

Final Master's Thesis

***Educating on Equity: How Aspirations Influence the Fight Against Educational Inequality
in the Netherlands***

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of primary school educators' aspirations on the implementation of policies designed to reduce educational inequality in the Netherlands. As the issue of inequality of opportunity has risen in Dutch education, understanding how educators' motivations intersect with policy goals is essential for improving implementation outcomes. However, the link between these two variables has not been researched in this context. Consequently, this study answers: '*What is the influence of primary school educators' aspirations on the implementation of policies aimed at reducing educational inequality in the Netherlands?*'. Using an inductive, qualitative approach involving 31 interviews, it was found that while educators often express aspirations to support disadvantaged students, these aspirations have a limited and mostly indirect impact on implementation. Structural barriers, such as insufficient funding and unclear policy, constrain educators' ability to act. These results demonstrate that aspirations can shape, but do not determine, policy implementation in practice.

Keywords: Aspirations; Policy Implementation; Educational Inequality; Street-level Bureaucracy

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Introduction

“If inequality starts anywhere, many scholars agree, it’s with faulty education” (Ireland, 2016). This statement highlights that education plays a vital role in shaping life’s opportunities and outcomes. Yet, in practice, not everyone has access to the education that is most suitable for them to maximise their learning potential (Scheider et al., 2023). In this way, when access to education is unequal, it can create barriers later in individuals’ lives. When individuals do not have the opportunity to reach their maximum potential, it can also impact the country’s overall labour potential (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Ibourk & Amaghous, 2013; Liyana, 2023; Sart et al., 2023). Therefore, educational inequality constitutes a significant social challenge in contemporary society.

Recognition of the need to address this inequality has been rising in the Netherlands. However, the country has been judged as insufficient in giving equal opportunities for development to children from low-income households (Algemeen Dagblad [AD], 2024a). It has even been stated that the Netherlands has become an international frontrunner in the European Union in educational disparities between schools and children (AD, 2024b; Centraal Planbureau, 2020; Stichting Leerkracht, n.d.). These inequalities are often correlated with socio-economic status, religious background or ethnicity (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2024). To combat this problem that more and more children face, the Netherlands has launched a range of policies and subsidy opportunities for schools over the years. These initiatives include ‘De Gelijke Kansen Alliantie’ (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap [OCW], n.d.), ‘gewichtenregeling’ (Primair Onderwijs raad [PO-raad], 2019), summerschool and ‘schakelklas’ (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Despite these efforts to reduce educational inequality, the problem persists, and the ineffectiveness of the policies in fully addressing the issue has been established (OCW, 2024; PO-raad, 2024). The latter might be

related to the fact that policies often disregard the view and impact of those implementing the policies on the street level, the people working in schools, such as teachers and directors (PO-raad, 2024).

Teachers and school leaders are increasingly recognised as playing a vital role in the implementation of policy by institutions such as the CBS (2024) and NPO Kennis (2024). These entities have brought educators' influence to the forefront as key factors that influence educational inequality in schools. It has been suggested that teachers' expectations of children can be influential for the children's future (Chakri, n.d.). However, there is still limited understanding of how their aspirations towards their students impact this. Even though the topic of aspirations for other population groups has been widely discussed in academic journals, when it comes to educators, aspirations research considers only teachers' career aspirations or aspirations of students themselves (Eren & Tezel, 2010; Guyon & Huillery, 2021; Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016; van den Broeck, 2020; Watt et al., 2014). It does not consider what the teacher aspires for the students and their education. This disregard is remarkable since previous research has revealed that teachers, as street-level bureaucrats, apply discretion in interpreting and applying policies in their daily classroom practice, and directors serve as communicators of these policies (Lipsky, 1980).

The existing literature, which will be discussed in-depth in the theory section, has suggested a diverse range of implementing actors (Calista, 1994; Sabatier, 1986), and has even highlighted the power of frontline workers or street-level bureaucrats, such as teachers (Gofen, 2014; Hupe & Hill, 2019; Lipsky, 1969). Nonetheless, the connection with aspirations has remained unexplored. This study aims to address this gap by examining the role of educational professionals' aspirations. Accordingly, it aims to explore the research question: *What is the influence of primary school educators' aspirations on the implementation of policies aimed at reducing educational inequality in the Netherlands?* This is explained through the

subquestions: *‘What does existing literature say about aspirations, implementation and street-level bureaucrats?’*, *‘How can these factors be put into sensitising concepts?’*, *‘How do educators’ aspirations influence implementation in the first round of interviews?’*, *‘How do educators’ aspirations influence implementation in the second round of interviews?’* and *‘How do educators’ aspirations influence implementation in the third round of interviews?’*. Here, aspirations are understood as an individual’s ambitions, goals, wishes or desires, and their intentions to achieve them. They are formed and affected by the person’s background and environment, and constantly evolve (Brzozowska, 2024). Educational inequality is conceptualised as a remarkable difference in educational achievements between individuals in society (Blanden et al., 2023). It is suggested that, despite the existence of policies to reduce inequality of opportunity among children, their effectiveness may depend on the educators’ aspirations. Consequently, this paper’s goal is to construct a theory of the aspirations of primary school workers influencing the implementation of policies targeting educational inequality.

Beyond the mentioned academic contribution, societal relevance is achieved due to the contribution of this research to a deeper understanding of how teachers and other educators influence the implementation of policies. Since these actors are expected to play a significant role in how policies are implemented, insights into their aspirations and their front-line influence can help with developing better policies (Johnson, 2024). The final recommendations, which will stem from the results, provide guidance on how to achieve the desired effect of policy on reducing inequality through assisting ground-level actors.

To achieve the proposed contributions, this paper will start by presenting the existing theory on the topics of aspirations and policy implementation, which will offer a starting point for recognising patterns to create an inductive theory. Afterwards, the methodology will explain the sampling and other considerations for the qualitative research that was conducted. For an in-depth understanding and an accurate inductive results section, 31 interviews were

conducted with teachers and other educators. Based on the findings, several concluding remarks will be made, which contain the answer to the research question and reflect on the learning process.

Theoretical Framework

The following chapter will review existing literature on policy implementation and aspirations to create a basis for understanding the main variables of the research question. Based on this, sensitising concepts are presented of aspirations which could impact policy implementation. These concepts will serve as guidance for the interviews and for the initiation of theory creation, and will be adjusted to ensure accuracy in the results section.

Policy implementation

Multiple authors have provided insights into the importance of implementation for a policy to be effective (Calista, 1994; Tezera, 2019). The book *Implementation* by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) is important to introduce first, as it “has the reputation of having discovered the study of the implementation stage as the ‘missing link’ in policy studies and the crucial stage in the policy cycle in which success and failure of policies are decided” (Wegrich, 2016, p.342). The authors of this book defined implementation as a process involving multiple steps and actors that interact with each other, described as ‘complex chains of reciprocal interaction’ (Hupe, 2010). In that case, a policy would have higher chances of succeeding if all actors involved collaborated rightly with each other. The authors argued that fewer ‘clearance’ points of miscommunication and excessive involvement of actors must happen for a lower risk of policy failure. This concept, where policies fail due to a lack of regard for implementation and its complexity, resulting in a mismatch between policymakers’ intentions or promises and the actual outcomes achieved, is referred to as the implementation gap (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). For this gap to be filled, interactions across actors within the government system must occur, and cooperation in each part of the ‘chain’ should be successful by reducing clearance points and making organisational agreements, according to them. In other words, Pressman and Wildavsky, along with other scholars, suggest that societal change cannot be achieved solely

through policy changes, but lies more deeply in a complex set of interactions across multiple levels of government (Wegrich, 2016).

Sabatier (1986), Mthethwa (2012), and Calista (1994) see the mentioned approach as top-down. It involves implementing policies through the government's hierarchical structure by clearly communicating policy objectives and providing specific goals to be fulfilled down the chain. This process is set up and controlled to ensure that the intentions of policymakers align with the outcomes. However, Sabatier (1986) and Mthethwa (2012) find that this perspective ignores the local discretion and the influence of implementers to adapt the policy to their own values and circumstances. Whereas Calista (1994) mentions that even though it is assumed that implementers cannot influence the outcomes, it should be considered as a possibility. He recognises the prospect of self-interested actions by implementers and acknowledges that support must be gained from implementers for them to cooperate. Nonetheless, all authors who mention this perspective primarily focus on achieving policymakers' intentions through communicating and controlling the performance of their subordinates, while broadly ignoring the local complexity of bureaucrats.

Other authors that Hupe and Hill (2019) bring forward, for instance, Michael Lipsky, further emphasise the importance of implementation. They suggest that, depending on the situation, a policy will be implemented differently based on the demands and resources at that moment. Therefore, aside from suggesting the complexity and importance of the implementation process, like the previously mentioned authors, they bring forward the role of non-governmental actors in the process. Implementation is then viewed as a 'practice' instead of a process outlined in the policy and implemented accordingly. From this bottom-up perspective, local actors, such as street-level bureaucrats, are seen as crucial in how a policy is implemented. Rather than being inactive appliers of policy to avoid increasing clearance points, they shape the policy outcomes by adapting policy in their own way. They have a form of

domination over the outcomes of the policy, and thus the network of local actors involved must be taken into consideration immediately (Calista, 1994; Sabatier, 1986).

