

NARRATIVES FROM KANALENEILAND: UNDERSTANDING SOCIO-ECONOMIC
INFLUENCES ON ADOLESCENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

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This thesis has been written as a study assignment under the supervision of an Utrecht University teacher. Ethical permission has been granted for this thesis project by the ethics board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, and the thesis has been assessed by two university teachers. However, the thesis has not undergone a thorough peer-review process so conclusions and findings should be read as such.

Abstract

This qualitative thesis explores how socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood effects intersect to shape academic achievements of adolescents from a low socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhood in Kanaleneiland, Utrecht. This study integrates Bourdieu's cultural and social capital theory (1986), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to deepen understanding of contextual influences on academic success in low SES neighbourhoods. Structured in-depth interviews with adolescents (aged 16-25) were conducted to capture their lived experiences and perspectives on family dynamics, parental support, and peer relationships. Thematic analysis revealed several critical factors: the influence of family dynamics and parental support emerged as crucial in navigating educational pathways, with varying degrees of involvement and expectations shaping individual trajectories. Peer relationships also played a significant role, affecting behaviours and academic engagement, particularly concerning peer pressure and conformity. In conclusion, this research contributes to understanding educational disparities by demonstrating how Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory illuminates the complex interactions between family, peers, and broader community influences on academic outcomes. By amplifying the voices of adolescents, the study aims to inform policies and practices that promote educational equity and support the aspirations of marginalized youth. Practical implications emphasize enhancing parental engagement and providing supportive educational resources to foster inclusivity and support for adolescents from low SES backgrounds

Keywords: socio-economic circumstances, low SES, neighbourhood effects, academic achievement, adolescents, cultural capital.

Introduction

Approximately 6 percent of underage children in the Netherlands are raised in poverty (NJI, 2023), facing significant barriers to academic success due to financial constraints and early skill gaps (Ter Weel et al., 2022). These disparities in both cognitive and non-cognitive skills significantly affect children's educational trajectories from an early age, perpetuating unequal opportunities for access to quality education and future job prospects (NJI, 2023).

These unequal opportunities for future success are primarily attributed to the suboptimal environments in which impoverished children are raised, as highlighted by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. This model emphasizes how adolescent development is shaped by environmental factors at different levels, including the microsystem (e.g., family and community), the mesosystem (interactions within family, school and peer groups) and the exosystem (external influences such as socioeconomic conditions and institutional policies). Neighbourhood effects further compound these challenges, as adolescents from low SES neighbourhoods often face additional barriers stemming from the physical and social environment in which they reside (Visser et al., 2021). For instance, limited access to educational resources as laptops and books and the inability to afford extracurricular activities, but also strained relationships between family and educators, and inadequate government policies all contribute to hindered concentration and performance at school and are amplified in neighbourhoods with limited resources and support systems (NJI, 2023).

Quantitative studies, such as Sirin's meta-analytic review (2005), consistently highlight the correlation between socio-economic status (SES) and academic achievement, yet they often overlook the nuanced experiences of adolescents from low SES backgrounds. This study fills this gap by using qualitative research to delve into the lived realities, aspirations, and challenges of adolescents in Kanaleneiland. By amplifying their voices through semi-structured

interviews, this research aims to provide narrative-based insights that complement existing quantitative data.

As qualitative research offers a unique opportunity to delve deeper into the lived realities of these adolescents, providing valuable insights into their future prospects, barriers in life and especially education, and coping mechanisms within their socio-economic contexts. By focusing on qualitative inquiry, this study aims to fill the gap in scientific knowledge and provide adolescents with a platform to share their stories and perspectives. Through narratives, the voices of adolescents from low SES backgrounds will be amplified and contribute rich, narrative-based data. In doing so, this study contributes to the recent theoretical debate of structure and agency by exploring how these adolescents navigate and negotiate their social environments (Mickelson & Saatcioglu, 2024; Zhao et al., 2021).

Addressing educational disparities due to socio-economic disparities is important for both education and society. Low-income youth face barriers in accessing high-quality education, highlighting broader implications for social equity. By bridging quantitative data with personal narratives, this study seeks to uncover systemic barriers and propose interventions that can enhance academic outcomes for disadvantaged youth in Utrecht. Ultimately, this research strives to contribute towards a more equitable educational environment that supports the aspirations of all adolescents, regardless of socio-economic background. The research question for this exploration is:

How do socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood effects impact the academic achievement of adolescents from a low SES neighbourhood in Utrecht?

The answer to this question is derived from structured, in-depth interviews with youth from Kanaleneiland, Utrecht.

Theoretical framework

The introduction of the topic and the research question is followed by a critical analysis of the various theories and perspectives that are in line with this subject. This theoretical framework aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors affecting academic achievement.

Defining Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a crucial determinant of educational achievement, with many researchers approaching the concept in various ways. In general terms, SES refers to an individual's or a family's position within a social hierarchy based on their access to, or control over, some combination of valued resources such as wealth, power, and social status (Mueller & Parcel, 1981). Despite ongoing debates about the precise definition of SES, Sirin's meta-analysis (2005) found that many studies use a combination of parental education, occupation, and income to measure SES. This practical approach is useful for empirical research but may overlook broader environmental factors.

Environmental resources

It is also important to consider home resources, or even broader neighbourhood resources, into account, such as high-quality schools, educational services and household possessions as books, computers and a study room (Entwisle & Astone, 1994). On the other hand, Bradley and Corwyn (2002), focus on a broader access to both social and economic resources, seeing SES as a fundamental element in understanding the influence of socio-economic conditions on educational achievement. While their approach may be comprehensive, it can be challenging to operationalize.

