition of the student population in school by using so-called 'weights'. In the Netherlands, Dutch students receive a 'weight' on the basis of the educational level of a student's parents. Based on these weights, schools used to receive additional funding⁵. A pupil receives a weight of 0.3 if both parents obtained a lower secondary degree, and a weight of 1.2 if one parent completed primary education, and the other parent obtained a lower secondary degree or less. All other students receive a weight of 0 (i.e., school receives basic

⁵ This procedure changed as of the 2020-2021 school year

funding for this pupil). I calculated the average student weight⁶ to get an indication of the *share of students in school from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds*.

As control variables, I included whether the respondent was a teacher in the school year of 2019-2020, whether the respondent was only involved in the formation of preliminary track recommendations (for students < grade 6) and whether the respondent experienced upward educational mobility him- or herself (i.e., the respondent enrolled in a vocational track directly after primary school, or the respondent enrolled in a vocational/intermediate track after primary school). Moreover, I account for the respondent's educational degree (i.e., college Bachelor or College Master / University degree), years of work experience in this or another school, age, gender, and highest level of parental education. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all variables.

4. Analytical Strategy

I first examine all the dependent variables descriptively. Subsequently I conduct multi-level models with teachers nested in schools. In these models I include all control variables. I use linear regression models for continuous outcomes, and linear probability models for dichotomous outcomes.⁷

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive findings

Before the cancellation of the school leavers' test, almost 30% of the respondents indicated that they (very) often adjust their track recommendation on the basis of the school leavers' test. None of the respondents indicated that they never rely on the test (table 1). However, after the test was

⁶ (total number of pupils with weight_03*0.3 + total number of pupils with weight_12*1.2) / total number of pupils in school).

⁷ I also estimated Heckman selection models to analyze the reasons that teachers provided for making adjustments in track recommendations. In these models I analyzed whether respondents consider adjustments in track recommendations in a first step, and the reason for this adjustment in a second step. These findings led to the same conclusion as the ones described in the main text.

cancelled, respondents generally seemed to think that the cancellation of the test would hardly affect student entrance levels/track recommendations (average of 3.7 on a 5-point scale, table 1).

Interestingly, there was quite some variation across respondents in whether they considered possible adjustments in their track recommendations after the cancellation of the school leavers' test. About half of the respondents indicated that the initial track recommendation that students received would not be adjusted anymore (table 1). According to this group, adjustments would not be possible anymore after the cancellation of the test. However, about 40% of the respondents provided clear reasons for why they would consider (possible) adjustments in their initial track recommendations. The reasons this group provided differed: 16% of all respondents would consider a possible adjustment if a student's work habits or performance had improved in the past period (during the school closure), 11% of all respondents took into account parental wishes and requests, and 14% of all respondents considered the opinion or requests of secondary schools⁸ (table 1). Bivariately, none of these variables were statistically significantly related to the share of disadvantaged students in school.

⁸ These are the three most frequently mentioned reasons. Some respondents also provided other reasons, such as student test score on additional (IQ) tests.

Table 1: Descriptives

	Mean / % (s.d)
Dependent variables	
Respondent adjusts track recommendation based on school leavers' test (asked before school shutdown)	
Never	0%
Seldom	16%
Sometimes	56%
Often	21%
Very often	7%
Opinion 'cancellation of school leavers' test hardly affects students'	3.7 (0.7)
Respondent considers (possible) adjustment in track recommendation this school year	
No	49%
Yes	43%
Unclear	8%
Frequently mentioned reasons for (possible) adjustment in track recommendation	
Work habits students past period	16%
Influence parents	11%
Influence secondary school	14%
Independent variable	
Share socio-economically disadvantaged students in school (avg. school weight students)	0.06 (0.06)
Control variables	
Teaches this school year	70%
Only involved in formation of preliminary track recommendations	10%
Respondent experienced upward educational mobility	
No	72%
Yes, enrolled in vocational track directly after primary school	14%
Yes, enrolled in vocational/intermediate track directly after primary school	10%
Educational degree	
College Bachelor	79%
College Master / University degree	21%
Years of work experience in this or another school	9.2 (7.9)
Age	43.5 (10.9)
Highest level of parental education	
< upper secondary school	34%
Upper secondary, postsecondary non-tertiary	33%
University BA or higher	34%
Gender (ref. = female)	26%
N schools ²	52
N teachers ²	86