Similarly, Linder and Peters (1987, as cited in Vinzant & Crothers, 1996) argued that implementation can only be successful if the policy implementers are considered when designing policy. This bottom-up approach, where implementers play a significant role in the effectiveness of policy, is also brought forward by Mthethwa (2012). He suggests that, depending on the implementer's view of the policy and interaction with it and each other, policies are implemented in a certain way and can only be successful if street-level bureaucrats are considered. To engage these individuals, Tezera (2019) and Sarkies et al. (2017) suggest a strategy for bottom-up involvement to facilitate implementation. This involvement can be achieved by ensuring officials have a reason to commit to the policy's goals, motivating the entire network of implementing stakeholders to be supportive of the policy, creating a shared vision, demonstrating that the change has no detrimental effects and showing that resources are available. These aspects then influence how and to what extent the policy is implemented.

Although other authors, including Calista (1994) and Sabatier (1986), also recognise the need to strategise and consider local actors, they mainly focus on the multi-organisational relationship and local implementation structures that need to be acknowledged to ensure the intentions lead to correct outcomes. They suggest that successful implementation is "far more dependent upon the skills of specific individuals in 'local implementation structures' than upon the efforts of central government officials" (Hjern et al., 1978, as cited in Sabatier, 1986, p.32). Within this perspective, each implementation setting has different circumstances, which makes it possible for bureaucrats to make independent decisions. The focus should then be on enhancing the relationship with street-level bureaucrats and interacting with them about their goals and strategies on the policy.

Connecting these bottom-up and top-down perspectives on policy implementation, Sabatier (1988) proposed the Advocacy Coalition Framework. This framework focuses on the statement that various actors are active in the implementation, but in different ways. The interactions on various levels of government create both constraints and resources for actors, as illustrated by the top-down approach. However, each group or coalition chooses to use these resources with a particular strategy, as represented in the bottom-up approach. “On the basis of perceptions of the adequacy of governmental decisions and resultant impacts, as well as new information arising from search processes and external dynamics, each advocacy coalition may revise its beliefs and alter its strategy” (Sabatier, 1988, p.133). Thus, the system is divided into coalitions that adjust and develop their strategies of, for example, advocating or following a policy versus taking their own autonomy. This learning that occurs during the policy process is called policy-oriented learning and is relevant in the implementation step, as it considers challenges and various actors that influence the implementation process. Whitsel et al. (2024) also recognise the need to engage a network of actors when implementing policy. They see the involvement of different groups as essential for resources, commitment and capacity to adapt policies to diverse contexts and scenarios. Accordingly, a policy will not be effective if this implementation stage is not considered (Mthethwa, 2012; Hupe & Hill, 2019).

Street-level bureaucrat

In line with the idea that implementation is crucial for policies to work and that a range of actors make implementation possible, street-level bureaucrats have a certain power in policy implementation as one of the actors (Hupe & Hill, 2019). They are sometimes even presented as policymakers instead of policy-takers (Gofen, 2014). These bureaucrats are seen by Lipsky (1969) as public service workers, such as educators, who serve as the link between policies and citizens, and therefore have an influential role in the way they implement the policy. They have

great independence in job decision-making and have extensive influence on the lives of citizens through discretion. This type of actor can judge scenarios and affect outcomes through their interpretation, mindset and behaviour. Aside from Lipsky, other authors have noted similar findings, where bureaucrats interpret and implement policies that adjust outcomes (Cookson & Barrantes, 2024; Durose & Lowndes, 2024; Hupe & Keiser, 2019). Discretion is understood as a “choice, judgement or improvisation within recognised boundaries” (Durose & Lowndes, 2024, p.1027). Others see it more simply as “what implementers have -or rather ‘do’- after the goals of a public policy have been formulated and decided upon” (Hupe & Hill, 2020, p.238). This discretion is limited by resources, facilitated by independence, and presented in various forms. The authors Durose and Lowndes (2024) and Cookson and Barrantes (2024) propose rational, relational and professional discretion as motives for making specific choices. For example, rational discretion focuses on the bureaucrat’s self-interest in interpreting policy. They thus have a multitude of motivations that lead to specific choices and result in various policy outcomes.

Different types of discretions influencing citizens and policy implementation are also recognised by Vinzant and Crothers (1997). They mention cases where teachers use outcome discretion or process discretion to achieve their desired outcome. While the so-far mentioned authors discuss discretion to enhance Lipsky’s ideas, Chang and Brewer (2022) relate their ideas to Gofen (2014), who connected discretion with motivation. Gofen suggested that motivation can result in divergence from policies and showcased examples of how motivation can influence the actions of street-level bureaucrats and the outcome of policies. He gave an example of teachers who refused “to follow a curriculum change, because they think it is not beneficial to their students while they agree with the policy goal” (Gofen, 2014, p.483). In this case, the motivation of the teacher to make a beneficial decision for the student can be noticed and results in ignoring the implementation of the policy. Thus, whether street-level bureaucrats

are motivated by a specific person's interest, even their own, or external pressures has been discovered to impact how they implement policies.

Another 'type' of discretion by bureaucrats that has been acknowledged in the literature is coping. This concept, introduced by Tummers et al. (2015, as cited in Hupe & Hill, 2020), means that instead of being motivated to act in someone's interest, the individual acts in a way to control stress-causing pressures and demands. Between the range of these demands, they choose what to act on based on what they can handle, while accounting for their resource limitations. This means they might go against the specifics of a formulated policy. This mechanism of choosing what to implement and how to implement it is affected to a degree by the bureaucrat's preferences, capacity, workload and feelings towards the effectiveness of the policy (Sakir, 2023; Winter, 2002; Xiao et al., 2023). The coping mechanism can be viewed as a form of 'defence mechanism' where street-level bureaucrats attempt to mitigate stress resulting from inadequate resources, authority threats, or failing to meet expectations of their role (Lipsky, 1971). To go against these three stresses, the defence mechanism of educators can be, for example, to segment their students. Educators then try to put students in a mental bracket based on characteristics, such as their level of language proficiency, to oversee their role and attitude towards the student. When teachers or other educators showcase that they expect their students to excel and aim to motivate students to do better, those students are identified as more likely to succeed. Thus, depending on the educator's stress and motivation, as well as their values and mindset, street-level bureaucrats implement policies differently (Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983). These forms of street-level discretion are inevitable due to the complexity of the real world (Wagenaar, 2020). Even if policymakers want to implement their plans exactly as intended, street-level bureaucrats cannot act mechanically, and many factors, including coping, motivation, and aspirations, influence their decisions on implementation.

Aspirations

The term aspiration is generally seen by scholars as the way people describe their own goals for the future. These goals can be on different levels, such as social, educational, or occupational. Aspirations can have an impact on an individual's actions and behaviours in the immediate or long-term future, as well as be influenced by that individual's motivations and environment (Haller, 1968; Hart, 2016). Aspirations thus represent the wishes and desires of a person, which influence their actions.

In the context of education, educators' aspirations, specifically those of teachers, are often considered professional or career aspirations (Eren & Tezel, 2010; Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016; Watt et al., 2014). An aspiration is then "associated with their career choice satisfaction, motivations for teaching, future time perspective, interest in teaching, professional investment and commitment to teaching" (Eren, 2017, p.276). These are aspects identified as part of career development aspirations, which are seen as goals for future career steps within education and shaped by previous experiences (Watt et al., 2014). Next to career aspirations, educational aspirations from students are also identified in the literature. These are seen as ambitions students have for their own future in education, which impact their achievements (Guyon & Huillery, 2021; van den Broeck, 2020).

The type of aspirations to be researched in this paper is teachers' aspirations for the students and their education, as well as aspirations of directors, deputy directors (adjunct¹) and support coordinators (Intern Begeleider (IB-er)), and how those relate to applying policy. There is limited literature on this topic; nonetheless, several existing articles provide a basis for understanding these aspirations, although they mostly discuss other forms of aspirations, parts of their findings are still relevant. Firstly, Slack (2022), when discussing encouraging disadvantaged students through their aspirations, explained that many factors cause certain

¹ In brackets, the job position will be presented in the original language, Dutch.

aspirations. Feelings, experience, resources, background and perceptions make one's aspirations different from the next person's. Not only Slack, but also other authors, highlight how aspirations shape behaviour, motivation, and mindset, and vice versa (Baker et al., 2014; Forrester et al., 2024). For teachers, this means that aspirations for their students are not only based on pedagogical or personal ideals but are shaped by classroom interactions, expectations of students and their expected abilities, and outside pressures and stresses (Solheim, 2019; Veldman et al., 2017).

Following this, these authors noted that a teacher's belief or mindset about a student's potential can influence the encouragement and opportunities that the student receives. If an educator aspires to help a specific student get the most out of their abilities, this often results in positive reinforcement (Forrester et al., 2024; Williams, 1976). Related to this, Veldman et al. (2017) found that interpersonal self-efficacy, or how they see the relationship with their students and their ability to maintain a positive one, is an important aspiration of teachers which can affect their students' engagement. These authors identified agency and communion as dimensions that teachers aspire to achieve, meaning they seek to have control and dominance over the classroom while also exerting warmth and welcomeness. Similarly, Solheim (2019) noticed that teachers aspire to improve classroom interactions with students. She presents a framework that showcases that the expectancy, or self-efficacy of the teacher to execute a task, the values of the teacher, and affectivity towards the task and classroom make a teacher want to implement classroom interaction skills. This indicates that aspirations to implement certain skills affect the actual implementation and therewith the results for students.