Neighbourhood Effects on Educational Outcomes

The impact of SES on educational performances cannot be fully understood without considering the significant influence of environmental factors as neighbourhood effects as well

(Visser et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner's developmental psychology framework (1979) underscores the importance of a neighbourhood's physical and social environment in shaping individual life outcomes, particularly in educational pathways. This holistic view provides a broad understanding of environmental impact. In contrast, Galster (2011) further elucidates this by identifying key social mechanisms within neighbourhoods, such as poverty concentration, educational climate, migrant/ethnic groups proportion, and social disorganization. These factors interact with individual-level SES, leading to varied educational performances (Sirin, 2005; Jeynes, 2002; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). For instance, individuals from lower SES backgrounds often inhabit neighbourhoods characterized by higher poverty rates and limited resources, which adversely impact academic achievement (Nieuwenhuis & Hooimeijer, 2015). Conversely, those from higher SES backgrounds may live in areas with greater social capital and educational opportunities, resulting in better educational outcomes.

Mustard et al. (2012) adds a temporal dimension to the understanding of neighbourhood effects, shedding light on how these dynamics unfold over time. This perspective suggests that the impact of income inequality in neighbourhoods evolves through different mechanisms, with some effects requiring long-term exposure while others develop more rapidly. This contrast with Visser et al. (2021), who emphasize the immediate impact of the neighbourhood environment. These differing views underscore the importance of considering timing, duration, and cumulative exposure when addressing socioeconomic disparities and promoting equitable outcomes.

Stigmatization and Stereotypes

Stigmatization and stereotypes of neighbourhoods significantly influence educational pathways. Ainsworth (2002) discusses how dominant stereotypes associated with high-poverty, low SES neighbourhoods can negatively affect students' self-identity and the expectations of educators and peers. As not being stimulated or challenged enough within the school-system.

These stereotypes can lead to lower educational aspirations, self-esteem, and motivation among students (Ainsworth, 2002). This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) broad environmental perspective, emphasizing the influence of social context, while also fitting within Galster's (2011) detailed examination of social mechanisms within neighbourhoods. Furthermore, Ainsworth (2002) highlights that stigmatization can lead to social isolation, limiting students' access to beneficial social networks and extracurricular opportunities.

Defining Academic Achievement

After defining a fundamental understanding of socioeconomic status (SES) and its interaction with neighbourhood effects, the focus will now be turned to the concept of academic achievement. Academic achievement encompasses a broad spectrum of educational outcomes, including scores on standardized tests across various subjects, class rankings, grades, and measures of IQ, as defined by White (1982).

Factors Influencing School Performance

Differences in school performance attributed to SES can be clarified by examining a wide range of factors, including family dynamics, school quality and peer relationships. Several studies suggest that parental investment in children's cognitive development and children's exposure to chronic stress contribute to these differences (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004). Parenting practices, school quality, neighbourhood characteristics and exposure to stressors vary along SES gradients and thus affect children's development in different ways (Lawson & Farah, 2016). Consequently, SES in childhood can be conceptualized as a substitute for these different experiences.

Impact of Poverty on Academic Achievement

A research report by the NJI (2023) indicates that children growing up in poverty often experience feelings of inadequacy by not being able to participate in activities that others take for granted, such as school trips or birthday celebrations. This sense of exclusion can negatively

affect their well-being and school performance. Moreover, poverty-induced stress in parents can lead to distractions, making it difficult for them to adequately support their children's education. This is supported by the NJI (2023), which emphasizes that parents in poverty often spend a great deal of time and attention on financial matters, leaving them with fewer opportunities to encourage their children's development at home, such as less frequent read-alouds or conversations about school.

Parental Investment, Role Models and Home Environment

Comparing and contrasting various perspectives, we see that Bradley and Corwyn (2002) highlight the role of family dynamics, school quality, peer relations, as well as parental investment, suggesting that SES-related differences in educational outcomes are partly due to differences in home environments and parental engagement. Evans (2004) supports this view by emphasizing the adverse effects of chronic stress associated with low SES on children's cognitive development and school performance. These factors interact dynamically with SES circumstances and neighbourhood effects, shaping educational outcomes in complex ways, wherein the interplay between SES, family dynamics, and school quality can either amplify or mitigate the impact of neighbourhood effects on academic achievement (Sirin, 2005). Similarly, peer relationships, influenced by both SES and neighbourhood characteristics, play a crucial role in shaping students' academic aspirations and motivations (Berger & Archer, 2018).

Bandura's social learning theory (1977) provides additional insight into the role of role models in shaping academic aspirations and behaviours. According to Bandura (1977), individuals learn by observing others and emulating their behaviours. Positive role models, such as youth workers and family members, can therefore significantly influence adolescents' educational aspirations and outcomes. For example, the presence of educated parents or supportive mentors can model successful behaviours and attitudes towards education, helping young people develop resilience against negative environmental influences. This theory

underscores the importance of providing adolescents with positive examples to emulate, particularly in environments where they may be exposed to negative peer influences or socio-economic stressors.

Individual characteristics: Structural Constraints vs. Personal Agency

Research into the impact of socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood influences on the academic performance of adolescents from disadvantaged neighbourhoods reveals contrasting perspectives among researchers. Some scholars argue that limited resources and social support pose significant obstacles to educational success (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Lawson & Farah 2016; Sirin 2005). Within this view, socio-economic disparities and environmental factors act as barriers to academic achievement, constraining opportunities for advancement. In contrast, others emphasize the agency of individuals in shaping their educational trajectories within challenging environments (Giddens, 1984). This is where Giddens' theory of structure and agency (1984) comes into play, he posits that individuals possess the capacity to influence their circumstances through intentional actions and choices, transcending the limitations imposed by their socio-economic contexts. He emphasizes that individuals are not merely victims of structural constraints but are also active agents who can influence their environment through conscious actions and choices. This theory is a framework for understanding how adolescents from low SES neighbourhoods navigate and reshape their educational pathways within the context of structural realities, underscoring the importance of recognizing and fostering agency to promote equitable opportunities for all adolescents.

The Role of Capital

Within the discourse of individual characteristics, the concept of capital emerges as crucial point of contrast. Defesche (2022) highlights that while financial capital, such as income, is a significant determinant of socioeconomic status and equal opportunities, other forms of capital, namely cultural and social, play equally pivotal roles.

