

# Education as a Vehicle for Mobility?

Exploring the relationship between ethnicity, education and labor market positioning in the Netherlands



Karijn G. Nijhoff

*In this paper, the relationship between education and labor market positioning for Surinamese Dutch in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, is explored. The relationship is measured at two points with a 10 year interval. Over these years, little change can be noted in labor market positioning, while educational achievements increase drastically. In the discussion, several explanations are suggested. The relationship between education and labor market positioning in the country today is used to conclude that in Amsterdam and the Netherlands, the relationship between education and labor market positioning is not linear and local data are needed to understand local labor markets to the fullest.*

**Keywords:** migration, economic mobility, education, Surinamese

## Introduction

The economic incorporation of migrants into the (host) society is a topic where different views on the route to economic parity are advocated. One of the agreements is that education is important in the way up on the occupational ladder. In this paper I first explore the relationship between education and labor market positioning for Suriname-

---

*Karijn Nijhoff graduated from Utrecht University with a master in sociology and a master in cultural anthropology. She continued her education at Michigan State University in Michigan, USA. She obtained her PhD in Sociology in 2006 with a focus on international migration. After lecturing in the department of Social Work at the Hague University for five years, she now is a Senior Researcher at the university. Her research focuses on education and labor market positioning of migrants of minority background.*

se-Dutch in Amsterdam. This analysis is followed by a discussion on the position of minorities on the Dutch labor market today.

## The data: SPVA 1991 and 2002

Although the Netherlands does not have a Census, there is extensive data available on the Surinamese population. The survey *Sociale Positie en Voorzieningsgebruik Allochtonen* (SPVA – Social Position and Utilization of Provisions by Allochtones) is a longitudinal survey held among the four largest minority groups in the Netherlands (Dagevos 1998). It is an in-depth survey on education, labor market position, social-cultural aspects, and interactions with autochthones. The questionnaire includes a detailed overview of (national) background, age, marital status, household composition, education in and outside of the Netherlands, diplomas, reasons for lack of diplomas, labor market history, participation, type of employment, unemployment and its reasons and time period, income, housing, knowledge of language, and other aspects. The data sets from 1991 and 2002 were used. The main benefit of the SPVA is that subsamples can be selected by postal code: because of the changing global economy, and with the changed local economic systems of cities, the urban context had to be selected. The nature of the receiving economy and the local labor market are important in the literature on migrant mobility (Lipset and Bendix 1967; Sassen 2000; Wallerstein 1995; Wilson 1987).

## Surinamese in Amsterdam

Surinam was a Dutch colony until 1975. Migration increased dramatically in the period around independence, and with the increase, the character-

istics of the group changed. Before decolonization, Surinamese migration to the Netherlands was largely linked to educational opportunities in the Netherlands; post-colonial migration is characterized by a more diverse composition of the group. In the 1980s, the group was in a disadvantaged position, had large unemployment rates, an estimated high percentage of female-headed

households, high dependency on welfare, and high poverty rates (Reubsaet 1982; Reubsaet and Kropman 1983; Reubsaet, Kropman, and Mulier 1982; Reubsaet 1988).

In 1966, 6, 496 Surinamese lived in Amsterdam (van Amersfoort 1968). In the 1970s these numbers increased as migration to the Netherlands increased: while in 1973 the Surinamese population formed only 2.1 percent of the population of Amsterdam, this increased to 3.7 percent in 1982, and in 1988 the percentage was already 7.2 percent. In 1991 the total population of the city was 702, 731 people, and of these, 58,010 were of Surinamese descent, a little over 12 percent (van Amersfoort 1992)<sup>1</sup>. In 1999 25 percent of all Surinamese in the Netherlands lived in Amsterdam, i.e. 65,000 people (van Amersfoort and Cortie 1996; van Niekerk 2000b; van Praag 2003).

## Results

The SPVA focuses on the main cities in the Netherlands, and on the main minority groups. To select Surinamese in Amsterdam, two filters had to be imposed on the data<sup>2</sup>. A second step involved the selection of Surinamese population of working age. The International Labour Office (ILO)<sup>3</sup> defines the

<sup>1</sup>In the case of this article: Surinamese citizens, Dutch born in Surinam and children from head of family born in Surinam.