Another notable aspect from the literature is that when redefining their aspirations, educators may lower their expectations of their students as a coping strategy (Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983; Lipsky, 1971; Veldman, 2017). Slack (2022) noticed a similar mindset from educators as she saw that they often used this principle to select students for an inequality

initiative. For instance, a teacher mentioned that “although she was all for disadvantaged youngsters having chances, ‘at the end of the day they so often let you down’” (Slack, 2022, p.329). Instead of reducing unfairness in schools due to inequality, as the project was intended to do, the selection of the best students led to similar unfairness within the program. This showcases the mental bracket that educators place students in as a defence or coping mechanism, as discussed earlier (Lipsky, 1971). This bracket can lead to some students receiving more attention than others, which affects the students’ eventual achievement (Williams, 1976).

This framing of aspirations implies that educators’ aspirations are critical for policy implementation. Policies often rely on the assumption that front-line implementers, among whom teachers, will adopt and execute them uniformly (Hupe & Keiser, 2019). Yet, street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion influenced by their own motivations, beliefs and views (Durose & Lowndes, 2024). When educators aspire to specific outcomes for students, they may selectively implement policy features that align with those aspirations and intentionally ignore those which they view as not fitting or not relevant for the students or unintentionally neglect them due to stress or the importance of other aspirations. Although Solheim (2019) has shown that teachers generally want to support students, when a policy does not match this, they are less motivated to follow it and are rather guided by what they believe will benefit students. Aspirations, in that case, are not just desires for teachers to do what they want and believe in, but they also translate into reasons for and ways to interpret policy.

Sensitising concepts

According to the presented literature, educators’ aspirations are understood as motivations for them to engage with their students and their education, which are shaped by beliefs, external factors, and values, and lead to engagement with or resistance to policy implementation. In

this research, policy implementation refers to educational inequality policies, such as programs that require educators to provide additional support to students who do not receive it at home. The aspirations of these professionals are expected to affect whether this additional support happens at the street level. A range of scenarios is possible, such as teachers who believe that inequality is an important topic might aspire to follow the program's ideals, whereas teachers who prioritise having the smartest students might focus on the students who showcase their commitment and intelligence rather than engaging all children. These aspirations are expected to influence the extent to which inequality-reducing policies are implemented at the school level.

However, as showcased, the concept of aspirations is broad and can come in multiple forms that can each impact implementation in a specific way. Based on the previous analysis of aspirations literature, four categories of aspirations have been created that may influence the implementation by the educational worker. These categories should be considered concepts which offer guidance for data collection and analysis. They aim to capture how educators' aspirations for students manifest in practice and how they may influence the implementation of policies focused on inequality. The table of categories below outlines what educators might aspire to and will serve as the conceptual basis for developing the theory. It highlights the complex and diverse nature of aspirations that is tied to broader dynamics, such as institutional expectations and motivation.

<u>Sensitising concept</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Content</u>
Future	These reflect educators' long-term ambitions beyond the classroom and represent personal motivation. In theory, it was expected that educators would express future-oriented ambitions rather than having other ambitions, such as to implement a certain policy.	- Aspires for all students to be engaged - Aspires for specific students to be engaged - Aspires to a good future for all students - Aspires to a good future for specific students - Aspires to connect with all students - Aspires to connect with specific students - Aspires for all students to reach their full academic potential - Aspires for specific students to reach their full academic potential
Students	These reflect educators' ambitions for and towards their students. In theory, it was expected that educators might have specific ambitions for certain students, leading to one student being more engaged and getting better results than another.	- Aspires for all students to be engaged - Aspires for specific students to be engaged - Aspires to a good future for all students - Aspires to a good future for specific students - Aspires to connect with all students - Aspires to connect with specific students - Aspires for all students to reach their full academic potential - Aspires for specific students to reach their full academic potential

Institutional arrangements	These reflect educators' ambitions to engage with rules and policies. In theory, it was expected that educators might selectively implement policy according to what they see fit.	- Aspires to follow rules and regulations - Aspires to take a lot of discretionary space - Aspires to take little discretionary space - Aspires to ignore rules that are not beneficial - Knows about policies to be followed - Does not know about policies to be followed
Control	These reflect educators' ambitions on managing workload, struggles and pressures. In theory, it was expected that educators might unintentionally neglect policy due to stress or the importance of other aspirations.	- Aspires to be in charge of the classroom - Aspires to be in control of tasks - Aspires to reduce stress - Aspires to reduce external pressures

To measure the second variable of policy implementation, two aspects are focused on. Firstly, the opinion of educators on whether they think inequality is recognisable in their school, and whether and how they know of any measures being taken to address it. Secondly, their perception of how and to what extent the policy is implemented in daily practice by themselves and others in their school.

Methodology

The goal of this research is to explore the aspirations of individuals working in primary schools and how these influence the implementation of policies aimed at addressing educational inequality. To obtain the needed data for achieving this goal, 31 educators in Dutch primary schools were interviewed. In the following section, the sample population and strategy, the process of data collection and analysis, and a reflection on the reliability, validity, and ethical considerations will be explained to provide a methodological background for the data.

Sample population and sampling strategy

The participant sample was made up of primary school educators in the province of South Holland. This area was selected due to its diverse demographic profile, with people from a wide range of backgrounds and socio-economic statuses, as well as for convenience reasons. Because this research looks at policies aimed at decreasing educational inequality, which is a phenomenon that is more relevant in a place where a broader spectrum of families lives, this region provides a suitable and relevant setting to analyse inequality in practice and educators' effect on it. In this region, teachers were selected as participants, since they, as street-level bureaucrats or front-line workers, were expected to impact policy implementation, as has been shown in the theory section. Therefore, initially, interviews were held with teachers, rather than other individuals in schools. However, after several interviews with teachers, it was discovered that additional participants might be beneficial. The sample population was chosen to be enhanced with directors, deputy directors (adjunct) and support coordinators (IB-er), who are all part of the management team of primary schools. This was decided due to their expected involvement in policy implementation and to enhance the findings, which were

initially relatively similar when talking only to teachers. This resulted in a total of 16 teachers and 15 individuals in management team positions being interviewed (see *Appendix A* for more information on the participants). Although these 15 people are viewed as part of the management team for this research, most of them previously worked as teachers or in other positions in education.

These participants were selected using a combination of purposeful or purposive and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first approach was applied to find participants who matched the criterion of this research, which was for the individual to work in the mentioned positions in a primary school in South Holland. The snowball method was utilised at a later stage in the interviewing process to increase the number of participants while ensuring the participants had specific job descriptions and added to the diversity of the sample. The mentioned strategies resulted in three methods of reaching the participants. Firstly, schools in the main cities in South Holland were contacted through email and phone. Participants who were interviewed were asked for referrals to other potential participants, which was another approach taken to gain interviewees. Since this was not sufficiently effective, especially regarding finding teachers to interview, participants were also approached through the researcher's social network. While the researcher had no direct relationship with any of the participants, the use of this network may be considered a form of convenience sampling and could lead to potential sampling bias. Nevertheless, this approach, combined with referrals, made it possible to reach individuals in a short period of time, while still attempting to obtain a varied and diverse sample by interviewing individuals from more than 15 different schools in multiple cities and neighbourhoods with diverging characteristics.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this research were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by a topic list (see *Appendix B*). This list aligns with the sensitising concepts, presented at the end of the theoretical framework, containing questions regarding the topics of aspiring to the future, students, institutional arrangements and control. Before discussing these topics, the interviewees were asked about their demographics and their views on inequality, policy and aspirations to ensure the interviewee understood the research topic of inequality. Since this research is inductive and does not have clearly defined hypotheses, the questions about most of the topics, especially the ones stemming from the sensitising concepts, are open and broad. Accordingly, because the initial concepts are ill-defined, it is impossible to define the questions further without creating bias or mitigating the ability of participants to answer on their own accord and in their way. The inductive nature of this research also meant that flexibility was maintained during the interviews, allowing participants to discuss other relevant topics or themes that might not have been included in the current definition of the concepts. This made the interviews more conversational than structured, ensuring that participants felt comfortable enough to share their ideas openly. When a further explanation was needed to understand new concepts from the interviewee or for participants to comprehend the questions, probing questions were used to allow for this (Babbie, 2020).

Following the interviewing phase, the audio recordings were transcribed in the spoken language, Dutch or English, to ensure that none of the responses given would be lost. This data was then transferred into the qualitative data analysis software program Atlas.ti to start the coding process. At first, coding was attempted to be in line with the sensitising concepts from the theory section of this paper; however, these codes did not suffice for the answers that were given, since more and different themes and nuances were brought up that did not follow the initial concepts. Therefore, a grounded theory approach (Babbie, 2020) was

adopted by attempting to utilise the coding steps of Charmaz (2006, as cited in Boeije, 2009). In addition to open, axial and selective coding from these steps, memoing was tried, in which notes were taken on the interviews about emergent patterns and new thoughts that altered the expected final theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These memos, as well as the coding steps, were integrated into the written results section and led to the coding and writing process being done in rounds. After several interviews were reviewed and new insights came to light, the analysis was adjusted, and the initial themes were re-coded. This iterative analysis phase is reflected in the results section and the codebook (see *Appendix C*).