Social Capital: Networks and Relationships

Social capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986), refers to the value of social networks and relationships that individuals can mobilize to achieve their goals. This form of capital encompasses both the network itself and the resources that can be accessed through it. For instance, individuals can gain job leads, recommendations, and advocacy for advancement from their social networks, leading to career progression or increased earnings. Moreover, a sense of belonging and support from others can enhance self-esteem, cultural enrichment, and emotional well-being (De Haan et al., 2015; Defesche, 2022).

However, social capital does not always produce positive outcomes. De Haan et al. (2015) argue that in environments that discourage growth, such as criminal milieus or neglectful social circles, social capital can be disadvantageous. This critical perspective underscores the need to consider the nuanced effects of social capital, acknowledging that its impact can vary depending on context and circumstances.

According to Granovetter (1973), social capital is often categorized into bonding and bridging. Bonding refers to connections among individuals who share similarities, fostering a sense of community and mutual support crucial for overall well-being. Conversely, bridging involves interactions across different groups, facilitating access to diverse opportunities and resources. An imbalance, with excessive bonding and insufficient bridging, can lead to social fragmentation and increased disparities among groups. This highlights the importance of addressing disparities in social capital, as individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have limited access to bridging social capital, which restricts their exposure to diverse opportunities (Defesche, 2022).

Cultural Capital: Knowledge, Skills and Cultural Competencies

Cultural capital, a concept introduced by Bourdieu (1986), encompasses the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. These assets include education, intellect, style of speech, dress, or physical appearance. In the context of education,

cultural capital includes the knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies in navigating the education system. Children inherit cultural capital from their parents, either passively through exposure to parents' cultural capital or actively through deliberate efforts to transfer cultural capital knowledge (Jæger, 2011). This cultural capital is embedded in children's knowledge, language, and behaviours, forming their “habitus” (Defesche, 2022).

Within the context of education, adolescents from disadvantaged neighbourhoods who possess cultural capital, such as knowledge of the education culture and academic skills, can develop strategies to navigate the challenges of the education system and achieve their educational goals. Bourdieu's theory (1986) underscores the role of cultural resources in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes, particularly across different socio-economic groups. Adolescents with cultural capital can leverage these resources to their advantage, improving their chances of academic success.

Methodology and methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore how socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood impact the academic achievement of adolescents from low SES neighbourhoods in Utrecht. Qualitative research is chosen for its ability to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of participants in-depth, allowing for a better understanding of the studied phenomenon (Clark & Bryman, 2019), guided by principles of reliability, reflexivity, and ethical considerations (Boeije, 2009; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Validity threats are acknowledged, including potential biases due to the researcher's background and limited trust-building opportunities with participants, potentially affecting response reliability. More on this subject is discussed in the section labelled 'ethics'.

Study Design

As qualitative study design there is chosen for semi-structured interviews, which allowed a deeper exploration of individual experiences and perspectives. A total of three semi-structured (see Appendix 2 for topic list/interview-questions), in-depth interviews were conducted which were focused on the theme of living in Kanaleneiland and the influence of environmental factors on academic performance. The direct engagement with the community and the support from local youth workers were crucial in obtaining sufficient participants for this study.

Participants

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a purposively sampling strategy to select participants representing the target population. The sample consists of adolescents aged 16 to 25 years, due to ethical reasons, including both boys and girls from the low SES neighbourhood Kanaleneiland, in Utrecht. Access to the participants was gained in

collaboration with the 'Minding the Gap' project.¹ Since participants were randomly approached rather than pre-selected, the risk of selection bias is minimized, ensuring a more representative sample of adolescents from Kanaleneiland.

Procedure

Participant recruitment was conducted through the "Minding the Gap" project, which began with distributing flyers detailing five different thesis topics to various gatekeepers within the Kanaleneiland community. Each flyer included a link to an online registration form. After one week with only two registrations, s more direct recruitment methods were employed, including street recruitment and visits to local community centres and youth centres. Through the efforts of JOU Jongerenwerk, a youthworkers, acting as our gatekeeper, invited us to visit their facilities. This allowed me to inform young people about the research and conduct interviews.

Ethics

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in comfortable settings, with audio-recorded and participants' verbal consent. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly followed, with approval from the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University with approval from the ethics committee. Reflexivity was crucial to address potential biases. However, limited opportunities to build trust with participants might have affected response reliability. As a female, Dutch university student, I felt a certain distance. For example, one of the participants mentioned feeling pressured to give "good" answers and found it challenging to speak ABN. This dynamic could lead to socially desirable answers, either confirming or contradicting stereotypes of Kanaleneiland.

¹ Minding the Gap' is a research project focuses on the mental health of young people (aged 12-25) who know what it is like to live with money worries, such as poverty and/or debt (*Minding The Gap*, z.d.).

Instruments

The measurements in this study aim to capture the socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood effects, as well as their impact on academic achievement among adolescents from low SES neighbourhoods in Utrecht. SES was operationalized using multiple indicators, including objective SES, personal education level, and parents' occupation, consistent with previous research (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Jeynes, 2002; Sirin, 2005). Neighbourhood effects were assessed based on Bronfenbrenner's developmental psychology framework (1979) and Galster's (2011) social mechanisms within neighbourhoods. Participants were asked about their perceptions of their neighbourhood's physical environment, social climate, educational resources, and the presence of poverty concentration or social disorganization. Additionally, data on the duration of residency in the neighbourhood were also collected to account for temporal dimensions of neighbourhood effects (Mustard et al., 2012). Academic achievement will be measured using various indicators, including school advice, grades, and self-reported perceptions of academic performance.

Analysis Strategy

Data analysis will involve thematic analysis (see Appendix 3 for coding schedule). Initially, open coding was used to identify initial themes and patterns within the data, followed by axial coding to explore relationships between themes and concepts (Boeije, 2009; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Qualitative analysis methods were used to organize the data, emphasizing significant quotations and identifying key themes and patterns that either corresponded with or diverged from the research question.

