

## Segmented assimilation in the Netherlands? Young migrants and early school leaving

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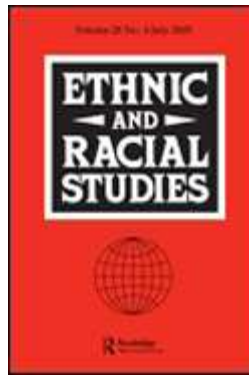
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**Segmented assimilation in the Netherlands? Young migrants and early school leaving**

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Keywords:	Second Generation, segmented assimilation, migrant Youth, ethnification, school dropout, unemployment



**Table 1.** *Drop-out numbers, priority and total (x 1000)*

	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05
Total new	41	39	40	47	71	64	64	60
Priority	13	12	12	16	12	20 <sup>1</sup>	16 <sup>1</sup>	15 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> new, before 2003 not possible to differentiate between old en new

Source: Sardes, 2006 (RMC data)

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**Table 2.** *Percentage priority drop out by ethnic background, 2005*

	priority drop-out	remaining drop-out	total drop-out
Ethnic origin:			
Dutch	4	6	10
Turk	11	6	17
Moroccan	12	4	16
Surinamese	11	4	15
Antillean	14	9	23
Other non-western	11	4	15

Source: Herweijer, 2006

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3 **Segmented assimilation in the Netherlands? Young migrants and early school**  
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5 **leaving.**  
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7  
8 **Willibrord de Graaf, Kaj van Zenderen**  
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11  
12 Abstract:

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15 There has been ongoing debate in the Netherlands in recent years about second-  
16  
17 generation immigrant youth, a debate fuelled by two, rather persistent phenomena:  
18  
19 high school dropout and unemployment among migrant youth. Fear exists that  
20  
21 migrant youth will become marginalized. This raises the question to what extent the  
22  
23 position of migrant youth can be viewed as manifesting downward mobility, leading  
24  
25 to a form of segmented assimilation? This article examines the problems of  
26  
27 education and dropout, and discusses the significance of the many statistics which  
28  
29 either prove or refute the assumed gravity of the problem. Then follows an outline of  
30  
31 the policy landscape and the concomitant ethnifying effects to complete the picture.  
32  
33 We conclude that downward segmented assimilation is not the dominant trend, and  
34  
35 end with a discussion of new forms of ethnic exclusion that lay the blame for not  
36  
37 integrating well into Dutch society at the foot of migrant youth themselves.  
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43  
44  
45 Keywords: segmented assimilation, school dropout, unemployment, second  
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47 generation, migrant youth, ethnification  
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## *Introduction*

The position of non-western<sup>1</sup> migrants in the educational system and on the labour market is generally not very favourable. This is a pattern that can be seen throughout Europe, and also in the Netherlands. Young migrants<sup>2</sup> in particular, i.e. second generation migrants, often leave school early and risk exclusion from the labour market and society at large. There are several reasons for this state of affairs, such as shifts in the qualification structure for entering the labour market as a result of the emerging service and knowledge society; difficulties with raising the schooling levels of migrants; the existence of segregated neighbourhoods; problems of discrimination in the labour market itself; and ineffective search strategies by migrants on the labour market. All these factors are covered in the theoretical debate about the integration process of second generation migrants and the possible outcomes thereof. This debate has been fuelled by the observation that the supposed steady, gradual integration and acculturation into the host society was not taking place (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Instead, two different pathways seemed to emerge: first the diametrically opposed route into poverty and slipping into the underclass; and secondly, economic integration all the while maintaining cultural values and social commitments, in which case support from one's own social networks helps overcome obstacles to upward mobility (Zhou, 1997). Based on experiences in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century, the classical idea is that a gradual process of assimilation generally prevails. Some studies claim that this classical pattern can still be observed today (Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997). However, others

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'non-western' refers here to its application in the Netherlands. Non-western means people from outside the EU, such as Asia, Africa, South America.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'young migrant' refers to the children of migrants (the second generation), born in the Netherlands.