Reliability and Validity

Next to the use of an iterative coding process, which helps make the findings more accurate and representative while increasing transparency, several validity and reliability methods were applied to this research, inspired by Creswell and Poth (2018). Firstly, triangulation was used to corroborate evidence by reviewing multiple sources and types of data to obtain information for the research, such as news and academic articles, and primary and secondary data. Another method was by discussing and showing the research and its findings to both external auditors and participants. The opinion of external individuals, who were not involved in the research and had limited knowledge of its topic, helped give critical reflections on the paper and the codes. Participants' reflections were intended as a form of member checking, where the respondents validated or disconfirmed the research findings to ensure accuracy in the results. It must be noted that this was conducted relatively informally, by asking several participants at the end of the interview, although still part of the transcript, if they considered what was discovered up until that point accurate.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

To adhere to ethical guidelines, participants were informed about the research and their rights in advance, and all signed the completed information and consent sheet provided by Erasmus University. Each participant was also given a pseudonym in the entirety of this paper for anonymity, and all personal or sensitive data were replaced in the transcripts and potential quotes for the analysis (Babbie, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results

After the conceptualisation and expectations set in the theoretical framework, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic list following the presented sensitising concepts. To create an inductive, iterative process of refining these concepts, the author first coded five interviews before analysing further findings. Although a pattern was noticeable in these interviews, it did not match the sensitising concepts from the theory. It became evident that these initial expectations did not fully capture the nuances and complexities of the participants' perspectives. The codes that stemmed from the theory thus failed to reflect how educators truly viewed policy and aspirations. Therefore, the initial concepts will be re-coded inductively in this section. This will occur in rounds, where a specific number of interviews is reviewed each time to refine the previously suggested concepts. This number will change based on whether enough new information was given to demonstrate a more in-depth analysis than was provided previously. In each analysis round, a description of the new concepts derived from patterns in the interviews will be presented, with the use of quotes to provide more detail, validity and understanding. To ensure anonymity in quoting, all names mentioned are pseudonyms.

First round

The original sensitising concepts consisted of aspirations about 'the future', 'the students', maintaining 'control' over the classroom and other stresses, and wanting to follow 'institutional arrangements'. The first concept of 'future' represented career ambitions or other long-term big goals, such as having a legacy or making an impact in education (Eren & Tezel, 2010). However, rather than aspiring to any of these goals for their own future or the future of education, most of the first five respondents mentioned that they did not have any significant plans for their future. Instead, they suggested that they would like to continue

teaching and providing children with knowledge and chances for personal development, aside from wanting to create a good and safe environment for these children to grow up in.

Willemijn² answered the question of what she hoped or expected of her future as a teacher with “That I can continue like this”, reasoning that “I just have a lot of fun with the children”.

The future they see for themselves is connected to the aspiration to care for the children rather than being taken separately and focused on their personal growth, as expected from the theory. As previously mentioned, multiple authors have suggested that teachers aspire to grow in the career ladder, for example, to obtain a leadership role (Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016; Watt et al., 2014). This is the main aspiration focused on by the existing database on the topic of teachers’ aspirations. Yet, these interviews showcase the opposite; their future career goal is not a topic that occupies their mind when considering why they teach or act a certain way in the classroom. Neither is it an impactful factor when applying policy or addressing educational inequality.

Aside from the aspiration to see children grow, develop, have fun and feel safe in the classroom, some teachers also shared aspirations for their own future. These included learning to understand different cultures, becoming more educated on special care for children, and helping develop more suitable class materials. Nonetheless, these were brought forward as extra suggestions for their future while continuing to teach rather than their main aspirations. The first expected aspiration category has thus not been evidenced, while the second one, ‘students’, has been discovered as the key aspiration for teachers to do what they do. This aspiration toward students was also linked by participants to their perspective on inequality of opportunity. Several interviewees mentioned that they wanted ‘what’s best for all students’, while the notion of inequality is an adversary to this goal. It was said that “when they look back in twenty years to their youth [I hope] that they all look back with very fond

² All names mentioned are pseudonyms.

memories” and “it is a success if you have class where everyone can be themselves”.

Teachers emphasised here that in aspiring to the best for the children, it is not important to regard the student’s level and grades or their future study and career plan, but that they grow in their own way. Noa said:

“They do not have to have the highest job, and they don’t all have to become a lawyer or a doctor. That’s not at all what inequality of opportunity is about, of course. As long as they get the chances, if they want to do it. But, most of all, that they are happy with where they are.”

Another teacher mentioned that he does not think grades are relevant for growth as a student, but that other aspects, including social life, are important for development. Similarly, deputy director (adjunct) Ida stated that, next to focusing on teaching the core subjects, among which are Dutch language and mathematics, giving attention to safety and social and emotional support is necessary. These aspirations among educational workers towards the children are a salient pattern that showcases that a positive outcome for all children in their school is their main ambition. Although this does not directly relate to existing theories, Veldman et al. (2017) noted a similar finding that teachers aspire to achieve a warm and welcoming classroom for effective teaching.

Even if the main ambition seems in line with aiming to reduce inequality of opportunity, when asked about their recognition of inequality and about policy, the educators’ perspectives differ. Although all five participants considered educational inequality to be existent, their schools’ demographic context changes the way they think about it. While Yasmine and Willemijn recognise broader societal differences, they acknowledge that inequality is less visible in their respective schools, saying that they work in wealthier

neighbourhoods. When asked about what policies they consider, they answered “I must honestly say that I do not exactly know if we have written policies on this” or “we do have care policies, those are written. But really about inequality, I am not sure if there is any policy”. This is remarkable and raises the question whether these schools have no written school policy on this topic, teachers do not know about this type of policy, or teachers do not consider policies in general. Related to this, how can a policy be effectively implemented by teachers if they are not aware of the policy? Ken suggested that a policy about educational inequality has not been made in his school, but rather a focus on awareness that inequality exists and empathy towards the “fellow human” should be considered. He expressed discomfort with colleagues showing biases towards certain children because of their family’s background and highlighted the importance of confronting this form of inequality by improving the personal awareness of others. Although he sees policy as absent in his ‘rich school’, he states that he actively engages in inequality-reducing initiatives because he aspires to make a difference in his way. The impact of bias that Ken brings forward is substantiated by Forrester et al. (2024) and Williams (1976), who previously discovered that when teachers aspire to help specific students, they are positively reinforced. Slack (2022) suggested that choosing the ‘best’ students leads to unfairness, but this practice is still done by teachers in any circumstance.

On the other hand, Noa sees inequality daily and sees it being tied to parental wealth and language proficiency. She raised that in her school, which is situated in a neighbourhood with more low-income and migrant-background families, teachers try to actively engage with parents and neighbourhood institutions, and the school requests subsidies to do so. Ida, a deputy director, showed the contrasting perspective of the school she works at, which is in a rich, relatively white neighbourhood. She said that although her school tries to accommodate children with fewer opportunities due to wealth or language acquisition by providing chances

through language classes and remedial teaching, the team has fewer financial means to do so. Rather than aspirations being of influence on inequality and the use of policies, she brings forward that:

“I think that a school reflects a neighbourhood. So, the problems that are present in the neighbourhood, you will automatically see in a school [in that neighbourhood]. And it is hard to mix that, so in neighbourhoods where there is a lot of need, the schools also have a lot of need. So, I think it’s justified that those areas have more staff, funding, smaller class sizes, more of everything.”

This was confirmed as Noa indeed mentioned a variety of extra possibilities for the children in her school through language courses, smaller classes and extra sports and creativity programs that are all arranged with monetary funding from subsidies.

The effect of the other expected aspirations of ‘control’ and ‘institutional arrangements’ must be reconsidered as well. Teachers did not consider having control over the classroom or stress over their tasks as reasons for whether they implement inequality-reducing measures, as expected from theory (Sakir, 2023). Although the deputy director did mention that “choices have to be made” in what to focus on, especially with the recent cuts in education, this did not significantly impact her ambition to reduce educational inequality where possible. Related to this, most teachers suggested that they “have to take space to make the decision that is right”, bringing up the discretionary space that was brought forward in literature (Chang & Brewer, 2022; Cookson & Barrantes, 2024; Durose & Lowndes, 2024; Vinzant & Crothers, 1997). Still, the interpretation of discretion diverged from the literature, which suggested that teachers implement a certain policy in their own way due to their motivations. Instead, the participants’ main point was that, although policy on educational

inequality was unclear to them, and teachers cannot do everything to reduce inequality, they “know their fellow teachers will do what they think is right for each student”. These statements reflect the lack of impact that ‘control’ and ‘aspiring to implement policy a certain way’ have on whether policy aimed at reducing inequality is implemented.

The first few interviews showcased a new range of main themes that steer away from the original interpretation that different categories of aspirations affect the policies being implemented. The patterns found so far show that teachers generally aspire for students’ well-being over anything else; however, this aspiration does not seem to influence policy implementation. This might be due to a lack of knowledge of school policy. Furthermore, educational inequality is perceived between schools and neighbourhoods rather than within schools, and addressing it seems to be subsidy-dependent. Therefore, the existing concepts must be refined, which results in the concepts presented in the following table.