Results

It is Tuesday evening, nearing half past five, and with a slight tension in our steps, I walk through the streets of Kanaleneiland alongside three of my fellow students. The tension is tangible as we are unsure of what the evening will bring. Last week, during our preliminary research in the neighbourhood, we met one of the youth coaches at JOU Jongerenwerk, who invited us tonight to gather insights from the boys aged sixteen and over who regularly attend the walk-in hours. As we approach the location, a sudden downpour begins. I hear several male voices calling out, "Come on in, ladies, come inside to take shelter!" and we hurry indoors. At the entrance there is a group of about ten young boys, one of whom guides us to a side room where we can sit. After catching our breath for a moment, we cautiously make our way to the spacious "living room," where we see all the young people hanging out. Some are immersed in playing FIFA on the PlayStation, others are playing ping pong, pool, or simply chatting on the couch. All eyes are on us. We exchange awkward glances and burst into laughter. Here we go.

After an evening of impressions in Kanaleneiland, facilitated by Chadid's guidance, my research began by delving deeper into the lived experiences and perspectives of the young people from Kanaleneiland. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three prominent themes that summarise the adolescent's lives as well as both the key elements of the research question. In this section, the findings will be presented through the lens of three distinct narratives, those of Youssef, Mehmet, and Lianne.² Each offering a unique perspective on the intersection of socio-economic circumstances, neighbourhood dynamics, and individual experiences shaping educational journeys in Kanaleneiland. These narratives provide rich accounts of their lives, aspirations, and challenges within the context of the community.

² All participants' names are replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

Narrative's Introduction

Youssef, Mehmet, and Lianne illustrate the varying family dynamics within Kanaleneiland. Lianne grew up in a relatively small family with two educated, working parents and a younger sister. The stability and emphasis on education within her household provided a solid foundation for her educational aspirations. Youssef, born and raised in Kanaleneiland, currently resides with his grandparents as his parents and three younger brothers moved away. He is pursuing a vocational education in personal guidance and social care, aspiring to become a youth support worker. Mehmet, also a native of Kanaleneiland, lives with his parents, two younger brothers, and sister. He is enrolled in a vocational education program in account management, aiming to take over his father's car family business someday. Despite their differing family structures and backgrounds, Youssef, Mehmet, and Lianne navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by their environment, driven by their aspirations for a better future.

Theme 1: Social Environment and Family Life

Within the diversity of Kanaleneiland, families vary in socio-economic status, impacting the extent of parental support and involvement and ultimately influencing individual paths. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, which posits that non-financial social assets like education and family support play crucial roles in shaping educational outcomes.

Parental Support and Expectation

Participants described a range of parental approaches to education, with some receiving academic and emotional support from their parents, while others experienced stricter monitoring and control aimed at steering them away from negative influences. Youssef told me about his strict upbringing focused on academic achievement, his mother, for instance, insisted that he would repeat the seventh grade in order to improve his academic school advice.

Although Youssef initially resisted, he eventually complied with his parents' wishes, progressing to a higher educational advice by eighth grade. Reflecting on his parents' emphasis on education, Youssef explained:

“They simply wanted a son who wouldn't end up hanging out on the streets later. They wanted a son with a diploma who could secure a decent job. They did it for me, but I did it for them too. [...] The older youths now are not in school; they're outside every day and smoke every day. They don't work, have no income. My parents just didn't want me to end up like those youths, those hanging out on the streets.”

Youssef's parents' attitude, as he describes, is characteristic of several parents from Kanaleneiland who want to prevent their children from living up to the stereotypical image of 'hanging youths'. Ainsworth (2002) discusses how dominant stereotypes in high-poverty, low SES neighbourhoods can negatively affect students' self-identity and aspirations. These stereotypes often lead to lower motivation and social isolation. However, Youssef's story illustrates how proactive parental involvement can counteract these negative effects. By emphasizing education and steering their children away from negative influences, parents provide crucial support, helping their children overcome the stigmatization and isolation Ainsworth (2002) describes.

Mehmet recognizes the strict parenting style of his mother, who maintains regular contact with his school mentor to monitor his progress. In relation to his past misbehaviour, Mehmet finds this involvement comforting and acknowledges this as a factor in his educational journey. However, he notes that such mentor-parent relationships are rare in Kanaleneiland, primarily due to language barriers that many parents face when communicating with teachers. This underscores Entwisle and Astone's (1994) observation on the critical role of parental engagement in educational success.

In contrast, Lianne experiences a different form of parental pressure. Her parents' prominent level of education sets clear expectations, yet she thrives academically with their support. This contrast shows the varying impact of parental involvement based on socio-economic and cultural contexts. While Mehmet's narrative aligns with theories on the importance of parental engagement, Lianne's experience adds nuance by showing how higher expectations and support can lead to academic success, even under pressure.

These findings challenge the assumption that parental involvement alone is sufficient for educational success. They reveal the importance of considering the quality and context of such involvement. Mehmet's situation highlights structural barriers like language that can limit parental engagement, whereas Lianne's story shows how educated parents can provide substantial support. This adds a new dimension to the discussion of educational outcomes in low SES neighbourhoods, illustrating that the interplay between parental involvement, socio-economic context, and individuals needs is more complex than traditionally acknowledged in the literature.

Friendships and Peer Pressure

Friendships and peer pressure significantly influence the participants' behaviours and decisions. Within their social circles, the desire for acceptance often leads to conformity and susceptibility to peer pressure, especially regarding risky behaviours like substance abuse or criminal activities. Youssef highlighted the complex interplay of group dynamics, recognizing the influence of group norms on his behaviour. This can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the impact of immediate social environments on individual development. He recognises the pressure to conform as an expression of group loyalty and the need for affirmation within collective identity.

Youssef provided insight into the peer pressure that young people can experience:

“For example, I see a friend of mine fighting, then of course I'm going to help him. I'm not going to let him fight against an older man a just watch. I can't do that. And that's also how the group works. Even if one of them starts stealing now, you start to think, will you join in stealing? Then I think not today, maybe tomorrow. But no, luckily, I've never stolen in my life. I'm glad about that. But group pressure is dangerous indeed.”