¹ N teachers is 79 and N schools is 50 for '(Reasons for) (possible) adjustment in track recommendations'

5.2 Relationship with the socio-economic composition of the school

Figure 1 and 2 summarize the findings from the multilevel regression models. Figure 1 shows that there is no statistically significant relationship between the share of disadvantaged students in school and the extent to which teachers usually adjust their track recommendations on the basis of the school leaver's test (as indicated before the test was cancelled). I do find that in schools with a higher share of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, respondents are more likely to think that the cancellation of the school leaver's test affects students' educational trajectories. A one-standard-deviation increase in the share of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in school is related to a 0.2 decrease in believing that the cancellation hardly affects students (i.e., $0.2/0.7=0.3$ of a standard deviation in the outcome variable).

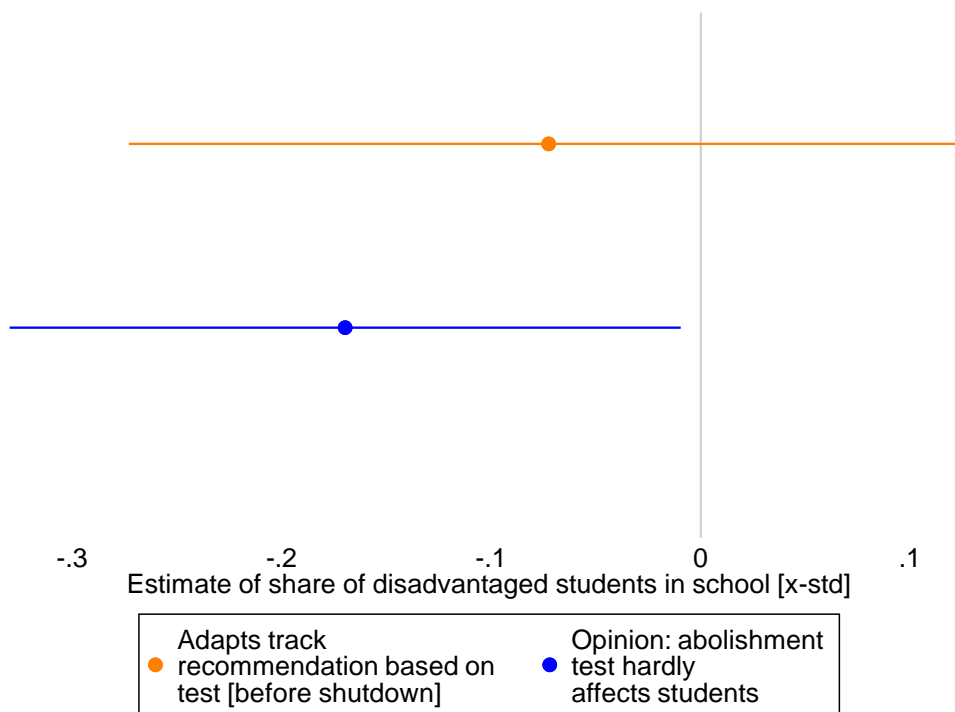


Figure 1: Average Marginal Effect of the share of socio-economically disadvantaged students in school (standardized) on the extent to which teachers adjust their track recommendation on the basis of the school leaver's test (before the school shutdown) and their opinion about the cancellation of the school leavers' test. Estimates are based on multilevel regression models with teachers nested in schools. The model includes all control variables. N schools = 52, N teachers = 86.

I find no relationship between the share of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in school and the likelihood that respondents considered possible adjustments in their final track recommendations after the school leaver's test was cancelled (figure 2). Neither do I find relationships between the share of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in school and the likelihood that respondents mentioned (1) student work habits during the school shutdown, (2) parental wishes and request, and (3) wishes and requests from secondary schools as a reason for making such adjustments (figure 2).