<u>Sensitising concept</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Content</u>
Students	This reflects educators’ ambitions toward their students. Educators have the main aspiration for all students to grow and feel safe, however these aspirations are not seen to impact policy implementation.	- Aspires for all students to feel safe and accepted - Aspires for students to be socially and emotionally supported - Aspires for students to achieve a positive outcome - Aspires for students to enjoy their school experience
Context-dependence	This reflects how the implementation of policy is dependent on the socio-economic context of the school and neighbourhood, rather than educators’ aspirations.	- Rich neighbourhood and school: focus on awareness, less policy - Poor neighbourhood and school: focus on engaging parents, more policy
Financial means	This reflects how the implementation of policy is dependent on the external financial	- No subsidy: limited extra measures

	support that a school receives, from subsidies. The support is determined by the amount of need and inequality in a school.	- Subsidy: more measures for extra opportunities for children
Limited implementation	This reflects that even though educators might aspire to reduce inequality of opportunity, most educators did not implement policy against it, expectedly due to a lack of knowledge about these policies.	- Aspires to reduce educational inequality, but is not aware of policy - Aspires to reduce inequality, but school has no written policy on reducing it - Aspires to reduce inequality, but not by implementing policy - Aspires to reduce inequality by focusing on awareness of inequality

Second round

Several of the above concepts were reaffirmed by participants from interviews 6 to 25; however, more nuance was added to these findings. In the first round of interviews, educators explicitly mentioned how they aspired to the development of their students. This motivation was brought forward by most of the participants in this round when asking what their aspirations or motivations initially were for becoming an educational professional. Another repeatedly mentioned aspiration, not only at the start of their career but during their whole educational career, was to create a safe environment where children can develop both cognitively and socially. Most teachers, as well as school coordinators, explained their aspirations through statements similar to the following:

“When they can tell you that they’ve learned things. That should happen in school, especially in terms of cognitive development. But it can also be a year in which it’s

more important for a child to have taken a social-emotional step. And I believe that, as a teacher, you are responsible for both aspects. And as a principal, I find it important to create a safe environment for both children and teachers.”

Nonetheless, although this aspiration was widely shared, it does not seem to have had an impact on implementation. Neither teachers nor other educational workers mentioned the implementation of a policy that matched this, and no other lineage was found with making specific decisions towards reducing educational inequality. Thus, while these intrinsic motivations might initially seem to result in implementation, since they do showcase the educators aspiring to reduce educational inequality in a certain way, they are described in general terms rather than concerning specific policy measures or practices. Teachers wanting to create a safe space for all students operationalise this in practices, such as trying to engage all students, which do not regard the specific reduction of inequality for an individual student or the daily application of certain routines for this specific goal. Relatedly, even if interviewees mentioned that this type of aspiration had been attempted to be implemented, many participants indicated, when asked whether they could engage all students equally, that their ability was limited due to the large classrooms and lack of support. They then might have to focus on ‘coping’ with the demands rather than focusing on policy implementation as suggested by Hupe & Hill (2020). One of the interviewees, Nina, said that often teachers have a positive intention towards all students, but in spite of that, they struggle with the lack of tools or their inability to handle “special cases” of children who need extra help when there are many more students. Rather than this aspiration leading to the implementation of policy, implementation seemed to depend on other factors.

One of these factors, already suggested in round one, is the difference between poor and rich schools. In neighbourhoods with generally more poor households and a higher

migrant rate, the schools have a higher educational disadvantage score or, in Dutch, achterstandsscore and there often seems to be more focus on policy and implementation. Here, teachers are perceived to have a larger role in the children's lives, as they are expected to do more than teach core subjects. Since some of the children from these neighbourhoods are mentioned to have insufficient knowledge of the Dutch language, inadequate upbringing, behavioural problems or are overall "falling behind other kids", educators are seen to have to put more effort into attending to them. Both individuals working in 'richer' or 'less diverse' schools and those in 'poorer' or 'more diverse' schools mentioned that the latter have more inequality and thus require more effort to reduce it. For this reason, they get more support from subsidies. Educators who do not receive this extra help to reduce inequality often mention that, even if they notice some students not reaching their full potential, it is difficult to change this due to the lack of support. For example, Mats shares his struggles: "We have a language class which gets paid from a small subsidy. Well, sometimes that subsidy is at risk of being cut because our [educational disadvantage] score is slightly too low. Then the language class will be cut, and language is important for inequality." The difference in neighbourhoods and subsidies thus results in divergence in the implementation of inequality-reducing measures, even if educators might aspire to make a difference. This is in accordance with Hupe and Hill's (2019) theory that a policy will be implemented differently based on the demands and resources of the moment. In this case, the resource of financial means might be considered too little, due to a decrease in subsidy money.

Still, the difference in implementation was found in this round of analysis to go beyond the subsidy and neighbourhood context, as the notion of interpretation of inequality and policies towards reducing it might be relevant. When asked how they experience inequality of opportunity among students and in what ways it is (un)addressed in their school, participants gave a range of answers. Several suggested, as previously said, that they do not

see inequality among children in their school, but instead between schools. This led to them concluding that only a few measures were implemented in their own 'richer' school, among which is remedial teaching, and that more support is not necessary. Others mentioned that inequality comes from the ethnic and migration background of the families and, to address it, a language class is necessary to reduce the language gap with Dutch children. While, again, different educators suggested that inequality of opportunity results from the way children live. Saying that, if they have no financial means at home, the children will have to work harder to achieve a better outcome in school. Some of these educators then indicate that it is the responsibility of parents to encourage their children to obtain this best scenario and that the school has limited influence. These diverging perspectives on educational inequality resulted in each educator identifying different solutions in their respective school, and giving contrasting viewpoints on their role within implementing the measures against it. From this finding, it appears that the perspectives of educators, rather than their aspirations, are relevant for making certain decisions regarding implementation.

This was noticeable because, although all participants emphasised the importance of addressing educational inequality, many teachers, especially in wealthier schools, struggled to identify how they recognised it among students and what they did about it. Their interpretation is often that if they give good classes, they fight inequality. Some indirect forms of reducing inequality in classrooms were brought up by others, such as creating a safe space, having remedial teaching options and having a language class. Yet, these do not lead to the direct implementation of policies that reduce educational inequality in the classroom. Therefore, the implementation seems dependent on the suggested interpretation. This seems further confirmed by other interviewees who mentioned the ways they notice that children have a disadvantage compared to their classmates and how they address it. For example, one person mentioned that a student who has no lunch can not learn and must be provided for.

This person interpreted inequality as having a disadvantage in being able to learn and mentioned rules set against it that must be implemented. In this way, rather than simply applying policy, these educators shape the policy outcome by choosing to adopt a policy based on their view of what is necessary (Calista, 1994; Hupe & Hill, 2019). The interpretation of educational inequality and the educator's role are seen to lead to the decision to implement measures, which could be related to aspirations. In the mentioned example, the educator interpreting having no lunch as an inequality problem might have led him to aspire to eliminate this disadvantage and then implement a policy towards it. However, this idea cannot be truly proven with the current data.

The impact of interpretation on implementation is noticeable not only between individuals but is repeatedly seen in the diverging answers of teachers versus directors. When speaking with individuals who are part of the management team, a range of ways in which they attempt to address inequality within their schools was mentioned, including providing breakfast, smaller classrooms and inclusivity principles. In classroom practice, they said they focus on role model behaviour without prejudice and using inclusive materials. In contrast, most teachers, although caring about inequality, admitted that they did not know of any policy being implemented against inequality in their school. Some teachers brought forward that they have language classes or remedial teaching to help students who are falling behind, but these were not presented as policies specifically aimed at tackling inequality. They also did not bring up any classroom interventions that they do themselves.

Although this distinction could be due to the difference in aspirations between teachers and management team members, it seemed that this was not the case; rather, two explanations seemed possible. Firstly, the possibility of miscommunication between the management team and the staff was considered. It seemed teachers might be mostly preoccupied with their classroom tasks and less focused on trying to understand what the

management team needs them to implement. This could be due to control, as was mentioned multiple times in existing literature on bureaucratic implementation (Hupe & Hill, 2020; Lipsky, 1971; Veldman et al., 2017; Winter, 2002; Xiao et al., 2023), however aiming to keep control over the classroom was not mentioned by this research's participants as a reason for not implementing a certain policy. Instead, the findings suggested that directors may not be putting enough effort into introducing policies on inequality to their teachers in an effective manner, which could result in a gap between seeking to implement and achieving the desired outcome. This gap would be in line with the theory on the implementation gap by Pressman & Wildavsky (1973), which can only be filled through proper communication. Another explanation that seemed probable is that the policies offered by the management team are mostly focused on school-wide interventions, such as arranging breakfast and reading corners. This is not organised by the teacher but by the school as an entity or by the support coordinator. Yet, other aspirations of directors were focused on improving the teaching of the main subjects, specifically math and language. Irene, a school leader, considered this a crucial step in fighting inequality of opportunity. This would have to be implemented by teachers, which makes the teachers' knowledge of this policy important. The question that arises from this finding is: why do teachers seem less focused on implementing inequality-reducing policy than management team members, and do aspirations play a role in this?