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2  
3 stress that changes in the structure of the labour market, institutional discrimination,  
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5 and the living conditions in inner cities in particular mean that the classical pattern is  
6  
7 now outmoded. They point out that the downward route was more prevalent among  
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9 migrants following the Second World War (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, Haller, 2005).  
10  
11 The empirical results, both in the USA and Europe, show a mixed and contradictory  
12  
13 picture (Thomson and Crul, 2007, Silberman, Alba, Fournier, 2007), which may be  
14  
15 the result of different national contexts. This mixed picture applies also to the young  
16  
17 migrants in the Netherlands: their overall situation is improving and more and more  
18  
19 young migrants are faring well (CBS, 2008), but on the other hand there are groups  
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21 that are not doing well, might be considered to be marginalized and are even ending  
22  
23 up in criminality. This raises the question as to whether segmented assimilation  
24  
25 exists in the Netherlands and can a tendency towards downward mobility be  
26  
27 observed? The answer to this question is important since the public and political  
28  
29 debate about the integration of migrants has been shifting to the conclusion that  
30  
31 integration has been a failure and that more pressing measures have to be taken  
32  
33 (WRR, 2007, Roggeband and Vliegenhart, 2007). Also internationally this shift in  
34  
35 the Netherlands has been remarked and so it seems relevant to look into the specific  
36  
37 Dutch national context in order to disentangle this complex matter of integration.  
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45 This article answers these questions by examining early school leaving  
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47 among young migrants, also because dropping-out is seen as a marker for downward  
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49 mobility in the discussion on segmented assimilation. The Dutch case is particularly  
50  
51 interesting because, with a rate of almost 13 per cent of Dutch youth leaving school  
52  
53 with less than upper secondary education, the Netherlands is below the EU average  
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55 but above that of neighbouring European countries (OECD, 2008). Since this figure  
56  
57 is barely diminishing, the OECD warns for long lasting unemployment which results  
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3 from dropping-out and points to a group of marginalised, often migrant youth, who  
4 are detached from the labour market. Dropping out of school is also seen in the  
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8 Netherlands as a disaster, and it is something that must be combated (WRR, 2008).  
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11 Because migrant youth are overrepresented in the dropout figures, the  
12  
13 resulting ‘moral panic’ tends to see all migrant youth as being highly problematic  
14  
15 and in danger of not participating in society. In fact, dropping out by migrants is seen  
16  
17 as prove of their failure to integrate. And this in itself may contribute towards further  
18  
19 ethnic stigmatisation and exclusion of young migrants. It is therefore very important  
20  
21 that the problems in the transition from school to work be analysed, and similarly,  
22  
23 that the effect the interpretation of these problems has on the position of migrant  
24  
25 youth in general be examined.  
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29  
30 There are two steps to our argument. The first step takes a look at a number of  
31  
32 general findings about the educational position of young migrants and then analyses  
33  
34 the existing data on dropout in the context of the transition from school to work. Our  
35  
36 analysis shows that dropout rates are difficult to establish and may be used to both  
37  
38 confirm and contradict the thesis of downward segmented assimilation. Moreover,  
39  
40 there is no simple connection between dropping-out and success on the labour  
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42 market. There are many different types of dropouts whose employment success  
43  
44 differs. We point out how the discourses surrounding the supposedly problematic  
45  
46 status of migrant dropouts may lead to their being blamed for their own disadvantage  
47  
48 and failure to adapt successfully to the educational system.  
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54 In the second step we indicate more precisely how the context of policies,  
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56 measures and reforms influences the educational situation of young migrants. We  
57  
58 discuss the reforms in vocational education, the measures put in place to prevent  
59  
60 migrants dropping out and to reintegrate dropouts, and how these arrangements are



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3 monitored and managed. We also attempt to show how this policy context  
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5 contributes to the discursive representation of all migrant youth as a problematic  
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7 group.  
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### 10 11 12 *Overall data on migrant youth in education*

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17 The ethnic diversity of migrant groups in the Netherlands is considerable. In addition  
18  
19 to the four main migrant groups: Moroccans, Turks, Surinamese, and Antilleans,  
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21 there are also immigrant groups from Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. It is beyond  
22  
23 the scope of this paper to examine all these groups in detail, so we concentrate here  
24  
25 on general patterns found among the youth of the four main migrant groups. The  
26  
27 general socio-economic picture of these migrant youth in Dutch society is  
28  
29 unfavourable. Compared with their native counterparts, most migrant youngsters are  
30  
31 disadvantaged when it comes to education and work. They are less highly educated,  
32  
33 have higher school dropout rates, unemployment levels are also greater, and their  
34  
35 position on the labour market tends to be vulnerable (SCP/WODC/CBS, 2005). But  
36  
37 when the socio-economic status of parents is taken into account, there are no big  
38  
39 differences compared with native Dutch youngsters with the same background.  
40  
41 Therefore, the position of migrant youth may largely be explained by the low  
42  
43 educational and professional levels of their parents. But we will also show how  
44  
45 policies actually reproduce the effects that they are intended to combat.  
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### 54 55 *Educational level and dropout*

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57 There is a gap between the educational performance level of migrants and their  
58  
59 native counterparts (Min. OCW, 2006). Migrant youth leave primary school at a  
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3 considerable disadvantage i.e. some 1-2 years behind their native counterparts in  
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5 language and maths. This means that they generally end up in lower vocational  
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7 education, and migrant youth tend to follow the lowest streams of training courses  
8  
9 (SCP/WODC/CBS, 2005). Of special concern are migrant school dropouts because  
10  
11 they are overrepresented in the dropout rates: the percentage of migrant dropouts is  
12  
13 almost twice as high: 9 per cent of the 18-24 age group compared with 5 per cent of  
14  
15 the natives (CBS, 2007a, Min. OCW, 2007b). Despite this lower educational  
16  
17 position, the trend for the educational performance of young migrants is positive.  
18  
19 Their educational disadvantage has diminished over the past 15 years  
20  
21 (SCP/WODC/CBS, 2005) and the performance level of second generation migrants  
22  
23 is now closer to that of their native counterparts. The proportion of young migrants  
24  
25 with the basic qualifications required for the labour market is on the increase, from  
26  
27 34 per cent between 2001 and 2003 to 43 per cent between 2004 and 2006 (CBS,  
28  
29 2007b). The proportion of migrants in higher education has increased substantially  
30  
31 over the past five years (RWI, 2006) and successful migrants are increasingly seen as  
32  
33 role models in the public sphere. Despite the general lower educational levels and  
34  
35 higher dropout rates, migrants are making up for their deficit (SCP, 2007b). But this  
36  
37 is a statement based on averages. It is important to note that there seems to be a  
38  
39 divide between successful young migrants, who, in a roundabout way, end up in  
40  
41 higher education or who have found a solid position in the labour market, and  
42  
43 migrants who neither finish their education nor find suitable, regular jobs. There is,  
44  
45 for instance, an increasing group of young people who do not attend school and who  
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47 are not active jobseekers, 52,000 in 2004, and in 2005 this figure was 59,000  
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49 youngsters. This corresponds to 14 per cent of the native young people in the 15-22  
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51 age group and 32 per cent of migrant youth in this age group (Min. SZW, 2006). The  
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3 growth of this group is due to an increase in the number of native youngsters, but  
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5 migrant youth are still overrepresented. This non-participating group is difficult to  
6  
7 reach and is considered unemployable. Other figures are sometimes mentioned to  
8  
9 define the group of unwilling and/or problematic youngsters, in which the young  
10  
11 migrants always appear to be at a higher risk of marginalisation. We will see later  
12  
13 that defining problematic groups is also important in relation to school dropouts.  
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### 17 18 19 20 *Transition from school to work and early school leaving*