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provides insight here, suggesting that individuals learn behaviours through observing and emulating their peers. Youssef's example highlights the complicated dynamics of peer relationships and the pervasive influence of social circles on individual choices and actions. Moreover, it confirms, as De Haan et al (2015) argued, that having a big social network and having social capital does not always have positive outcomes and that environments such as neglectful social circles can be disadvantageous.

Theme 2: Neighbourhood Effects and Supportive Facilities

The influence of the neighbourhood and supportive facilities play a crucial role in the lives of the participants in Kanaleneiland. The characteristics and social dynamics of the neighbourhood vary significantly, and these differences directly impact the youths living there.

Neighbourhood Characteristics and Social Dynamics

In Kanaleneiland, the neighbourhood's socio-economic status and cultural dynamics shape the experiences and aspirations of its youth. The presence of a significant Islamic community influences cultural norms and expectations, particularly concerning family life and marriage. Lianne's experience of being questioned about marriage at the age of twenty-four, exemplifies these cultural norms, contrasting with expectations in other social contexts. This phenomenon can be analysed through the lens of cultural capital, a concept introduced by Bourdieu (1986). Cultural capital encompasses the cultural knowledge, skills, and practices that families and communities pass on to their members. In Kanaleneiland, families with higher

levels of cultural capital, often linked to education and professional success, transmit values that prioritize academic achievement and future-oriented goals. This contrasts with families with lower cultural capital, where traditional norms and economic constraints may limit educational opportunities and career aspirations.

The socio-economic status of the neighbourhood presents a mixed picture. Some young people notice a lot of poverty, visible through old clothes and cars, while others do not recognize this. When I asked Mehmet if income differences play a role in social interactions within the neighbourhood, he shared: "Here in the neighbourhood, not really, because everyone is more or less on the same level. If you have a class of thirty kids, maybe three or four are really well-off, but the other twenty-six are not. [...] It's a nice atmosphere here, everyone is equal."

This quote shows how the community spirit and social cohesion in the neighbourhood are strong; many residents know each other well, contributing to a friendly atmosphere and a sense of solidarity. Youssef illustrated this as well: "It's a nice neighbourhood. I have many friends here; I have a lot of family. Friends eventually become family too."

At the same time, safety and nuisance remain important issues. The neighbourhood is busy and diverse, but challenges such as unsafe streets and speeding cars make it difficult for children to play outside. Hanging youths sometimes cause disturbances, although the presence of youth centres like 'JOU Jongerenwerk' have helped reduce issues as bullying, fighting and theft. This improvement aligns with Bandura's social learning theory (1977), which suggests that supportive environments can foster positive behaviours and outcomes. Despite these improvements, the high population density makes the neighbourhood susceptible to negative influences. This is also discussed by Galster's (2011) work on how neighbourhood characteristics affect social dynamics. In densely populated areas like Kanaleneiland, despite the presence of supportive services, challenges such as safety concerns and potential negative peer influences persist due to the sheer number of people living closely together.

Supportive Facilities and Resources

Educational support is abundant, with libraries and quiet study places available. For some, studying at home is difficult due to overcrowded households and distractions from peer groups, making the library an important shelter. Youssef illustrated this by sharing his experience of finding motivation and focus in the library: "Sometimes in the library, I see guys from the neighbourhood. 'Yo, how's it going, what are you doing?' 'I'm here to study.' I say, 'Good, let's study together. And then the whole street isn't tempting for me anymore.'"

This reflects the importance of environmental resources in facilitating academic success, as discussed by Entwisle & Astone (1994). The role of youth centres in providing safe spaces for socializing and studying underscores the significance of supportive facilities in promoting positive youth development and is consistent with the findings of Sirin (2005) on the impact of community resources on educational outcomes.

Guidance and mentorship are also widely available. Within the educational system, mentors, deans, and academic advisors play important roles in supporting adolescents with their schoolwork and overall academic progress. Mentors, usually experienced individuals such as teachers or community members, provide students with personal guidance, help them deal with academic challenges and encourage essential skills. Deans oversee student affairs, including academic guidance and disciplinary matters, within schools or educational institutions. Academic advisers, present in higher education institutions, help students plan their academic path, select courses, and address academic obstacles they face. In Kanaleneiland, these support services are often organized within schools or community centres. Additionally, local organizations and youth services may facilitate access to additional support resources, such as tutoring programs, study groups, or workshops focused on academic skill development.

This integrated support system is crucial for youths in Kanaleneiland, offering resources and guidance for academic and social success. Youssef and Mehmet benefited from programs

like mentoring and community centres, which played important roles in their educational journeys. However, Lianne's situation shows that having highly educated parents can offer similar support without formal programs. This highlights how family and cultural capital can influence educational outcomes independently of structured support systems.

Theme 3: Academic Performance and Future Prospects

The theme of school performance and future prospects reveals significant insights into the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of young people in Kanaleneiland. The interplay of school experiences, role models, and personal development shapes their educational outcomes and career ambitions.

School Experiences and Performances

Behavioural issues and school performance are closely linked for many youths in Kanaleneiland. Some students are sent to behavioural schools and express a desire to improve their behaviour for their parents' sake. The lack of homework outside of school, high school expectations, and distractions from the street contribute to a decline in academic performance. Youssef shared his experience: "I used to do HAVO/VWO. Then I saw my friends chilling outside and thought, screw school, I'll join them. I didn't do my homework, didn't study for tests, got bad grades, and dropped down to TL."

Behavioural issues, often exacerbated by peer pressure, lead to concentration problems and disruptions in class. Mehmet explained that peer pressure affects school performance:

"You see a lot in the neighbourhood that kids are smart, but their behaviour messes up their school performance. They start on a high level in primary school but go lower and lower in secondary school." These narratives reflect the impact of the social environment on academic outcomes, as discussed by Bradley and Corwyn (2002), who emphasize the role of negative peer influences in affecting school performance. Research by De Haan et al. (2015) on similar urban neighbourhoods supports this view, highlighting how peer dynamics and street culture

can derail academic trajectories. Despite these challenges, there are instances where students strive to change their behaviour for the better, demonstrating resilience and personal agency.