Regardless of this difference between educators, aspirations thus far have seemed only indirectly relevant to the implementation of policy. Nonetheless, a subtle but notable exception was identified in this round. A small group of educators shared concrete examples of how their aspiration to make a difference led to the actual implementation of inequality-reducing measures. These individuals expressed a strong intrinsic motivation to help specific students in their school who, according to them, suffered from inequality. Instead of relying on funding, they conveyed that they aspired to make a difference for these children and

demonstrated personal commitment, going above and beyond to help students, even outside the formal policy framework. Irene mentioned how two of her students were not able to go to a language class due to a lack of transportation. She said, “And then I nagged and lobbied for these students at the municipality until their transportation was paid for.” Meanwhile, Ilse aspired to help her students by implementing a rule in her classroom that was focused on openness and aid. By placing a mailbox in her classroom where students could put in their struggles, enabling her to provide help, she attempted to implement the policy aim of addressing emotional well-being and offering personal attention to students. Lastly, Bert implemented multiple equality measures which ensured all students got treated the same, such as abolishing parental contribution and establishing funds for families who need them. These different ways of addressing educational inequality validate that implementation can be considered a practice that is shaped by the person implementing it (Hupe & Hill, 2019).

Still, these examples seem rare examples of educators translating aspirations into school and classroom policies where a lasting impact is promoted over dependence on regional or national funding. The first educator herself said that “these processes cost lots of time, which you can only spend once, so you have to make conscious choices”, and the significant effort it took means it would be difficult to sustain. In general, even if educators aspire to implement inequality-reducing measures, other issues, such as classroom size and a lack of resources, often lead to the decision not to invest effort in implementing any measure. It seems that if educators do not believe they can make a difference without structural support, they will likely not focus on implementing inequality-reducing measures, despite their aspirations to help. In addition to the view on support, the perceived role of education might be an underlying reason for choosing not to engage in implementation. One interviewee was clear that “we can never provide a solution for inequality of opportunity, we can only offer small pieces and then hope it turns out alright”. This viewpoint, in contrast

with the small group of educators who said they made a difference, showcases that the mindset towards the feasibility of aspirations might be important. These factors can possibly impact aspirations and will impact implementation. This leads to the following adjusted concepts:

<u>Sensitising concept</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Content</u>
Students	This reflects educators' ambitions toward their students. Educators have the main aspiration for all students to grow and feel safe, however these aspirations are not seen to impact policy implementation.	- Aspires for all students to feel safe and accepted - Aspires for students to be socially and emotionally supported - Aspires for students to achieve a positive outcome - Aspires for students to enjoy their school experience
Context-dependence	This reflects how the implementation of policy is dependent on the socio-economic context of the school and its neighbourhood. Financial support is intrinsically linked to this context, as funding is allocated based on the school's educational disadvantage score. Rather than educators' aspirations, these conditions determine what is realistically possible.	- Rich neighbourhood and school: focus on awareness, less financial support, less policy - Poor neighbourhood and school: focus on engaging parents, more financial support, more policy
Interpretation	This reflects how educators' personal interpretations of educational inequality and their perceived role in addressing it influence whether and how policies are implemented. These interpretations seem to shape the perspective of educators and affect their decisions, which might be due to their connection with aspirations.	- Interprets educational inequality as existent only between schools, rather than within schools - Interprets inequality to be non-existent in specific schools, leading to no measures being implemented

		- Interprets inequality to be an issue for families rather than schools - Interprets educators to play a key role in reducing inequality - Interprets educators to have no impact on reducing inequality - Interprets inequality to be solved by improving teaching skills - Interprets inequality to be solved by providing means for disadvantaged students - Interprets inequality to be solved by implementing specific policy measure aimed at reding inequality
Gap between teachers and management team	This reflects the divergence between how management team members and teachers perceive and engage with policy. While directors describe many concrete actions, teachers often seem to remain unaware of these, which might be attributed to miscommunication or policies being school-wide instead of teacher-focused.	- Teacher mentions that their school does not have policy on educational inequality - Teacher merely mentions remedial teaching - Management team mentions implementation of policies such as school breakfast, smaller classrooms, inclusive materials - Management team does not effectively communicate policy - Policy is implemented only by management team

Strong personal aspirations	This reflects the rare cases where strong personal aspirations lead to direct action or policy implementation. These are exceptions, not general patterns, and often depend on personal effort beyond institutional support.	- Educator aspires to make a difference for a specific student - Educator aspires to help despite lack of funding - Educator implements school-wide initiatives to reduce inequality - Educator used personal drive to push for support
Implementation through other factors	This reflects that while educators express aspirations, these do not generally lead to concrete implementation. However, other factors related to aspirations, like support and interpretation, might impact whether implementation occurs.	- Interpretation impacts implementation - Perceived role of education impacts implementation - Financial support impacts implementation - Aspirations possibly impact implementation through the other factors

Final round

The final six interviews and an analytical reflection after the interviewing phase result in several new insights that lead to an adjusted final theory. From the second round, a question about why teachers are less focused on the implementation of inequality-reducing policies than management team members and the impact of aspirations on this was brought forward. Possible reasons were suggested in the round, yet interviewees 26 to 31 discussed a particular explanation that was not considered. When school leaders were asked how they communicate the inequality-reducing policies they bring forward to others in their school, and teachers were asked how they learn about policy, all six participants gave a similar answer. Rachel said, “Policy is often a different language than the one spoken by teachers”. This was expanded upon by directors, who explained that they specifically chose to ensure that most policy engagement is conducted at the management level. “I try to keep most of those affairs

away from the people [employees]” and “We take care of that, so that they [teachers] don’t have to concern themselves with those kinds of things as well” were stated by Roxanne and Sidney. Isabel emphasised the importance of shielding teachers from these policy responsibilities:

We try to partly take it off the teachers’ shoulders, because they can’t manage everything for all 28 children. They’re already so busy, and their work is demanding. When we first started with school breakfast here, the teachers responded with something like ‘Oh, this on top of everything else?’, but now it’s running smoothly, and you hear much less resistance.”

Keeping policy decisions and implementation among management team members seems a conscious choice to avoid aversion to policies and prevent teacher overload. Still, leaders did announce that, although policies and subsidies might not be directly communicated, it is salient to “share the school vision among teachers”. Rather than transmitting detailed policies to teachers, management teams focus on creating awareness and an open mindset towards inequality and its implications. Specifically, Sidney indicated that if the policy “is not about maths or language, but about integration, so, how do we spend money from a fund in the right way?” then it starts with the core team and gets shared in steps. The aim is then for teachers to focus on awareness and empathy towards the children in their class.

Related to this, it was shared that a teacher must have this mindset to be open towards others and the ambition to empathise and help children to be able to work in a diverse school. This finding adds nuance to the second analysis round, where it was observed that, rather than aspirations, the school and neighbourhood contexts play a key role in implementation. In this round, aspirations are found to be interrelated with this context. If educators have a

mindset of wanting to help disadvantaged students, they will likely choose to work in 'poorer' schools with a higher proportion of underprivileged students. In contrast, educators who merely want to focus on teaching will aim to work at rich and less diverse schools. This distinction is showcased by multiple interviewees. While one director said, "Because everyone who comes to work here, and I'm very clear about that, really needs to be willing and daring to go the extra mile, and dare and be willing to do things a bit differently". A teacher, who now works in a richer neighbourhood but used to work in a poorer school, explained, "It's such a different way of working which carries a heavy burden, that I couldn't handle". These interviews confirm that aspirations do play a role indirectly, as what one aspires to is a motivation for where one wants to work, which, in turn, leads to implementing measures and utilising subsidies more. This idea is validated by Baker et al.'s (2014) statement that aspirations shape behaviour, motivation and mindset, and Tezera's (2019) suggestion that a motivated network with a shared vision leads to increased involvement in implementation. To reflect on these findings, a few participants were asked about the effect of ambition on reducing inequality, it was answered: "If you're not aware of what students face every day, there is no connection. If there's no connection, your lesson, everything you do, is simply less effective. It yields less". Awareness was acknowledged as leading to ambition, which in turn led to alignment with a specific school. The mentioned factors of motivation, aspirations, and the school's context may also be correlated with the educator's interpretation of their role. An individual who views their position as extending beyond teaching to educating children on multiple levels and learning about different cultures is more likely to work in a diverse school. Nonetheless, this sentiment appears to be an underlying connection between the variables that cannot be fully substantiated with the current data.

The last sections have demonstrated the interconnectedness of mindset, interpretation and aspirations, and their impact on implementation. However, not only do these variables

influence policy implementation, but a last finding was that policies on inequality, in their current state, do not motivate educators to implement them. Policies are often unclear, vague and overly dependent on non-structural support through subsidies. An educator said, “There is so much policy, I’m overwhelmed”, before indicating that he found it difficult to know how to implement specific policies. Some educators described how, while they understood the importance of addressing inequality, they did not see how current policies helped them achieve that goal. “There is a lot of policy, but almost nothing is structural”, and “We need more trust. Without imposing all sorts of conditions, I think more open policies will make parents more willing to participate” were common sentiments. Rather than focusing on policy, action by working together with organisations was seen as more influential for addressing inequality. Therefore, the decision by some educators not to implement policy went beyond personal choices about mindset or aspirations, being connected to the insufficiency and absence of policies that properly consider implementers. These findings lead to the following final concepts.

