



Progressive and Tolerant Amsterdam and the Educational Outcomes of Young Immigrants and Refugees

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ABSTRACT

Amsterdam, widely perceived as a progressive and tolerant metropolis, embodies a paradox. Its global reputation as a champion of multiculturalism and social equity contrasts sharply with persistent structural inequalities, particularly in education for children of immigrant and refugee backgrounds. This article situates Amsterdam's contemporary educational landscape within its broader historical, demographic, and political context, tracing connections from the city's colonial legacy to present-day disparities. Drawing on demographic projections for 2025, the study notes that nearly 60% of Amsterdam's youth have a migrant background, with a significant share from non-Western countries. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal systemic disadvantage—manifest in early educational tracking, culturally biased assessment, teacher shortages, disproportionate absenteeism, and underrepresentation in higher academic tracks—exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on digital access, mental health, and learning outcomes. While initiatives such as broad bridging classes and diploma stacking demonstrate potential for upward mobility, these remain insufficient to close entrenched achievement gaps. The article advances a rights-based framework for educational equity, recommending decolonisation of curricula, culturally responsive pedagogy, restorative justice practices, and enhanced media literacy to address global conflict narratives. By linking historical exploitation to contemporary exclusion, the study argues that achieving Amsterdam's vision of inclusivity requires confronting the enduring legacies of its colonial and neo-colonial past.

Keywords: Amsterdam, educational inequality, migration, colonial legacy, youth, multiculturalism, systemic discrimination, decolonising education, teacher shortages, absenteeism, restorative justice, COVID-19 impact, media literacy, social equity.

INTRODUCTION

Amsterdam has a reputation for being a tolerant city abroad. It is also said to be progressive. After all, it has a dominant Green-Left-PvdA administration and city council. However, the city Amsterdam also has a dark history of theft, looting, beheadings, genocide, murder, manslaughter and abuse in its former Asian, African and American colonies.

Migration is deeply rooted in Amsterdam's history. Since the 16th century, the city has welcomed thousands of newcomers every year, from the Dutch countryside and from far-flung corners of the globe. At the same time, many people have also left the city, sometimes after living there for generations. This constant ebb and flow has often led to tension and even exclusion, as demonstrated by the histories of the Jewish, Surinamese and Moroccan communities in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, it is this continuous migration that has driven the diversity for which the city is renowned. It is also behind the city's world-famous economic and cultural dynamism, which makes it attractive to many. Jan and Leo Lucassen demonstrate how

residents and outsiders have interacted with each other over the centuries to shape Amsterdam into the city it is today (Lucassen et al. 2021).



Figure 1: Hundreds gather in Amsterdam to protest against EU migrant policies (link: <https://ap.lc/zUWsi>)

As the capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam is treading a fine line. On the one hand, there is robbery, looting and murder; on the other, tolerance and progressiveness. In this article, we explore how this duality affects the children of immigrants and refugees. It is reasonable to expect both aspects to be evident in the city's governance, population, institutions and businesses. Our exploratory research will focus primarily on primary and secondary school pupils in Amsterdam.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF AMSTERDAM

It is estimated that the population of Amsterdam will reach 934,526 by 2025*. According to the most recent data from the Municipality of Amsterdam, the city's population is expected to reach 934,374 on 1 January 2025. Another source, AlleCijfers.nl, indicates that the municipality of Amsterdam will have 934,526 inhabitants in 2025. Therefore, both sources confirm that the city will have around 934,500 inhabitants in 2025. The city's growth is mainly due to foreign migration, with more people moving to Amsterdam from outside the Netherlands than vice versa. Additionally, there is a birth surplus, with more babies being born than people dying. Although it is difficult to provide an exact percentage, we can estimate the number of immigrants and refugees in Amsterdam in 2025 based on current trends and forecasts. By then, the city's population will have become even more multicultural, with more people having migrated there.

Amsterdam is city, with a significant proportion of residents having migrated there.

Immigration and Emigration: The city's population growth is mainly due to foreign migration, with people coming to Amsterdam from other countries.

* <https://allecijfers.nl/>

Asylum Seekers: The number of asylum applications fluctuates; however, according to Sociaalweb.nl, there was a clear decline in the first quarter of 2025.

Expats: Amsterdam also attracts many expatriates (international knowledge migrants), which contributes to a large, multicultural variety of Amsterdam residents and the economy.

Non-Western Immigrants: The proportion of non-Western immigrants increased significantly in the past, but growth has levelled off now.

According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS), the population grew by 45,600 due to migration in the first half of the year. Immigration was higher in the first three months of 2025 than in the same period in 2024, with 79,000 immigrants arriving.

In 2022, there were over 90,000 expatriates working in Amsterdam.

Conclusion: Amsterdam remains a city of immigration and emigration. Although it is difficult to predict the exact number of immigrants and refugees, the trend is towards an increasingly multicultural society. 35.0 per cent of Amsterdam's population are from non-Western countries, compared to 15.3 per cent from Western countries. The proportion of non-Western immigrants in the city's population increased sharply until 2005, after which growth levelled off.