Influence of Role Models

Positive role models play a crucial role in guiding young people towards better academic and personal outcomes. Youth workers and family members, such as Lianne's mother, serve as inspiring figures. Lianne mentioned the impact of having educated parents: "Both my parents studied, so it was always easier with their help. It's also expected that if your parents studied, you would too. I believe having two intelligent parents makes it easier for you at school."

This quote reflects how Lianne's parents, both educated professionals, provide a model of academic success and offer practical support, reinforcing her own educational aspirations. In line with Bandura's social learning theory (1977) suggesting that individuals learn behaviours and attitudes through observation of role models. This also fits with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, where the knowledge and educational support provided by parents are crucial for academic success. Studies in similar contexts, such as those by Sirin (2005), have also found that role models and parental involvement significantly impact educational outcomes, highlighting the broader applicability of these findings.

Future Prospects and Ambitions

The future plans and career goals of the youths in Kanaleineiland vary. Some have clear ambitions, such as taking over a family business or pursuing a traineeship. Working nearly full-time alongside school is common, driven by the desire to avoid wasting time and to earn money. Personal development is a significant aspect of their journey. Learning to reflect and manage behaviour is crucial for success. Youssef illustrated this struggle:

"I still sometimes bring that attitude to school. For example, I speak in street language to the teacher. She told me my attitude isn't right. Now, I try not to speak in class to

avoid using street language. I'm working on it because I know you can't talk like that to an employer."

These integrated support systems, role models, and personal growth opportunities help the youths in Kanaleneiland navigate their educational paths and shape their future prospects. However, their experiences also reveal a nuanced view of the structure-agency debate. Mehmet, from a low SES background, emphasizes personal agency: "If you want to do something, you do it. I think it really depends on yourself. You shouldn't place the blame on others." Conversely, Lianne, with a higher SES background, acknowledges structural influences: "There are good schools here, but also more distractions and challenges. The home situation might be different, with parents having less time to help. I think I was fortunate with how I grew up."

This highlights the interplay between individual actions and structural conditions, as described by Giddens' theory of structure and agency (1984). While the youth in Kanaleneiland exercise agency in pursuing their goals, their opportunities are often shaped by socio-economic conditions, illustrating the complex dynamics at play in their educational trajectories. The contrasting perspectives of Mehmet and Lianne underscore the persistent inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes, reflecting broader societal disparities that continue to influence the lives of young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the socio-cultural dynamics, challenges, and aspirations of adolescents from a low SES neighbourhood in Utrecht, specifically focusing on how socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood effects impact academic achievement. The thematic analysis revealed that family dynamics and parental support were particularly influential factors, with varying levels of involvement and expectations significantly impacting the educational trajectories of the participants. Peer relationships also played a crucial role, with the desire for acceptance often leading to conformity and susceptibility to peer pressure, especially regarding risky behaviours. Through the narratives of Youssef, Mehmet, and Lianne, I observed how effective parental support and involvement tailored to navigate socio-economic barriers and cultural nuances, emerge as crucial factors for the educational success of youths in low SES neighbourhoods. However, addressing the influence of peer pressure and negative group dynamics in such environments is equally crucial for encouraging positive educational outcomes.

These findings underscore the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, particularly the microsystem (family and peers) and the mesosystem (interactions between parents and teachers). However, it is also important to consider individual characteristics. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and cultural capital suggests that non-economic resources significantly influence academic success. This research supports this, showing that social capital (networks and relationships) and cultural capital (knowledge and skills) are crucial. However, the findings also problematize the theory by indicating that in low SES neighbourhoods, the potential of social and cultural capital can be heavily constrained by broader socio-economic factors. This suggests a need to more explicitly incorporate these constraints into the theory. In line with this, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory emphasizes individual agency within structural constraints, revealing how adolescents navigate socio-

economic barriers. This highlights the need to balance the view of individual agency with a recognition of the significant impact of structural barriers.

This study contributes to the ongoing debate over structure and agency by providing a youth-centred perspective, showing how young people's actions are shaped by, and can sometimes transcend, their socio-economic conditions (Mickelson & Saatcioglu, 2024; Zhao et al., 2021). Besides, it contributes also to the understanding of neighbourhood affects, ecological systems and the constraints on capital within disadvantaged contexts (Visser et al., 2021; Jæger, 2011).

Limitations

A key limitation of this study is the potential selection bias due to the recruitment methods. Despite efforts to minimize this bias by randomly approaching participants, those who chose to participate might have been more motivated or interested in the research topic. This could have influenced the findings, as we might have primarily heard from adolescents who recognize the impact of the neighbourhood on their academic performance. Additionally, my positionality as a female, Dutch university student might have influenced the responses. During the interviews, I felt a certain distance which might have made participants feel pressure to give socially desirable answers.

Implications

In practice, the findings advocate for targeted policies and community-based interventions. These include enhancing parental engagement, supporting educational resources as youth centres and mentoring programs, and addressing structural barriers such as language limitations. Recommendations emphasize holistic approaches that integrate support networks across families, schools, and communities to promote positive academic and social outcomes.

Unresolved challenges include mitigating negative peer influences and ensuring equitable access to supportive resources.

Moving forward, fostering collaborative efforts among families, educators, and community stakeholders can create a supportive ecosystem that empowers youth to thrive academically and socially. By addressing these multifaceted challenges holistically, we can pave the way for more equitable educational opportunities and brighter futures for all adolescents, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.

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Appendix 1: Reflection on Interdisciplinarity

By examining the subject of this thesis through multiple disciplines, a more comprehensive understanding can be achieved. This interdisciplinary approach is chosen to address the complex nature of socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood effects on academic achievement.

As an cultural anthropologist, I used to write from an anthropological approach. This approach provides insights into the thoughts, culture, and motivations of adolescents from low SES neighbourhoods, offering a deep understanding of their lived experiences. However, this perspective alone may not be enough when looking at broader societal issues, as adolescents growing up in poverty. As sociology can reveal broader societal processes, showing how structural factors and societal trends impact these adolescents. Psychology can explain individual and group behaviours, such as peer influence and family dynamics, which are crucial for understanding the personal and social aspects of the issue. Thereby, adding a pedagogical perspective can be useful as well, given the focus on education and parental support, to understand the role of educational practices and family involvement in academic success.