<sup>2</sup>“etngroep” was limited to value ‘3’, Surinamese; Amsterdam: gemeente =1

<sup>3</sup>From: [www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/kilm/](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/kilm/)

**Table 1: Educational categories.**

	Amsterdam	US categories
1	Less than primary education Primary education	Less than high school
2	Secondary education, lower level	High school completed
3	Secondary education, upper level Tertiary education, lower level	Some post secondary education
4	Tertiary education, upper level	Bachelor’s degree or higher

From: DiPrete, Graaf, Luijkx, Tahlin, and Blossfeld (1997).

working age population between the ages of 15 and 64. This restriction excludes those parts of the population that are too young or too old to be part of the labor force. The total number of respondents is reduced by these necessary restrictions, to 196 in 1991 and to n=179 in 2002.

## Education Levels

In order to look at the data in a internationally comparative way, education levels have been recategorized (Table 1).

Looking at education levels in the two years (Table 2), there is an overall increase. In 1991, a large percentage (35 %) did not achieve more than basic education, in 2002 this percentage was reduced to about 15 %. The percentages that completed high school remained stable, while there is an increase in people attaining higher education. Category 4, bachelor degrees and higher, has almost doubled in percentage over the 10 years. Overall, education levels increased between 1991 and 2002.

The question is if this increase in education levels has resulted in improved labor market participa-

**Table 2: Education levels of Surinamese in Amsterdam in 1991 and 2002, %.**

	1991	2002
1	36	14
2	30	29
3	24	37
4	10	20

tion for Surinamese in Amsterdam. Labor market participation has been studied in two ways. First, unemployment levels at both time points and per educational group are studied. Second, positioning has been looked at using ILO-categorizations. The latter form of measurement gives an impression of what jobs or what types of jobs people are employed in. Employment in itself is not necessarily a sign of an equal or good position in society.

## Education and Employment

General unemployment levels went down for the group in the survey: in 1991 the percentage of unemployed among the Surinamese was 46.9 %, almost half of the potential labor force. In 2002 this percentage was reduced to 33.5 %, a third of the Surinamese in Amsterdam of working age was unemployed. There are variations across educational groups (Figure 1).

The groups with education level 2 and 3, as described in table 1, have seen the largest decrease in unemployment levels, unemployment for the groups with highest and lowest levels of education is relatively stable. The percentages remain high and the pattern has not shifted. In 1991, the

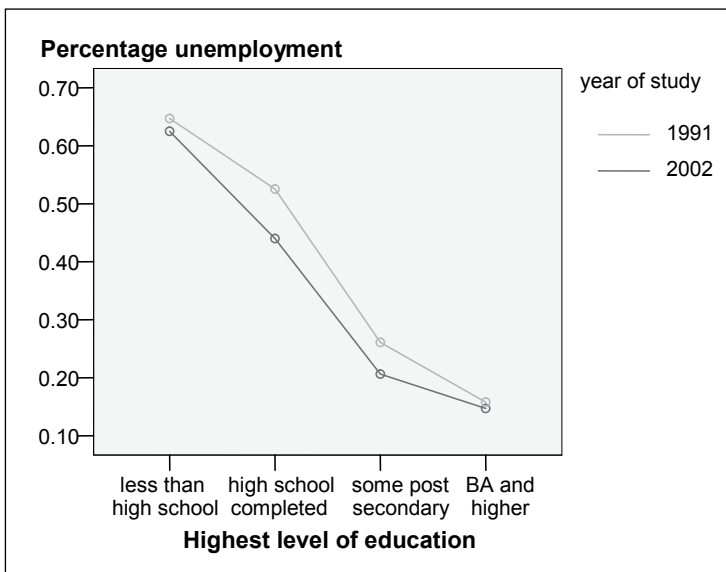


Figure 1: Unemployment levels per educational category in 1991 and 2002.

unemployment percentage for those with elementary education only, was around 65 %. In 2002 this percentage only slightly changed to 63 %. For those with lower secondary education, the percentage of unemployment was a little over 50 % in 1991, in 2002 it was reduced to around 45 %. For those with middle secondary education levels, the change was smaller: from about 27 % to 20 %. Finally, the unemployment percentage for those with higher education in the sample remained stable around 15 %.