<u>Final concept</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Content</u>
Students	This reflects educators’ ambitions toward their students. Educators have the main aspiration for all students to grow and feel safe, however these aspirations are not seen to impact policy implementation.	- Aspires for all students to feel safe and accepted - Aspires for students to be socially and emotionally supported - Aspires for students to achieve a positive outcome - Aspires for students to enjoy their school experience
Context-dependence	This reflects how the implementation of policy depends on the socio-economic context of the school, with financial support intrinsically linked because of the educational disadvantage score.	- Aspire to work at rich school: focus on awareness, less financial support, less policy - Aspire to work at poor school: focus on engaging

	But, while these conditions largely determine what is feasible to implement, educators' aspirations indirectly influence implementation through their choice of school context.	parents, more financial support, more policy
Interpretation	This reflects how educators' personal interpretations of educational inequality and their perceived role in addressing it influence whether and how policies are implemented. These interpretations seem to shape the perspective of educators and affect their decisions, which might be connected to their aspirations.	- Interprets educational inequality as existent only between schools, rather than within schools - Interprets inequality to be non-existent in specific schools, leading to no measures being implemented - Interprets inequality to be an issue for families rather than schools - Interprets educators to play a key role in reducing inequality - Interprets educators to have no impact on reducing inequality - Interprets inequality to be solved by improving teaching skills - Interprets inequality to be solved by providing means for disadvantaged students - Interprets inequality to be solved by implementing specific policy measure aimed at reding inequality
Gap between teachers and management team	This reflects the divergence between how management team members and teachers perceive and engage with policy. While directors describe many concrete actions, teachers often remain unaware of these. This is because directors choose to ensure most of the policy	- Teacher mentions that their school does not have policy on educational inequality - Teacher merely mentions remedial teaching - Management team mentions implementation of policies such as school breakfast,

	engagement is conducted at the management level.	smaller classrooms, inclusive materials - Management team aims to keep teachers aware of inequality - Management team aims to engage with policy themselves
Strong personal aspirations	This reflects the rare cases where strong personal aspirations lead to direct action or policy implementation. These are exceptions, not general patterns, and often depend on personal effort beyond institutional support.	- Educator aspires to make a difference for a specific student - Educator aspires to help despite lack of funding - Educator implements school-wide initiatives to reduce inequality - Educator used personal drive to push for support
Implementation through connection of factors	This reflects that while educators express aspirations, these do not generally lead to concrete implementation. However, other factors related to or influenced by aspirations impact whether implementation occurs.	- Interpretation impacts implementation - Perceived role of education impacts implementation - Financial support impacts implementation - Mindset impacts implementation of policy - Aspirations possibly impact implementation through the other factors

Synthesis round

Based on these three rounds of analysis, this research has attempted to create a theory on the impact that educators' aspirations have on the implementation of policy. Overall, it was found that the implementation of policy depended on a multitude of factors, with aspirations playing a more limited, mostly indirect, role. While aspirations were proven to have a direct impact on implementation in some cases, this is rare. Existing theory on implementation did

confirm that policy is impacted by the implementer's motivation and approach, and that street-level bureaucrats especially have a role in this (Gofen, 2014; Hupe & Hill, 2019; Vinzant & Crothers, 1996). However, while aspirations may guide educators, this research found no significant evidence that they independently determine how policies are implemented. Instead, an indirect effect was observed, where certain factors related to aspirations influence implementation. On the one hand, aspirations are found to influence the choice of school and an educator's mindset, which, in turn, influence implementation. This can be related to existing literature on aspirations, which found that aspirations are not merely desires for teachers to do what they want, but also result in reasons for interpreting policy (Solheim, 2019). On the other hand, the interpretation of the issue and the educator's role might lead to specific aspirations, which can also impact implementation. This shows the interconnection of variables related to aspirations. This aligns with Slack's (2022) and Baker et al.'s (2014) findings, which state that various factors can cause certain aspirations, making them different for each person.

However, it was generally seen that factors reduced the impact of aspirations on the implementation of policy. Although educators often express aspirations towards reducing inequality, structural barriers limit their ability to implement effective policies. Aspirations are overshadowed by the lack of funding, the short duration of subsidies, the vagueness of policies and the uncertainty about how to address inequality. This limited realisation of aspirations due to external constraints aligns with the literature from the theory section, which discusses how educators may aspire to support students and reduce inequality, but motivation, abilities, and outside pressures and stresses can limit their capacity (Solheim, 2019; Veldman et al., 2017). Ultimately, this highlights that while aspirations can play a role, their actual impact on implementation is contingent on broader processes.

Conclusions

This research investigated the relationship between the aspirations of primary school educators and the implementation of policies aimed at reducing educational inequality. This was realised by reviewing existing literature on these variables and conducting 31 semi-structured interviews. Theory was created in rounds to follow an inductive, iterative process where concepts are refined. This adds to the nuanced understanding of both variables of the main research question, defined as ‘*What is the influence of primary school educators’ aspirations on the implementation of policies aimed at reducing educational inequality in the Netherlands?*’. This section aims to answer this question and reflect on the overall research.

The findings reveal that while educators do have specific aspirations, including wanting development for their students, these do not consistently impact the implementation of policies aimed at reducing educational inequality in the Netherlands. Although rare cases were found where educators showcase that strong personal motivation and aspirations to make a difference for children result in the implementation of specific measures that they see as reducing inequality. Generally, aspirations were found to have a limited, mostly indirect, influence on policy implementation, as other factors overshadowed them. Even if educators express aspirations to help reduce inequality, their ability to act is constrained by structural barriers such as insufficient resources, unclear policy or the short duration of subsidies. Instead of directly influencing policy implementation, aspirations are connected to educators’ mindset, their choice of school context, and interpretation of policy, which, in turn, affects the extent to which policy is applied. For example, educators who aspire to support disadvantaged students tend to choose to work in diverse schools in lower-income areas, where implementation is often more urgently needed, thus having an indirect effect. Moreover, although the application of policy was initially thought to be implemented by

teachers, it was discovered that the management team is the primary decision-maker for implementing policies. As such, while teachers might aspire to reduce inequality, school leaders have more influence over policy implementation. Overall, although aspirations may have an indirect effect on the implementation of policies aimed at addressing educational inequality, the interplay of other factors, such as school context, shows a more substantive influence on implementation. Theoretically, the relationship between aspirations and implementation can be seen as indirect, and shaped and constrained by individual and structural conditions in which actors operate. *Aspirations shape, but do not determine, policy implementation in practice.*

In addressing the research question, this paper contributes to the existing literature on educators' aspirations and the factors that influence the effective implementation of policy. While previous studies have emphasised the impact of street-level bureaucrats on implementation (Gofen, 2014; Hupe & Hill, 2019) and have showcased the significance of teachers' motivations and aspirations for student outcomes (Slack, 2022; Solheim, 2019). The connection between these variables remained undiscovered until now. Furthermore, the current paper has developed a theory on a side of aspirations that has had limited previous research. In addition, by focusing on policies aimed at reducing inequality of opportunity, this research has contributed to a societally relevant issue that is meant to be tackled through policy. So far, the policies have been ineffective in providing sufficient measures to achieve the outset goal of reducing inequality of opportunity among primary school children. This study has provided factors and reasons for why these policies and their implementation could be hindered.

Reflection

Although this article aimed to represent educators' aspirations and consequent policy implementation, limitations occurred that may have reduced the accuracy. Firstly, although a diverse sample was attempted, when interviewing multiple teachers from the same school, similar answers were given. Relatedly, educators from both 'poorer' and 'richer' schools were interviewed, but the former were highly outnumbered, which may have limited the full representativeness of the results or skewed the findings. Similarly, while multiple teachers from the same school were interviewed, management team members from that school were generally not questioned. For more nuanced findings and to verify the accuracy of what the teachers said, it would have been helpful to examine both sides of the school.

Another limitation of the research stems from the researcher's expectations. At the outset, the author of this paper assumed that strong aspirations would naturally lead to the implementation of inequality-reducing policies. However, throughout the interview process and iterative analysis, it was realised that the reality is far more layered. Aspirations, implementation, and inequality of opportunity are not concepts that educators typically consider in their daily practice, which means their answers are deeper, underlying thought processes rather than straightforward statements. The author's initial perspective limited her from seeking a nuanced answer. At first, the topic list was followed religiously, instead of keeping in mind what the research question is foremost. During the analysis, a similar approach was taken. After realising that the results did not directly answer the research question, and struggling to grasp the nuances in the answers, more attention was paid to what the participants' answers meant and how what was said could be further expanded upon in the conversations. The initial view might have led to confirmation bias, which was attempted to be corrected. Yet, it could still have had an impact on the representation of aspirations in

the research. In this way, the researcher learned to sit with contradictions in data and not overlook underlying meanings.

Based on the limitations, it is recommended that future researchers approach any answers from interviews with an open mind, while remaining critical of their relation to the research question. Relatedly, it is suggested that students are aware of their viewpoints and dive deep to understand those of others. Aside from practical recommendations, a suggestion for future researchers is to investigate the educational disadvantage score, also known as *achterstandsscore* in Dutch. This score had an impact in the current research, as it was the reason schools received a certain number of subsidies. It would be relevant to discover whether this contributes to reducing inequality or whether it presents a particular portrayal of schools that might not attract wealthier individuals, as suggested by an interviewee. Future research could also examine the same research question for secondary schools. Participants in the current research indicated that there might be increased educational inequality there, which would make the study worthwhile.