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24 The problem of early school leaving is, in the Netherlands, generally considered to  
25  
26 have negative consequences for young people's labour market opportunities. The  
27  
28 present discussion about the problematic transition from school to work actually  
29  
30 began over thirty years ago when there were complaints about the lack of quality in  
31  
32 the labour force, due to insufficient education, in relation to the promoted mobility  
33  
34 and flexibility of workers. In 1990, a governmental advisory committee on the  
35  
36 education-market relationship, the Rauwenhoff committee, promoted more equal  
37  
38 participation in school and the establishment of a basic qualification that would  
39  
40 guarantee access to the labour market and further vocational training (Houtkoop,  
41  
42 2004). "Investing in the schooling of unskilled workers clearly represents something  
43  
44 of a threshold. The risk of not doing so however is that employees will be  
45  
46 insufficiently mobile and flexible in the later stages of their working lives and so will  
47  
48 be forced to drop out of the labour market prematurely" (cited in Houtkoop, 2004).  
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51 The committee's proposals for a basic qualification were adopted by the government,  
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53  
54 thereby accepting the idea that a basic qualification focused on the problem of  
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60 leaving school prematurely, because a minimum of vocational training was seen as a

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3 necessary condition for career development. Furthermore, this basic qualification  
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5 was not only defined in educational terms, but also in terms of the personal and  
6  
7 social skills required to participate in society.  
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10 The basic qualification involved completing at least the second level of  
11  
12 secondary vocational education. Without a basic qualification, securing work is  
13  
14 assumed to be difficult. This is why the definition of ‘dropouts’ in the Netherlands  
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16 actually refers to all those who do not obtain this basic qualification. In fact, one is  
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18 considered to be a dropout even with a certificate at the level of primary vocational  
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20 education.  
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24 The dropout problem is high on the political agenda, because school dropouts  
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26 are assumed to run a greater risk of being unemployed or of holding less favourable  
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28 positions on the labour market, of having a low income, and of being jobseekers  
29  
30 much longer than people with a basic qualification (Min. OCW, 2002). The  
31  
32 discussion is further strongly influenced by the Lisbon agreements to halve the  
33  
34 number of dropouts in the 18-24 age range between 2000 and 2010, and the national  
35  
36 goal to reduce the number of new dropouts in the 12-22 age group by 50 per cent  
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38 between 2002 and 2012 (Min. OCW, 2007a). What all these debates have in  
39  
40 common is that dropping out is seen as a problem to be solved, while, at the same  
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42 time, the extent of the problem remains unclear. We now go on to analyse the  
43  
44 existing data on dropouts and show that the very nature of the data leaves little room  
45  
46 for one simple interpretation.  
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#### 54 55 *Registration, number and characteristics of dropouts*