## Education and Occupation Levels

As with education, a recode was needed for occupation. The analysis is performed using the ILO-categorizations of labor (Table 3).

While there is a shift in occupational positioning, the pattern seems to focus around the middle categories, categories mainly related to lower level jobs in the service industry. (see Figure 2) The increase in category 8 is small and there is a decrease in the percentage of Surinamese in category 7. The increase in category 6 is high, the percentage of Surinamese holding technical/associate professional occupations in 2002 has almost tripled since 1991. Category 5 (clerks) has seen an increase, and in category 4, the percentage of Surinamese remained high: over 30 percent of the Surinamese in the samples hold a service job. Categories 2 and 3 have declined, while the percentages in category 1 are stable over time.

Changes in occupational means are measured per educational category. (Figure 3) People with a bachelor's degree or more were able to improve their occupational position (as a group). For those that had more than high school, but less than a bachelor's degree, occupational levels went down. The occupational classification for the group with a high school education stayed very much the same. For those with little education (less than a high school diploma), the occupation levels decreased.

**Table 3: Occupation Levels by ILO-categorization**

General Description of Occupation:	
1	Elementary Occupations
2	Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers
3	Craft and Related Trades Workers
4	Service Workers and Shop and Market Sales Workers
5	Clerks
6	Technicians and Associate Professionals
7	Professionals
8	Legislators, Senior Officials and Managers

A bifurcation in opportunities seems to be taking place: for those with the highest education, occupational positions have improved, for the three other groups, positioning in the occupational ladder has remained stable or decreased. On the other hand, looking at employment changes, this bifurcation is less visible. While unemployment is lower for those with more education, the numbers remained high and were stable over the period of study.

## Conclusions and Discussion

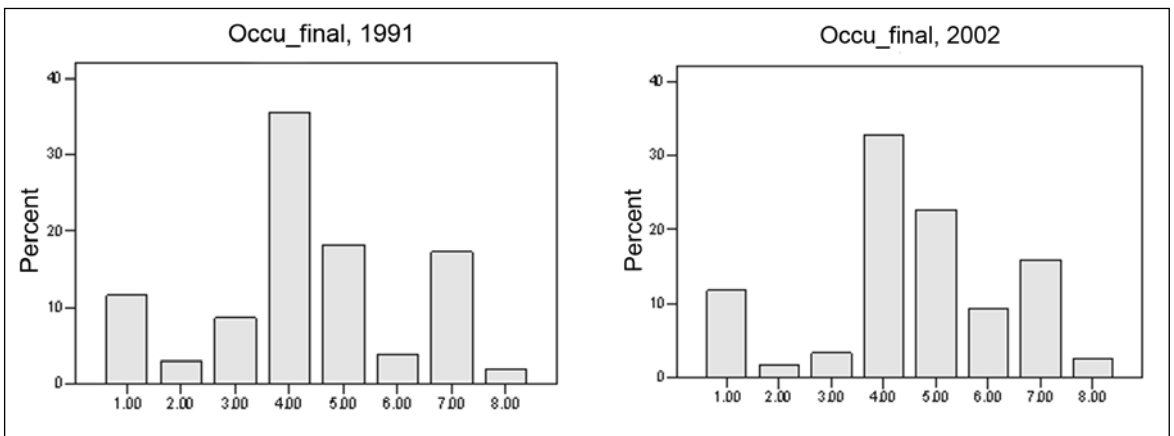


Figure 2: Occupational changes, Surinamese, 1991 to 2002. (Levels, see Table 3).