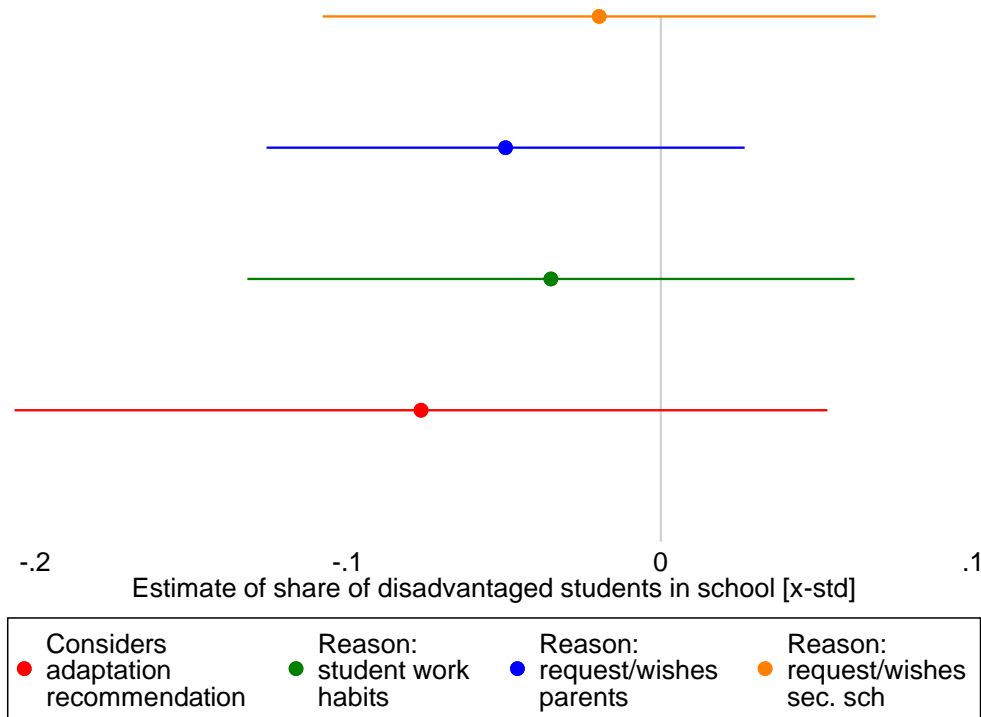


Figure 2: Average Marginal Effect of the share of socio-economically disadvantaged students in school (standardized) on the likelihood that teachers consider (possible) adjustments in student track recommendations (after the cancellation of the school leavers' test) and the likelihood they, respectively, mention student work habits, parental request/wishes and secondary school request/wishes as a reason for such adjustments. Estimates are based on multilevel regression models with teachers nested in schools. The model includes all control variables. N schools = 50, N teachers = 79.

6. Discussion

In the Netherlands students are allocated to different tracks when children are 12 years old. Teachers provide an initial track recommendation and can upwardly adjust this recommendation

if a student's score on the school leaver's test – i.e., the final standardized test in primary school - exceeds the initial track recommendation. In the school year of 2019-2020, this test was cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The findings of this research note suggest that teachers tended to vary in how they dealt with the cancellation of the school leavers' test. From the teacher perspective, it might have been evident that some track recommendations had to be adjusted. For example, it is likely that some teachers had given prudent track recommendations under the assumption that students would still make a test that would allow them to 'upgrade' their recommendation. While adjustments might have been reasonable in some cases, it is important to be aware of differences across teachers and schools in the likelihood to make adjustments, and in their reasons for doing so.

I did not find that teachers' considerations for making adjustments in their track recommendations were related to the socio-economic composition of their school. However, it is possible that, *within* schools, students from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to receive an upward adjustment in their track recommendation in the school year of 2019-2020. Future research should examine this, especially since the criteria that teachers considered for making adjustments may have led to such inequalities in educational opportunities.

More specifically, some teachers indicated that they were considering to take into account the work habits and school development of students during the school shutdown. A prior study showed that Dutch students from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds received more school support during the school shutdown, partly because their parents were better equipped to help (Bol 2020). Relatedly, Dutch students from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds experienced a smaller learning loss during the shutdown (Engzell, Frey, and Verhagen 2020).

Some teachers also indicated that they were considering to take into account parental wishes and request when making possible adjustments in their track recommendations. Past research indicated that parents from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are better equipped to communicate with school and to navigate educational institutions (Lareau 2015). Hence, they are possibly also more successful in negotiating track recommendations. Related to this, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education showed that in school years prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, parents with a higher socio-economic status were more likely to request adjustments in the track recommendation (Onderwijsinspectie 2020). Given the complexity and ambiguity of the track

recommendation procedure during the COVID-19 pandemic, being informed about educational institutions and equipped to navigate them, was probably even more important in the school year of 2019-2020.