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57 Concern about dropout levels has led to a considerable amount of research being  
58  
59 conducted with the primary aim of ascertaining the exact number of dropouts.  
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3 However, measuring and registering school dropout numbers meet with numerous  
4 difficulties, and there are in fact no reliable figures available (Eimers, 2006). There  
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6 are a number of reasons for this.  
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9  
10 Firstly, measurements are partly based on incomplete data. The Netherlands  
11 has, since 1994, been divided into Regional Report and Coordination Points (RMC  
12 regions) to facilitate tackling the problem of school dropouts. Their task is to register  
13 the number of dropouts, and to ensure that dropouts do go on to obtain a basic  
14 qualification by taking the appropriate measures. Schools are obliged to report their  
15 dropouts to the RMC, but they do not report accurately and consistently, simply  
16 because, should they do so, they run the risk of getting a bad reputation. The RMCs  
17 admit that their registration method is not up to scratch and that they are unable to  
18 provide definite numbers (Sardes, 2006). However, the RMC figures indicate the  
19 number of new dropouts in the 12 to 22 age range every school year. In 2006 there  
20 were 56,000 new dropouts (Min. OCW, 2007a) comprising 35 per cent migrant  
21 youth. But the problem is that the figures do not take account of pupil mobility –  
22 some pupils may return to school in the same school year. These registration  
23 problems could therefore mean that the number of dropouts is either underestimated  
24 or even overestimated (CPB, 2006).  
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45 A second point is that there are numerous different definitions of school  
46 dropouts, and many different methods to record measurement and timing. Dropouts  
47 are generally defined as young people in the 12 to 22 age range who have not  
48 attended vocational education for more than four weeks and who do not have a basic  
49 qualification. However, different studies apply different definitions, and this, in turn,  
50 leads to differing figures. For instance, besides the RMC, the CBS (Statistics  
51 Netherlands) provides figures on dropout rates based on the data from the Employed  
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3 Population Survey (EBB), which is taken from a sample of the working population.  
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5 The EBB data are used to present the Dutch dropout figures to the European Union,  
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7 but they only pertain to the 18-24 age range. In 2006 the percentage of youth without  
8  
9 a basic qualification and not attending school compared with the total number of  
10  
11 young people in this age category of 18-24 is 12.9 percent, which amounts to some  
12  
13 175,000 young people (SCP, 2007a). This number includes both new and old  
14  
15 dropouts.  
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18  
19 A new, third measurement method based on the educational number (ON)  
20  
21 was introduced recently. This number identifies every individual participating in  
22  
23 education and makes it possible to follow students throughout their entire educational  
24  
25 career. The educational number measures the net number of dropouts in a school  
26  
27 year. With this number, for the very first time, school dropout rates could be  
28  
29 measured more accurately (Min. OCW, 2007b). The ON registration system  
30  
31 indicates that there were 57,000 new dropouts in 2006. This figure is close to the  
32  
33 RMC figures, which could imply that the flaws in the RMC figures have been  
34  
35 gradually corrected and/or that the ON registration is also still lacking.  
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43 Although the figures differ according to the sources used, it is possible to get an idea  
44  
45 of the personal profile of dropouts. There are more males than females (60-40 per  
46  
47 cent), while their share in the young age groups is more or less equal. The dropout  
48  
49 rate is highest in the category 17-18 years of age and most (67 per cent) are from  
50  
51 secondary vocational education, and in particular from the first and second levels,  
52  
53 intended to be the criterion for the basic qualification! Dropouts are already behind in  
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55 their school career. Dropout rates are highest in regions where incomes are low,  
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57  
58 where there are more people on benefit, and where there are higher numbers of  
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3 migrants. The chance of dropping out is twice as high in urban areas than in other  
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5 areas, and this is particularly apparent in urban neighbourhoods characterised by  
6  
7 poverty, segregation and poor housing (Min. OCW, 2007a). Furthermore, family  
8  
9 circumstances i.e. being in a one-parent household or even being a parent, seem to  
10  
11 influence higher dropout rates. In addition to the above characteristics, several  
12  
13 analysts have also taken the efforts to define exactly which groups of dropouts are at  
14  
15 high risk of non-participation - not working, not attending school.  
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20 Firstly, Sardes, the monitoring institution of the RMC figures, distinguishes  
21  
22 pupils with a primary vocational certificate with other youngsters without any  
23  
24 certificate at all, who are referred to as 'priority' dropouts (table 1).  
25  
26 (table 1 about here)  
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28

29 The proportion of young migrants in the total of new dropouts was about 41 per cent  
30  
31 in 2004 and 35 per cent in 2005, a figure which is still disproportionately higher than  
32  
33 their share in the age group, but a decline has been observed. However, the picture  
34  
35 for migrants looks less positive if we consider their share in the priority group. Other  
36  
37 findings indicate that the young migrants in the priority group in particular are  
38  
39 overrepresented (table 2).  
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41

42 (table 2 about here)  
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45 Secondly, Eimers, generally seen as an expert on Dutch school leaving,  
46  
47 makes a distinction between school leavers at risk and non-problematic school  
48  
49 leavers. School leavers at risk are confronted with problems both at school and  
50  
51 outside it, which make it difficult for them to perform well or even attend school.  
52  
53 Some of them are not capable of obtaining a basic qualification. This group amounts  
54  
55 to 25,000, and this figure seems to be relatively stable. The non-problematic dropouts  
56  
57 consist of 35,000 early school leavers, but they often do have a diploma at primary  
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3 vocational level, have a job or do not want to work or cannot work because they have  
4  
5 care responsibilities (Eimers, 2006).  
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8 Thirdly, there is a link between not having a basic qualification, being  
9  
10 unemployed and/or not willing to work, and not being registered in the Public  
11  
12 Employment Service. Non-registration would imply that this group is difficult to  
13  
14 locate and approach through the official channels. This group is estimated to be  
15  
16 around 38,000, a figure that crops up at times to refer to hard core problematic youth  
17  
18 and also points at migrant youth as having a disproportionate share. This is the  
19  
20 outcome of calculations made by the Taskforce Youth Unemployment (Taskforce  
21  
22 Jeugdwerkloosheid, 2006)  
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27 Fourthly, when assessing which dropouts are most at risk it is also possible to  
28  
29 focus on the long-term unemployed, i.e. those who have been unemployed for over  
30  
31 half a year. A survey among second generation Turks and Moroccans in Amsterdam  
32  
33 and Rotterdam showed that this group is relatively small with only 9 per cent falling  
34  
35 into this category (Crul et al.2008), and the remainder had been unemployed only for  
36  
37 a couple months.  
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43 These examples of high risk dropouts make it clear that different criteria are  
44  
45 used and consequently different numbers emerge. Furthermore, it is still unclear what  
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47 exactly their 'problematic' status is. But whatever the criteria used, the at-risk groups  
48  
49 are surprisingly small. However, in the debate surrounding early school leaving it is  
50  
51 these groups that are placed at the forefront and are used to point to the grave nature  
52  
53 of the problem. What we learn from these data is that some groups may, indeed, be  
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55 cause for concern even though the criteria for belonging to these groups are not well  
56  
57 defined. The problems about registration, definitions and groups-at-risk clearly  
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3 indicate that what is needed is a more refined analysis of what these figures mean  
4  
5 and of how they are interpreted and used in the context of the debate on school  
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7 dropout levels. This would help assess the migrant proportion of dropout levels and  
8  
9 the tendency to downward or upward mobility of young migrants. We will show that  
10  
11 there are a number of different ways of looking at and interpreting these figures and  
12  
13 of assessing the extent of the problem. By doing so the problem of early school  
14  
15 leaving can either be overestimated or underestimated.  
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### 22 *Overestimation of the problem*