Combining these perspectives allows for a complete view of how socio-economic circumstances and neighbourhood effects influence academic achievement. Cultural anthropology helps in understanding the daily experiences and cultural contexts of the adolescents. Psychology explains behaviours shaped by peer and family influences. Sociology provides insights into larger societal trends and structures. Pedagogy highlights the importance of upbringing and parental support. Together, these disciplines offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex mix of factors affecting academic

success, showing the importance of cultural, psychological, social, and educational dimensions.

Also including insights from stakeholders outside academia, such as educators, community leaders, and policymakers, adds a valuable practical side to the research. These perspectives help connect the gap between theoretical understanding and real-world application. For example, teachers' insights into classroom dynamics and educational challenges offer practical ideas for interventions. Community leaders provide a grounded understanding of neighbourhood influences and resources. Policymakers' perspectives help align the research with broader educational policies and initiatives. These stakeholder insights are crucial for developing realistic and useful interventions that are informed both by science and practice.

While using multiple disciplines is useful for creating a complete overview of the issue, sometimes it is more effective to focus specifically on certain concepts, and a monodisciplinary approach may be more appropriate. For example, if the primary goal is to understand specific cultural mechanisms within a community, long-term anthropological fieldwork might provide deeper insights than a broader interdisciplinary approach.

Each research method has its strengths and weaknesses. For instance, surveys are known for their ability to collect data on a large scale, often resulting in a larger sample size and reducing the risk of socially desirable responses due to their anonymous nature. However, they often miss deeper motivations and background information that can be obtained through in-depth interviews. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative methods (such as in-depth interviews and participant observation) with quantitative methods (such as surveys and statistical analysis), can address these issues. Qualitative methods offer rich, detailed

narratives that capture the complexity of individual experiences, while quantitative methods allow for the generalisation of findings across a larger population.

Analysing the problem at multiple levels, such as the individual, community, and societal levels, can provide a deeper understanding of the research problem. For instance, examining individual behaviours and experiences provides insights into personal and immediate factors influencing academic achievement. Analysing community-level dynamics sheds light on the role of local resources, peer groups, and neighbourhood environments. At the societal level, exploring broader socio-economic trends and policies helps understand the structural factors at play. Combining these levels of analysis allows for a complete understanding of the issue, capturing the complexity and interconnectedness of the factors involved.

By clearly stating the reason for an interdisciplinary perspective and providing well-developed arguments that connect to the main aims of the research, this thesis shows the importance and effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach. Different elements of interdisciplinarity are discussed, showing how various disciplines contribute to a nuanced and complete understanding of the research problem.

Appendix 2: Topic list/interview questions

Algemene achtergrondinformatie

- Hoe gaat het met je?
- Zou je je kort kunnen voorstellen?
- Wie ben je, hoe oud ben je, waar kom je vandaan?
- Welke opleiding volg je momenteel, en wat vind je daarvan?

Socio-economische omstandigheden

- Kun je me iets vertellen over je gezin? Met wie woon je?
- Hoe ziet jullie gezinsleven eruit? Kan je een typische dag bij jou thuis omschrijven?
- Hebben je ouders/verzorgers een baan? Zo ja, wat voor werk doen ze?
- Het gemiddelde inkomen ligt in Kanaleneiland lager dan gemiddeld in Nederland, merk je dat ook in je eigen thuissituatie? Kan je daar meer over vertellen?
- En hoe is dat verder in jou buurt, heb je het gevoel dat er sprake van armoede is in de buurt?

Buurtinvloeden

- We zijn nu in Kanaleneiland, kom je hier ook vandaan?
- Hoelang woon je hier al/ben je hier ook opgegroeid?
- Hoe zou jij deze buurt beschrijven? Hoe is de sfeer? Voel je je veilig en welkom?
- Hoe gaan de mensen in jouw buurt met elkaar om? Zijn er veel sociale activiteiten of verenigingen actief?
- Wat vind je leuk aan de buurt en wat niet?
- Zijn er specifieke plekken in de buurt waar je graag komt of juist vermijdt? Waarom?

- Heb je ooit te maken gehad met problemen zoals vandalisme, criminaliteit of overlast in je buurt?
- Maken deze dingen in jouw buurt het ook moeilijker voor jou om te studeren, of te concentreren tijdens het leren?

Academische prestaties

- Kun je wat vertellen over de school waar je op zit?
- Welk niveau doe je? Is dat in lijn met het groep 8 advies dat je hebt gekregen?
- Wat vond je van dat advies? Heeft dit invloed gehad op je motivatie voor de toekomst?
- Hoe gaat het verder op school voor je?
- Ben je tevreden met de cijfers/beoordelingen die je krijgt?
- Zijn er vakken die je echt moeilijk vindt? Wat denk je dat daar de reden voor is?
- Vind je het leuk op school?
- Zijn er momenten geweest waarop het moeilijk voor je was op school? Zo ja, kun je daar iets over vertellen?
- Hoe ga je om met dit soort moeilijke momenten, wat helpt jou?
- Wat denk je dat jou zou helpen om beter te presteren op school?
- Heb je thuis een rustige plek waar je kan studeren? Zo nee, waar studeer je dan?
- Heb je weleens hulp gekregen van je ouders/verzorgers bij je schoolwerk?

Ondersteunende mechanismen

- Heb je toegang tot mensen of organisaties die je kunnen helpen op school of in de buurt? Zoals bijles, huiswerkbegeleiding, jongeren centrum of een vertrouwenspersoon?
- Heb je weleens deelgenomen aan naschoolse activiteiten?

- Is er iets specifiek dat je helpt om te gaan met eventuele problemen op school?