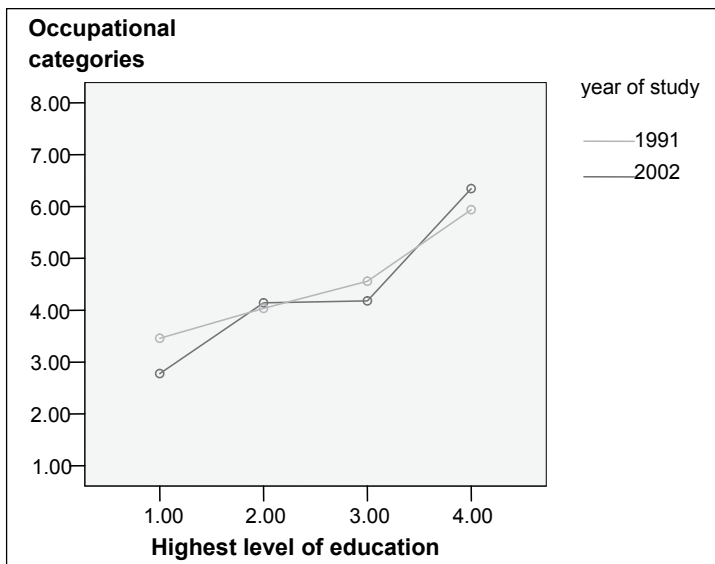


Figure 3: 'Average' occupation level per education level in 1991 and 2002.

In Amsterdam, educational levels have increased for the Surinamese, but occupational positions have not followed. This can be due to the short period of time of the study: the effect of changes in education levels might take longer to appear on the labor market. On the other hand, structural changes seem to have had an effect on occupational positions: a polarization is emerging, as postulated by Hammet: "The post-industrial societies can experience two alternative kinds of polarization. In the strong welfare states the polarization is between a small, but highly upgraded insider structure and a large outsider surplus population. In the other case, a large service

**Table 4: Ethnicity and unemployment 2010, national data in percentages.**

	2010		Difference
	Minorities	Non-minority	
Elementary school	14	8	1,8
Lower secondary	14	5	2,8
Middle secondary	10	4	2,5
Higher education	8	3	2,7

Source: (CBS/SCP 2010; Gijssberts and Dagevos 2009).

class proletariat will constitute the pivotal source of polarization” (Hamnet 1998), 25).

The apparent polarization in unemployment percentages and in labor market opportunities can also be due to discrimination on the labor market. The perseverance of discrimination on the Dutch and on local labor markets is documented in different studies (Bovenkerk and Breuning-van Leeuwen 1978/1979; Dagevos 1998; Gras and Bovenkerk 1999; van Niekerk 2000a). On a more positive side, the increase in education can implicate a better future for Surinamese in Amsterdam. The higher education levels might mean that in the (near) future, the “catching” up with the general population can be completed. As discussed, the numbers did not reveal a linear upward trend. The problem seems to persist today: in 2010, the national unemployment percentages continue to show a much higher percentage for minority unemployment than for groups of a (non-migratory) minority background: 11% versus 4%. Youth unemployment is even higher for all those that are defined as ethnic minority in the Netherlands: 21% compared to 10%.

Education should give a reduction in unemployment levels: on a national scale this is a trend. Unfortunately, this trend is not the same for all educational groups and based on the data two conclusions can be reached. The first is that education reduces the unemployment levels. The second conclusion is that while the absolute numbers show that with higher education unemployment percentages decrease, the decrease is very different for the groups. Education does not generate the same advantage for minorities. These findings are confirmed by an article from the New York Times

(December 2009): “Education, it seems, does not level the playing field – in fact, it appears to have made it more uneven” (www.nytimes.com). The author emphasizes two explanations: discrimination and search modes.

A final conclusion is on the importance of sampling. National data are showing different trends, that are confirmed in a city as Amsterdam. The importance of local contexts is illustrated in different studies, and even in a small country as the Netherlands, local labor markets are important for local populations. It is imperative that local government monitor trends in their city or region.

The Dutch data confirm the more complex, non-linear relationship between education, unemployment and origin. A positive message comes from the changes in levels of education: the second (and third) generation minority groups are higher educated than their parents. Over time, an increase in education levels has been seen.