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24 The discussions and concerns about the persistent 'high' dropout rate imply that  
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26 there is a big problem, particularly in relation to future labour market prospects. But  
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28 the question remains about the extent to which the lack of a basic qualification is a  
29  
30 real problem in the transition from school to work. Research findings suggest that a  
31  
32 basic qualification is not necessarily essential when looking for work. Many of the  
33  
34 dropouts are, in fact, employed. At least 65 per cent of the total group of dropouts  
35  
36 aged between 15 and 22 do have a job, and three quarters of this group have a  
37  
38 permanent contract (Min. OCW, 2007a). Many young dropouts with only a basic  
39  
40 pre-vocational certificate do participate in the labour market (71 per cent), while the  
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42 employment rate for youngsters with a basic qualification is 81 per cent. These data  
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44 do not indicate that the lack of a basic qualification is a major obstacle on the labour  
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46 market.  
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53 According to the Educational Council (Onderwijsraad, 2004), the basic  
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55 qualification is not a critical boundary per se for success on the labour market. It is  
56  
57 even stated that using the basic qualification in this way means that many youngsters  
58  
59 are stigmatised. Generally, the effect of qualification is more of a sliding scale: the  
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3 more highly qualified, the better one's chances on the labour market (CPB, 2006).  
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6 The basic qualification should therefore be seen as an educational level that offers  
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8 opportunities on the labour market but it does not necessarily mean that young  
9  
10 people without a basic qualification do not have any prospects. This was recently  
11  
12 confirmed by a survey among second generation Turkish and Moroccan youth in  
13  
14 Amsterdam and Rotterdam. A quarter of these youngsters, who left school without  
15  
16 obtaining a basic qualification, are considered to be at risk. However, the majority of  
17  
18 men who are supposedly at risk are easily employed once they leave school and are  
19  
20 only unemployed for a couple months. These findings confirm the fact that the  
21  
22 labour market clearly has an integrative role for many of these youngsters (Crul et  
23  
24 al., 2008).  
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29  
30 To avoid overestimating the problem of early school leaving in relation to  
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32 successful entry into the labour market, it is therefore necessary to analyse more  
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34 precisely the characteristics of the group without a basic qualification. Several  
35  
36 studies show that dropouts are not a homogenous group, and they can be divided into  
37  
38 different categories with different statuses and different dynamics on the labour  
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40 market. The above-mentioned description of the various at-risk groups is already one  
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42 way to point to differentiated factors involved in dropping out.  
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46 However, other factors are also at play. Some students may not be capable of  
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48 obtaining a basic qualification because of a lack of aptitude or as a result of their  
49  
50 social circumstances (CPB, 2006), and they will also have difficulties on the labour  
51  
52 market. Dropping out for other students depends on a combination of push and pull  
53  
54 factors. For instance, an important pull factor is what is referred to as 'green picking'  
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56 (RWI, 2005), which means that employers hire students shortly before they finish  
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58 their formal education and obtain a basic qualification. This is often the case when  
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3 students are in work placement and are offered a contract. The effect of green  
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5 picking recently curbed the decline in the dropout rate and caught the attention of the  
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7 government. Many vacancies became available because of the current positive  
8  
9 economic situation and young people are encouraged to leave school and to work  
10  
11 (Min. OCW, 2008). However, this clearly depends on the economic situation: when  
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13 labour market opportunities are tight, pull factors may become push factors; see the  
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15 following section.  
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20 A final important question is how dropouts see their qualifications in respect  
21  
22 of their situation on the labour market. The little research that has been conducted on  
23  
24 this issue seems to indicate that many dropouts enjoy gainful employment and do not  
25  
26 consider themselves to be a problem (Lee and Breen, 2007, Dekkers and Claassen,  
27  
28 2001). Work seems more rewarding for them because it gives them money, respect,  
29  
30 freedom, independence and responsibility. Qualitative research in the Netherlands on  
31  
32 a group of dropouts confirms that the majority of youngsters were, in fact, satisfied  
33  
34 with their current situation and did not particularly regret leaving school early. Those  
35  
36 with a job seemed to have got used to their income level (Portengen and Dekkers,  
37  
38 1998). The dominant discourse in which dropouts are constructed as unsuccessful  
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40 and problematic is, according to the dropouts themselves, clearly false (Lee & Breen,  
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42 2007).  
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#### 50 *Underestimation of the problem*