Toekomstperspectieven

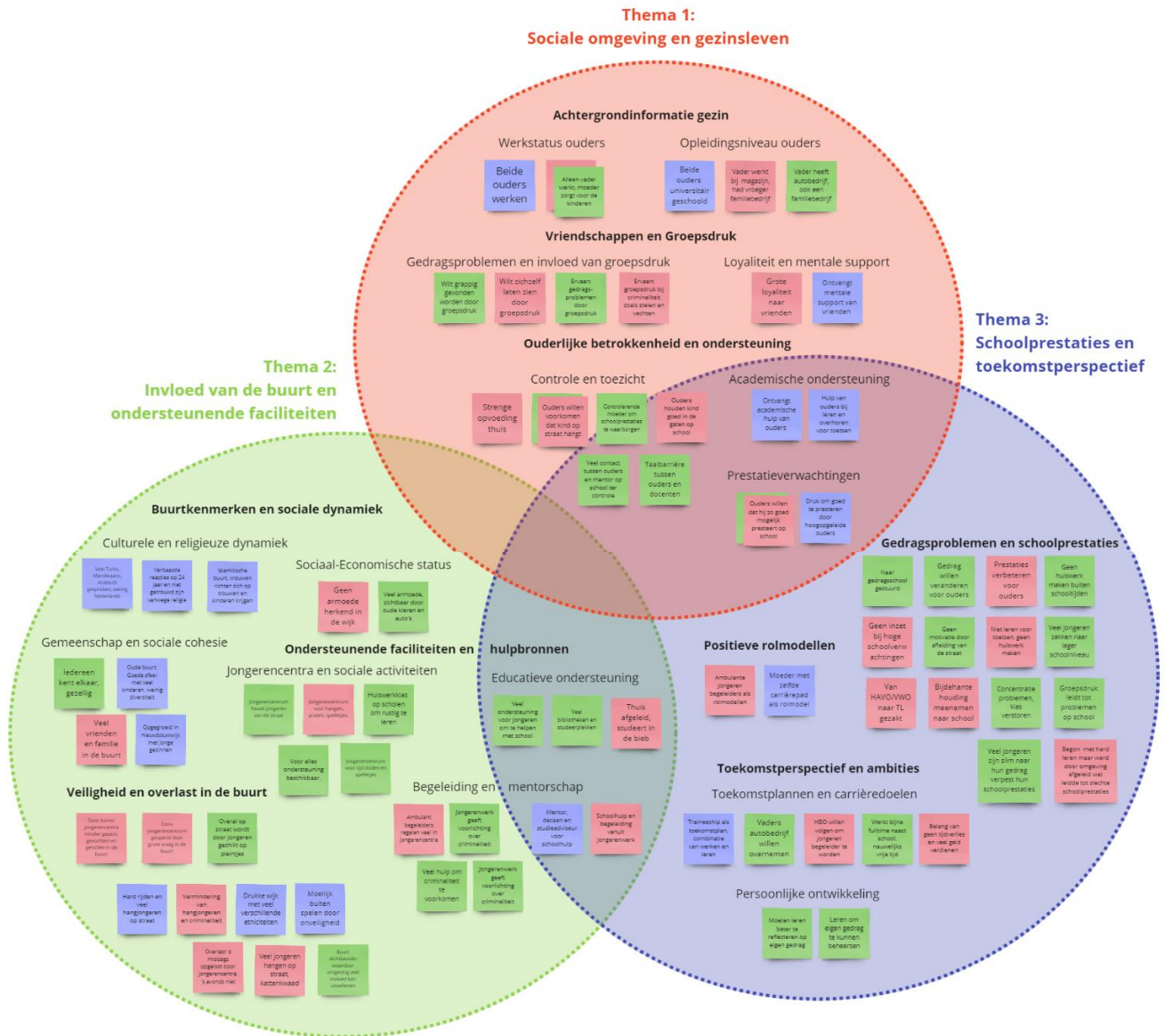
- Wat zou je willen doen als je klaar bent met school?
- Welke rolmodellen heb je, zowel binnen als buiten je familie?
- Denk je dat jouw achtergrond invloed heeft op wat je in de toekomst wilt doen?
- Heb je dromen of doelen die je wilt bereiken?

Afsluiting

- Wat zou je willen veranderen aan je buurt of school om het beter te maken voor jongeren zoals jij?
- Heb je advies voor andere jongeren die in een soortgelijke situatie zitten als jij?
- Heb je nog iets anders dat je zou willen delen over jouw ervaringen?

Appendix 3: Coding schedule

This coding scheme is structured into several layers. Post-it notes represent the open codes, categorized into three different colours corresponding to three distinct perspectives. These open codes are further organized into headings known as axial codes. Together, the open and axial codes form three overarching themes indicated by coloured circles.



- Participant 1 is geboren en getogen in Kanaleiland, en woont momenteel in Kanaleiland bij zijn opa en oma sinds zijn ouders met zijn drie broertjes zijn verhuist naar een andere plek. Hij volgt een MBO niveau 4 opleiding in persoonlijke begeleiding, en maatschappelijke zorg en ambieert een carrière als ambulante jongeren begeleider te worden. In zijn vrije tijd brengt hij vaak tijd door bij JOU jongerenwerk in Kanaleiland, waar hij sociale activiteiten onderneemt met andere jongeren uit de buurt.
- Participant 2 is ook opgegroeid in Kanaleiland en woont momenteel samen met zijn ouders, twee broertjes en zusje. Hij volgt de MBO niveau 4 opleiding accountmanagement en werkt buiten schooluren zo'n zeven dagen per week als pizzakoerier. Zijn doel is om op latere leeftijd het autobedrijf van zijn vader over te kunnen nemen.
- Participant nummer 3 is niet opgegroeid in Kanaleiland maar komt oorspronkelijk uit een rustige nieuwbouwwijk, op een half uurtje afstand van Kanaleiland. Na het afronden van haar bachelor informatiekunde aan de Universiteit Utrecht is ze momenteel bezig met het schrijven van haar masterscriptie. Vier jaar geleden, bij aanvang van haar studie, is ze samen gaan wonen met haar vriend in een appartement in Kanaleiland. Haar doel is om na het behalen van haar master een traineeship te gaan volgen, in lijn met het beroep van haar moeder, die werkzaam is als projectmanager binnen de ICT-sector.