All in all, teachers' consideration to take into account (1) students' school development during the school shutdown and (2) parental requests and wishes may have enhanced inequalities in track recommendations in the school year of 2019-2020. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are generally more likely to receive an upward adjustment in their track recommendation on the basis of the school leavers' test (CPB 2020), yet the cancellation of the test may have led to more upward adjustments among students from advantaged backgrounds. It is important that secondary schools are aware of this potential inequality, and to create additional opportunities for this cohort of students who did not have the chance to upgrade their recommendation via a test.

7. References

- Batruch, Anatolia, Frédérique Autin, Fabienne Bataillard, and Fabrizio Butera. 2018. "School Selection and the Social Class Divide: How Tracking Contributes to the Reproduction of Inequalities." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 0146167218791804.
- Bol, Thijs. 2020. "Inequality in Homeschooling during the Corona Crisis in the Netherlands. First Results from the LISS Panel. (Working Paper)."
- Bol, Thijs, Jacqueline Witschge, Herman G. Van de Werfhorst, and Jaap Dronkers. 2014. "Curricular Tracking and Central Examinations: Counterbalancing the Impact of Social Background on Student Achievement in 36 Countries." *Social Forces* 92(4):1545–1572.
- Bonizzoni, Paola, Marco Romito, and Cristina Cavallo. 2016. "Teachers' Guidance, Family Participation and Track Choice: The Educational Disadvantage of Immigrant Students in Italy." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37(5):702–720.

- Boone, Simon, and Mieke Van Houtte. 2013. "Why Are Teacher Recommendations at the Transition from Primary to Secondary Education Socially Biased? A Mixed-Methods Research." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34(1):20–38.
- CPB. 2019. *De Waarde van Eindtoetsen in Het Primair Onderwijs*. CPB.
- CPB. 2020. *Schrappen Eindtoets Groep 8 Kan Ongelijkheid Vergroten*. CPB.
- Engzell, Per, Arun Frey, and Mark D. Verhagen. 2020. "Learning Inequality during the COVID-19 Pandemic."
- Geven, Sara. 2020a. *Education in Dutch Primary Schools during the Corona-Crisis [Report and Dataset]*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Geven, Sara. 2020b. *Track Recommendation Procedures in Dutch Primary Schools [Report and Dataset]*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Geven, Sara, Anatolia Batruch, and Herman van de Werfhorst. 2018. *Inequality in Teacher Judgements, Expectations and Track Recommendations: A Review Study*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: University of Amsterdam.
- Inspectie van het Onderwijs. 2019. *Staat van Het Onderwijs 2019: Technisch Rapport Hoofdstuk Primair Onderwijs*. Inspectie van het Onderwijs.
- Lareau, Annette. 2015. "Cultural Knowledge and Social Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 80(1):1–27.
- van Leest, Anne, Lisette Hornstra, Jan van Tartwijk, and Janneke van de Pol. 2020. "Test-or Judgement-Based School Track Recommendations: Equal Opportunities for Students with Different Socio-Economic Backgrounds?" *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.
- Luyten, H., and R. J. Bosker. 2004. "Hoe Meritocratisch Zijn Schooladviezen? [How Meritocratic Are the Primary School Recommendations for Secondary Education?]." *Pedagogische Studiën* 81(2):89–103.

- Onderwijsinspectie. 2020. “Welke Factoren Bij Het Basisschooladvies Meewegen?” Retrieved (<https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/onderwerpen/overgang/welke-factoren-meewegen>).
- Timmermans, A. C., H. de Boer, H. T. A. Amsing, and M. P. C. van der Werf. 2018. “Track Recommendation Bias: Gender, Migration Background and SES Bias over a 20-Year Period in the Dutch Context.” *British Educational Research Journal* 44(5):847–874.
- Vanlommel, Kristin, and Kim Schildkamp. 2018. “How Do Teachers Make Sense of Data in the Context of High-Stakes Decision Making?” *American Educational Research Journal* 0002831218803891.