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52 But it is also possible to construe the argument that the dropout problem is actually  
53  
54 underestimated. This argument starts with how the dropout rate is calculated. This  
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56 rate is determined each year by counting the number of new dropouts. All the old  
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58 dropouts from previous years are therefore excluded from these figures, and this  
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3 makes a considerable difference in the reported dropout rate. According to the RMC  
4  
5 data, there were almost 57,000 registered new dropouts in the 2004-2005 school  
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7 year, but there were also 45,500 registered old dropouts who did not return to school,  
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9 so this amounts to a total of 102,500 dropouts.  
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13 Another problem is that the dropout rate, however it is calculated, is on the  
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15 decrease, but it is a slight decline, and not sufficient to meet the European target,  
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17 which is to halve the total number of new dropouts since 2000, which means  
18  
19 reaching a figure of 35,000 in 2010 (Min. OCW, 2007b). This would indicate that the  
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21 problem is rather persistent and difficult to combat, particularly if the target figures  
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23 were to include the old dropouts.  
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27 Furthermore, attention should be given to the fact that the relationship  
28  
29 between the basic qualification and labour market positions is strongly mediated by  
30  
31 economic cycles. When the economic climate deteriorates, the employment  
32  
33 opportunities for young people without a basic qualification diminish rapidly (RWI,  
34  
35 2006, Taskforce Jeugdwerkloosheid, 2006). Young people without a basic  
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37 qualification tend to have jobs in the lower segments of the labour market, which  
38  
39 makes it easier for employers to fire them. Dropouts are therefore the first to lose  
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41 their job, and they have less chance of sustainable labour participation (RWI, 2006;  
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43 Taskforce Jeugdwerkloosheid, 2006).  
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51 These discussions about underestimating or overestimating the problem of  
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53 dropout are important because they point to the dynamics involved in the transition  
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55 from school to work. As we have shown, the number of dropouts is related to  
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57 economic developments, to low educational levels and low socio-economic status,  
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59 and to personal and social problems. Furthermore, this discussion must not preclude  
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3 the situation of migrant youth, who are overrepresented in all dropout rate figures.  
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5 They also have a disproportionately high share in the most marginal groups, the so-  
6 called non-participants (15-24 years of age, not at school, not in work, and no regular  
7 income), 36 per cent for young migrant people compared with 18 per cent for native  
8 youth (Min. SZW, 2006). But at the same time, we should not forget that the general  
9 tendency of participation of migrant youth in education and work is positive.  
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### 20 *Policies on the transition from school to work*

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24 Although there are projects and measures in place to help migrant youth into work,  
25 there is no formal education or labour market policy for specific groups. The  
26 problems of migrant youngsters in school are tackled from the angle of  
27 compensatory policies or of achieving the basic qualification, and unemployment of  
28 young migrants is combated within the general framework of enhancing labour  
29 participation for young people. Therefore, the policies pertaining to the school-work  
30 transition for migrant youth are mostly described as part of more general measures  
31 and proposals. But at the same time it has to be acknowledged that in these policies  
32 the explicit or implicit referral to migrants has always the function to stress the  
33 urgency of the problem, as if it is primary a migrant problem. Especially in the  
34 debate about dropping-out the focus is on migrant youth as the group 'in danger'  
35 whereas the positive outcomes of their increasing successful participation in  
36 education and labour are underexposed.  
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3 *Vocational education and basic qualification*  
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5 The norm of the basic qualification stemmed from a major reform of vocational  
6 education in 1996. The reform aimed at flexible and individualised learning paths, at  
7 reducing the dropout level, and at a greater influence of the business community on  
8 content. The new system of (pre)vocational education entailed more theoretical  
9 elements which made it more difficult for groups of pupils to get a diploma, which  
10 led to a higher number of 'early school leavers'. So, paradoxically, the reform that  
11 aimed, amongst other things, to combat dropout, had, in fact, the opposite effect.  
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22 This sparked a fierce debate about the efficacy of the reform. Criticism of the  
23 resultant too theoretical level and the static content have led to plans for new  
24 attainment targets and new forms of teaching in vocational education. These plans  
25 have been developed with the approval of the business community, and are also  
26 considered to meet the needs of migrant youth (see SER, 2006). In a nutshell,  
27 attainment levels are now defined in terms of competences, both professional and  
28 social: i.e. the 'hard' and 'soft' skills. Students must learn these competences through  
29 what is referred to as 'new learning', which assumes that students work individually  
30 and in project groups on learning objectives, with teachers as coaches. But finding  
31 satisfactory translations of generally formulated competences into specific and  
32 testable skills is a problem, and both pupils and teachers feel that the move towards  
33 self-governed learning does not truly support the learning process. Preparations have  
34 started, but the difficulties encountered along the way have proved to be considerable  
35 (for a debate see Van der Werf, 2006, Stevens, 2006). These problems have given  
36 rise to a social debate about the dangers of new learning, and although the concept  
37 has not yet been abandoned altogether, the government decided in 2007 to postpone  
38 the introduction of the reform, planned for 2008, by at least one year. The  
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3 educational concept of new learning is deemed to be detrimental to migrant youth in  
4 particular, because their cultural background does not prepare them for the self-  
5 guidance required. These concerns also indicate a shift in the construction of migrant  
6 youth as a problematic group.  
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12 Related to the discussion about the best way to set up vocational education,  
13 the compulsory age for being in education has become the focus of debate. In 1969  
14 the compulsory school age was prescribed as being the end of the school year in  
15 which the pupil reached 16 years of age, followed by a year of part-time compulsory  
16 education. Compulsory school attendance ends at the age of 17. In practice, checking  
17 the part-time compulsory age proved to be difficult and many 16-17 year old pupils  
18 left education early without a basic qualification. This state of affairs was behind  
19 proposals to extend the school leaving age. As of 1-8-2007 the Compulsory  
20 Education Act has been extended with a 'qualification obligation' (Min. OCW,  
21 2007b). This implies that all youngsters between 16 and 18 years of age who do not  
22 have a basic qualification are obliged to attend school full time in order to obtain this  
23 basic qualification.  
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41 This is seen as a first step. The plan is to extend the compulsory age to 23,  
42 and possibly even to 27. The focus in this period is on combining school and work.  
43 But other, more drastic plans have also been put forward, with the aim of forcing  
44 'unwilling youth' into prep camps or boarding schools, the so-called campus  
45 approach, where they would be taught discipline, and again find the motivation to  
46 participate in society. How the coercive nature of this plan would be regulated within  
47 the existing legal framework is still not clear. Experiments based on voluntary  
48 participation are currently taking place (Taskforce Jeugdwerkloosheid, 2006; Min.  
49 Algemene Zaken, 2007). The main target for these plans are generally young  
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3 migrants who are seen as troublemakers on the streets because of their lack of  
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5 education and work and their resistance to being 're-educated' by social work and/or  
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7 training.  
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### 10 11 12 *Combating dropout and youth unemployment*