## References

- CBS/SCP. 2010. “Jaarrapport Integratie 2010.” CBS, Den Haag.
- Dagevos, Jaco. 1998. *Begrensde mobiliteit. Over allochtone werkenden in Nederland*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- DiPrete, Thomas A., Paul M. de Graaf, Ruud Luijkx, Michael Tahlin, and Hans-Peter Blossfeld. 1997. “Collectivist versus Individualist Mobility Regimes? Structural Change and Job Mobility in Four Countries.” *American Journal of Sociology* 103:318-358.
- Gijssberts, Mérove and Jaco Dagevos. 2009. “Jaarrapport Integratie 2009.”: SCP/http://www.vrom.nl/Docs/Jaarrapport%20Integratie%202009.pdf.
- Gras, Mitzi and Frank Bovenkerk. 1999. “Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in the Netherlands: Discrimination in Access to Employment.” Pp. 93-107 in *Migrants, Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market*, edited by J. Wrench, A. Rea, and N. Ouali. London: MacMillan Press.
- Hamnet, Chris. 1998. “Social polarization, economic restructuring and welfare state regimes.” Pp. 15-27 in *Urban Segregation and the Welfare State. Inequality and exclusion in western cities*, edited

- by S. Musterd and W. Ostendorf. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Reinhard Bendix. 1967. *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Reubsaet, T. J. M. 1982. *Surinaamse migranten in Nederland. Het beleid van de rijksoverheid van 1965-1979: uitgangspunten, doelstellingen en middelen.*, Vol. Deel 1. Nijmegen: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociologie.
- Reubsaet, Theo. 1988. "On the way up? Surinamese and Antilleans in the Dutch labour market." in *Lost Illusions. Caribbean minorities in Britain and the Netherlands*, edited by M. Cross and H. Entzinger. London: Routledge.
- Reubsaet, T. J. M. and J. A. Kropman. 1983. *Surinaamse migranten in Nederland. De positie van Surinamers en het gevoerde overheidsbeleid.*, Vol. Deel 6. Nijmegen: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociologie.
- Reubsaet, T. J. M., J. A. Kropman, and L. M. van Mulier. 1982. *Surinaamse migranten in Nederland. De positie van Surinamers in de Nederlandse samenleving*, Vol. Deel 2. Nijmegen: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociologie.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2000. *Cities in a World Economy*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- van Amersfoort, H. 1968. *Surinamers in de lage landen - De ontwikkeling en problematiek van de Surinaamse migratie naar Nederland*. The Hague: Staatsuitgeverij.
- . 1992. "Ethnic residential patterns in a welfare state. Lessons from Amsterdam, 1970-1990." *New Community* 18:439-456.
- van Amersfoort, Hans and Cees Cortie. 1996. "Social polarization in a welfare state? Immigrants in the Amsterdam region." *New Community* 22:671-688.
- van Bovenkerk, Frank and Elsebeth Breuning-van Leeuwen. 1978/1979. "Rasdiscriminatie en rasvoordeel op de Amsterdamse arbeidsmarkt." Pp. 31-57 in *Omdat zij anders zijn. Patronen van rasdiscriminatie in Nederland*, edited by F. Bovenkerk. Meppel/Amsterdam: Boom.
- van Niekerk, Mies. 2000a. *De Krekel en de Mier. Fabels en feiten over maatschappelijke steiging van Creoolse en Hindoestaanse Surinamers in Nederland*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- . 2000b. "Paradoxes in paradise. Integration and social mobility of the Surinamese in the Netherlands." Pp. 64-92 in *Immigrant Integration. The Dutch Case.*, edited by H. Vermeulen and R. Peninx. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- van Praag, Carlo. 2003. "Demografie". In *Rapportage Minderheden 2003. Onderwijs, arbeid en sociaal-culturele integratie*, edited by J. Dagevos, M. Gijsberts, and C. v. Praag. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1995. "The Modern World-System and Evolution." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 1.
- Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged. The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/us/01race.html>: "In Job Hunt, College Degree Can't Close Racial Gap" door Michael Luo.

## Siirtolaisuusinstituutin kotisivuilta löytyvät ajankohtaiset siirtolaisuustilastot

Siirtolaisuusinstituutin tietopalvelupäällikkö Jouni Korkiasaari on koonnut virallisista tilastoista instituutin kotisivuille osoitteeseen <http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/stat/> kattavat tilastot suomalaisesta lähtö- ja tulomuutosta.

Lisätietoja: Jouni Korkiasaari, puh. +358 2 2840 451  
S-posti: [jouni.korkiasaari@utu.fi](mailto:jouni.korkiasaari@utu.fi)