In addition to improving the academic field, this research has demonstrated that policies should be enhanced by shifting the focus from temporary subsidies to structural financial support. Further, policymakers must be educated on frontline realities and the effects of their policies, and educators should be more involved with shaping policies or other measures (Johnson, 2024). Lastly, to improve implementation, directors and teachers should consider collaborating more closely in co-creating and executing school-level policy, enabling teachers to actively participate in implementation-oriented decision-making.

In conclusion, this study has deepened our understanding of how aspirations impact policy implementation, while also highlighting the need for more effective approaches to reduce educational inequality. Let's aspire to make a difference!

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Appendix A: Table of Participant Information

Participant Number	Participant Name ³	School Location	Current Job Description ⁴	Interview Date
Participant 1	Noa	South Holland	Teacher	12-05-2025
Participant 2	Yasmine	South Holland	Teacher	14-05-2025
Participant 3	Kees	South Holland	Teacher	14-05-2025
Participant 4	Ida	South Holland	Deputy director (adjunct)	16-05-2025
Participant 5	Willemijn	South Holland	Teacher	16-05-2025
Participant 6	Mila	South Holland	Teacher	16-05-2025
Participant 7	Maarten	South Holland	Teacher	16-05-2025
Participant 8	Nina	South Holland	Support coordinator (IB-er)	20-05-2025
Participant 9	Irene	South Holland	Director	20-05-2025
Participant 10	Willem	South Holland	Teacher	20-05-2025
Participant 11	Mats	South Holland	Director	21-05-2025
Participant 12	Marianne	South Holland	Teacher	21-05-2025
Participant 13	Adriaan	South Holland	Director	22-05-2025
Participant 14	Paul	South Holland	Director	22-05-2025
Participant 15	Nadine	South Holland	Teacher	22-05-2025

³ All names mentioned are pseudonyms.

⁴ In brackets, the job position will be presented in the original language, Dutch.

Participant 16	Caya	South Holland	Teacher	22-05-2025
Participant 17	Maartje	South Holland	Teacher	23-05-2025
Participant 18	Lily	South Holland	Teacher	23-05-2025
Participant 19	Maike	South Holland	Support coordinator (IB-er)	26-05-2025
Participant 20	Milan	South Holland	Director	26-05-2025
Participant 21	Aafke	South Holland	Director	26-05-2025
Participant 22	Ilse	South Holland	Teacher	27-05-2025
Participant 23	Bert	South Holland	Director	28-05-2025
Participant 24	Jade	South Holland	Support coordinator (IB-er) & Deputy director (adjunct)	28-05-2025
Participant 25	Luna	South Holland	Teacher	28-05-2025
Participant 26	Laila	South Holland	Director	02-06-2025
Participant 27	Carla	South Holland	Teacher	03-06-2025
Participant 28	Isabel	South Holland	Director	05-06-2025
Participant 29	Rachel	South Holland	Teacher	06-06-2025
Participant 30	Sidney	South Holland	Director	11-06-2025
Participant 31	Roxanne	South Holland	Director	12-06-2025

Appendix B: Topic List

Research Question: What is the influence of primary school educators' aspirations on the implementation of policies aimed at reducing educational inequality in the Netherlands?

The interview questions are divided into subtopics:

Demographics:

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
 - Age
 - Education
 - Employment

Inequality:

- How do you experience inequality or differences in opportunity among your students?
- In what ways do you think inequality is addressed or left unaddressed in this school?
- Could you tell me your opinion on the effects of the policy?
- How do you engage/implement school-wide or national programs that are meant to avoid inequality?
- What kinds of support do you think are needed to better respond to inequality in education?

Policies:

- How do you learn about new policies or school initiatives?
- How do you decide which policies to engage with or adapt in your teaching?

- What personal/professional factors play a role when you decide how to implement a particular instruction or policy?

Aspirations general:

- Why did you become a teacher, and what is your motivation to keep teaching?
- What would you consider success as a teacher?

Future:

- What do you expect from the future?

Students:

- What are your aspirations towards your students? What is your goal with them?
- Do you feel you are able to engage all students equally? Why or why not?

Institutional arrangements:

- What kinds of rules or policies do you consider when making decisions in your classroom?
- What kind of space do you feel you have to make decisions based on your own judgment?
- What do you do when you feel stretched between what your students need and what your role requires?

Control:

- What helps you maintain a sense of control in your classroom?

- What helps you stay connected to your aspirations, even in challenging circumstances?

Final:

- Would you like to mention something else about any of the discussed topics?
- What would you give as advice to improve educational inequality in schools?

End of interview

Appendix C: Codebook

- active attitude to reduce inequality of opportunity
- additional courses based on interest
- addressing it: better policy
- addressing it: bridge/link officer (brugfunctionaris)
- addressing it: collaborative
- addressing it: good teachers
- addressing it: mindset of society
- addressing it: mixed living
- addressing it: more funding
- addressing it: need to learn Dutch
- addressing it: parents mindset/role
- addressing it: permanent funding, not subsidies
- addressing it: policy on society
- addressing it: positive image of requesting help
- addressing it: role of education
- addressing it: socially, not just cognitive
- addressing it: teacher shortage
- addressing it: well-being of parents
- advantages of subsidies
- advising based on potential (kansrijk adviseren)
- application: standing up for personal ideals
- application: taking discretionary space
- application: teachers doing their best

- aspiration: being role model as a teacher
- aspiration: children have fun
- aspiration: development of children
- aspiration: focus on language
- aspiration: further education
- aspiration: getting opportunities
- aspiration: happy childhood
- aspiration: impact on society
- aspiration: involving parents
- aspiration: mastering core subjects
- aspiration: not about level/grades
- aspiration: pleasant classroom atmosphere
- aspiration: representation in class
- aspiration: safe classroom
- aspiration: student growth
- aspiration: student self-confidence
- aspiration: understanding cultures
- availability of resources
- awareness of children's interest
- awareness of inequality
- bringing education types together (after-school care, special ed, primary)
- changes in population
- child coach (kindercoach)
- child on waiting list
- children's behavioural problems

- coherence between subjects
- combating policy aversion of teachers
- communication about policy
- communication: none
- communication: school vision
- communication: school working groups (werkgroep)
- communication: study/training days (studiedag)
- conditions for learning
- creating alertness
- creating calmness
- demographics
- disadvantages of no subsidies
- disadvantages of policy
- disadvantaged school
- differences between neighbourhoods
- differences between schools, not within schools
- differences in: connection to own country
- differences in: family prosperity
- differences in: focus in school
- differences in: length of stay in NL
- differences in: parents' language skills
- differences in: private lessons/homework support
- differences in: teacher mindset
- differences in: upbringing child
- effect of parents reading to children

- effective/a lot of policy on inequality
- empathy
- equal attention impossible
- equality as base
- extra social activities
- fewer opportunities
- financial problems
- finding balance as a school leader
- food at school
- general school policy, not in class
- hard to work with disadvantaged children
- having to make choices
- how to address it
- implementation: RT or support coordinator (IB'er)
- implementation: addressing needs of children regardless of background
- implementation: additional extracurricular subjects
- implementation: citizenship/democracy class (burgerschap)
- implementation: community in the neighbourhood
- implementation: extra support for groups of children
- implementation: focus on language
- implementation: guiding children
- implementation: how does the child feel
- implementation: involving parents
- implementation: NT2 (non-native Dutch speakers)
- implementation: representation in class

- implementation: supporting parents
- importance of food
- independence of Dutch children
- inequality of raising advice on schoollevel
- inequality theme in school plan
- keep teachers away from policy
- language classes
- language delays (taalachterstand) children
- management team
- mixed schools, more implementation
- more attention to inequality
- more training for teachers
- motivation: enjoyable job
- motivation: had a bad school experience
- motivation: helping children
- motivation: value of the work
- need for trauma processing
- no problem of educational inequality
- no time
- no transportation to fitting school
- not described in policy
- not much parent contact
- not policy, but happy child
- policy: cooperation with the environment
- policy: don't know

- policy: EDI instruction model
- policy: equal opportunities alliance (gelijke kansen alliantie)
- policy: external organizations
- policy: integration from both sides
- policy: language lessons for parents
- policy: learning opportunity profile (leerkansenprofiel)
- policy: more policy is unnecessary
- policy: none for inequality specific
- policy: offering extracurricular activities
- policy: resilience program (Kanjertaining)
- policy: school as role model for neighbourhood
- policy: social worker
- policy: subsidies
- prejudices
- problems under the radar
- products from school
- rejection based on type of person
- responsibility of schools
- shortage in youth care
- showing understanding
- special education is necessary
- special education separately
- stress among children
- structurally more care in school
- subsidy costs time

- support coordinator (IB-er)
- teacher
- teacher raising children
- teacher shortage disadvantaged schools
- tension at home
- tolerance of racism from school
- too many tasks for education
- transmitting norms and values
- unclear educator's role
- unconscious racism
- unreliability subsidies
- unsafe home
- visible inequality
- wealthy school
- willing, but unable