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14 Describing all the measures, projects, and taskforces that have been put in place to  
15  
16 combat dropout and unemployment is beyond the scope of this article. We will,  
17  
18 instead, present a brief overview of the three categories of underlying strategies. The  
19  
20 first category is the strategy of supervision and obligation. Several routes are  
21  
22 first category is the strategy of supervision and obligation. Several routes are  
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24 possible: one is refined registration and control, which means that young people  
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26 without a basic qualification can be traced and returned to education or work  
27  
28 experience programmes. When young people are past the compulsory school age  
29  
30 (now 18), this can only be done on a voluntary basis. So extending the compulsory  
31  
32 school age is a means to end this situation. Another way of forcing young people into  
33  
34 work (and training) is, when they apply for social assistance, to refuse benefit and  
35  
36 oblige them to work instead, i.e. the 'work first' approach. Proposals to send  
37  
38 problematic youngsters to prep camps or boarding schools also fall into this category  
39  
40 (Berenschot, 2006).  
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46 The second strategy involves creating training posts, work experience  
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48 placement, jobs etc.. This is done by agreements between the social partners  
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50 (government, employers and trade unions), municipalities and other involved  
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52 players. These agreements are sometimes supported by measures such as wage  
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54 subsidies or employers being exempt from having to pay certain social security  
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56 contributions, or extra budgets for municipalities. In particular, the measures and  
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58 projects in the second strategy are generally short term, local in nature, and have  
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3 hardly been evaluated at all. The same activities are sometimes undertaken under  
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5 new names.  
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8 The third strategy is the reform of vocational education, concentrating on a  
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10 better rapport with the labour market through training positions, the development of  
11  
12 professional and social (employee) skills as attainment levels, and flexible  
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14 programmes. However, implementing these reforms is proving to be very difficult,  
15  
16 and they meet with serious opposition from some quarters, including teachers,  
17  
18 political parties, and students. Another development is to introduce the concept of  
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20 'practically acquired skills', through which work experience may be re-evaluated as  
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22 being the equivalent of certain school qualifications.  
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### 29 *Self-fulfilling prophecies?* 30

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32 Although the number of dropouts is decreasing slightly, the results are still  
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34 unsatisfactory and it is unlikely that the target of halving the number of dropouts will  
35  
36 be achieved. As a result of growing anxiety about migrant youth becoming criminals  
37  
38 or radicalised, the disappointing effect of the existing policies has led to continued  
39  
40 attention being given to measures to combat school dropout.  
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44 In this context, the policy discourses have resulted in these dropouts being presented  
45  
46 along the following lines: in general, low educational achievement is considered to  
47  
48 be the result of student-related deficits: the low educational level of parents, poverty,  
49  
50 broken families, insufficient language use etc.. This explanation in terms of  
51  
52 individual characteristics is further enhanced by stating that migrant youth, because  
53  
54 of their cultural background, lack the competences required to adjust to and  
55  
56 participate in the Dutch educational system, and also fail the modern requirements of  
57  
58 self-development and social negotiation. Migrants are consequently portrayed as a  
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3 high-risk group in need of special attention and care, particularly when it involves  
4  
5 the group of non-participating young people who are seen as very problematic and  
6  
7 are associated with 'undesirable behaviour' (SZW 2007). The consequence of this  
8  
9 discourse may mean that young migrant people are blamed for their own  
10  
11 disadvantage and that this contributes to the prevailing image of migrant people in  
12  
13 the Netherlands as unwilling to integrate and adapt to Dutch society (Vasta, 2007).  
14  
15 This may end up in the equation of ethnicity with failing skills, and may thus argue  
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17 in favour of migrants being excluded without it being referred to as discrimination.  
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### 24 *Conclusion*

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29 We wanted to know if forms of segmented assimilation could be detected in the  
30  
31 Netherlands with drop-out figures of migrant youth as a marker. Our analysis of the  
32  
33 dropout rates and the link between early school leaving and success or failure on the  
34  
35 labour market shows that the general tendency for migrant youth is not necessarily  
36  
37 downward. Although some migrant youngsters end up in unemployment because of  
38  
39 their lack in educational qualifications, many others with the same background have  
40  
41 found a position on the labour market. These findings are corroborated by other  
42  
43 studies. For instance, there are signs of polarization among young second generation  
44  
45 Turkish people in the Netherlands (Crul and Doomerik, 2003). On the one hand an  
46  
47 increasing group of young Turkish people are successful in higher education and  
48  
49 they form a cultural and political elite in their community. On the other hand,  
50  
51 Turkish dropouts seem to reproduce the low-class position of their parents. This  
52  
53 polarization can also be found among the Moroccan migrants (see Crul et al., 2008).  
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58 This is a tendency also described by Faist (1995), referring to the position of Turkish  
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3 young migrants in Germany where he sees a differentiation between successful  
4 school-leavers and those who do not enter the job training stage. Other migrant  
5 groups like the Surinamese are as a group faring better in education and employment.  
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10 So polarization is not only taking place within the same migrant group but also  
11 between migrant groups. Furthermore the second generation migrants are clearly  
12 performing better than the first generation in terms of educational level and  
13 participation on the labour market. So, there is no overall prove to assume a  
14 segmented, downward assimilation of migrant youth.  
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22 We have shown furthermore that dropping out of school should not necessarily be  
23 seen as something dramatic, and the term dropout cannot, in fact, be used as a marker  
24 per se for downward mobility. The majority of dropouts can actually be considered  
25 to be less of a problem than imagined. They are in employment and have often even  
26 obtained an educational certificate. However, the fact is that the problematic group  
27 sets the image for the rest of the group. Discussions about early school leaving focus  
28 far too much on the dark side, and this means that early school leavers might  
29 possibly be stigmatized by the use of the term dropout.  
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41 The overview of figures and policies shows that the position of groups of young  
42 migrants in education is still, after numerous attempts to change their situation,  
43 unfavourable and is in need of improvement. Educational disadvantage,  
44 disproportionate dropout and unemployment levels, and discriminatory practices  
45 characterise their life chances in the Netherlands. This would seem to be the result of  
46 complex interaction between maladapted institutional methods to integrate migrants,  
47 and the migrants' own ways of situating themselves in Dutch society. It is especially  
48 important to point at the Dutch educational system as an institutional factor in  
49 distributing opportunities. The early selection for vocational or general secondary  
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3 education works out as a disadvantage for migrant youth (Crul and Vermeulen,  
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5 2003), who because of still lesser performances in primary education are referred to  
6  
7 vocational education. And within vocational education it is difficult for them to make  
8  
9 the right choices for the labour market, which causes delay or disappointment and  
10  
11 may enhance dropping out (SCP, 2008).  
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15 We think that these outcomes are interesting for reworking the theory of segmented  
16  
17 assimilation. The presumed relation between early school leaving and reduced labour  
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19 market opportunities, the phenomenon of, polarization between and in groups, and  
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21 the specifics of the national contexts have to be dealt with in order to analyse more  
22  
23 precisely the position of the second generation migrants.  
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29 It is however important to note that institutional barriers and policies targeting  
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31 migrant youth as problematic contribute towards maintaining ethnic categorization.  
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34 We have attempted to show how groups-at-risk are defined in the debate about  
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36 dropout and unemployment, and how this process enhances the idea that  
37  
38 disadvantage is linked to cultural and ethnic background. This implies a change in  
39  
40 the social representation of second generation migrants. The problems of migrant  
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42 youth, such as educational disadvantage, dropout or unemployment, are seen here in  
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44 terms of a 'youth at risk' who is not capable of or even willing to participate in Dutch  
45  
46 society. And because of a deliberate link between this incapacity/unwillingness and  
47  
48 problems of harassment and criminality, the call for drastic measures is being heard  
49  
50 ever more loudly. Problems of discrimination on the labour market, of changing  
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52 qualifications, or of inadequate forms of education are only discussed in the margins.  
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54 Living conditions in the urban conurbations, where highly segregated  
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56 neighbourhoods are located, are mostly discussed as proof of unwillingness to mix  
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3 and therefore to integrate. The troublemaking behaviour of some migrant youngsters  
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5 in the inner cities is seen as illustrative of this refusal to adapt to Dutch society.  
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10 Discourses in the 1980s and 1990s were predominantly in terms of structural  
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12 disadvantage that had to be overcome (SCP, 2006), whereas today the terms tend to  
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14 be more cultural or ethnic in nature: the migrants' problems are related to their  
15  
16 cultural or ethnic peculiarities and to the problems they have identifying with the  
17  
18 norms and values of Dutch society. This redefinition implies that the Other i.e.  
19  
20 migrants, fail to meet the social and cultural norms prevalent in the Netherlands, and  
21  
22 that migrants are therefore responsible for their own exclusion. Problems of  
23  
24 integration are attributed to migrants, and any reciprocity in the process is swiftly put  
25  
26 aside. We hope that our discussion on the transition from school to work for migrant  
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28 youth has opened the way to explore the dynamics of exclusion and participation,  
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30 and to consider the importance of discursive constructions that may contribute to the  
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32 creation of new forms of exclusion.  
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