Young People in Amsterdam: Around 60% of children and young people in Amsterdam (aged 0–17) have a migrant background. This means that either one or both of their parents were born outside the Netherlands[†]. More specifically: In 2020, more than 148,000 children and young people were living in Amsterdam. Sixty percent of them had a migrant background, equating to around 88,800 young people. The proportion of children with a migrant background is highest in districts such as IJburg and parts of Amsterdam Noord, Nieuw-West and Zuid Oost.

This multicultural group includes a significant number of young people with a Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese or Antillean background, as well as young people from other migrant backgrounds.

Forecast Population: 2025–2055: Despite a modest increase last year, Amsterdam's population is expected to continue growing. However, only 2,626 new residents moved to the city last year, compared to an average annual increase of 10,000 since 2008. The city's growth is primarily driven by foreign migration. New residents who immigrated in 2024 came mainly from Germany, the United States, Italy, Spain, and France. At the beginning of January 2025, the city's population stood at 934,374. It is projected to grow by around 170,000 by 2055, reaching a total population of 1,105,000. Amsterdam has a relatively young population. Most newcomers to the city are aged between 18 and 30. Due to this youthful demographic, more babies are born than people die in the city. This birth surplus is the second main cause of population growth. However, net domestic migration has been negative for years, resulting in a population decline.

[†] <https://openresearch.amsterdam/nl/>

THE CITY OF AMSTERDAM'S VISION AND MISSION

The city of Amsterdam has set an ambitious goal for 2025: to become a vibrant, sustainable, and multicultural metropolis where various communities coexist harmoniously. Central to this vision is the commitment to balance urban growth with the preservation of a high quality of life for all residents. To remain an attractive destination for both inhabitants and visitors, the city has identified three strategic pillars: affordability, accessibility, and the creation of healthy living environments.

A Clear Vision for the Future

Sustainability and the Circular Economy:

Amsterdam aspires to become a fully circular city by 2050. As a key milestone toward this objective, it aims to halve the consumption of new raw materials by 2030. The city's sustainable development model emphasizes the efficient use, reuse, and recycling of resources, setting a global example for responsible urban planning.

Smart, Sustainable Growth Within Limits:

Growth is guided by principles of spatial restraint and compact development. Amsterdam plans to construct 50,000 new homes within its existing urban footprint, concentrating efforts on the densification and revitalization of current neighbourhoods. This strategy ensures that expansion does not come at the cost of liveability or ecological integrity.

Affordability and Accessibility as Cornerstones:

Ensuring that housing and commercial spaces remain affordable and accessible is essential to Amsterdam's mission. Policies are in place to safeguard affordability for present and future residents, while also supporting local businesses and providing functional spaces for entrepreneurship and community services.

A City Rooted in multicultural coexistence and Community

Fostering Multicultural Coexistence:

Multicultural coexistence is celebrated as a defining strength of Amsterdam. The city is actively working to foster multicultural communities, embracing a wide spectrum of people, cultures, and economic activities. This is supported by efforts to empower local communities and cultivate vibrant public life through shared, accessible spaces.

Active, Healthy Mobility:

The city is committed to promoting sustainable and active modes of transport. Emphasis is placed on walking, cycling, and the use of public transit—encouraging a healthy lifestyle and reducing the city's environmental footprint.

Collective Participation in City Building:

Urban development in Amsterdam is a shared endeavour. Space is intentionally reserved for social initiatives and for residents to actively shape their own environments, reinforcing civic engagement and local stewardship.

Public Spaces as Shared Living Rooms:

Public spaces are envisioned as the "living rooms of all Amsterdammers"—welcoming,

multifunctional areas where people can gather, relax, and thrive. These spaces are integral to social cohesion, wellbeing, and the overall character of the city.

Key Initiatives Guiding Amsterdam's Urban Future

Housing Agenda 2025:

Amsterdam's housing policy stipulates that by 2025:

- 40% of new homes will be under rent control,
- 40% will be moderately priced for rent or ownership,
- 20% will be designated as high-end properties for rent or purchase.

This balanced distribution aims to ensure social diversity and long-term affordability.

Inner City Implementation Programme 2025:

This programme focuses on enhancing the quality of life in the city centre through improvements in public spaces, retail, gastronomy, and housing diversity. It seeks to balance liveliness with liveability in one of Amsterdam's most dynamic areas.

Public Space Vision 2025:

This vision outlines the future of Amsterdam's public spaces, prioritizing sustainability, inclusivity, and opportunities for social interaction. The goal is to create environments that support everyday activities and spontaneous encounters, while enhancing urban quality of life.

SAIL Amsterdam 2025:

Held every five years, this iconic maritime event brings historic sailing ships to the Port of Amsterdam, drawing large crowds and celebrating the city's nautical heritage. It underscores Amsterdam's identity as a global city with deep cultural roots.

In Conclusion

By 2025, Amsterdam aims to be a dynamic, sustainable, and multicultural metropolis where growth is carefully aligned with the enhancement of everyday life. Through its integrated approach—anchored in sustainability, affordability, and cultural vitality—the city is laying the foundation for a resilient and harmonious urban future.

AMSTERDAM'S VISION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN 2025

Amsterdam's vision for young people in 2025 is centred on creating a city where all young residents feel safe, heard, and full of potential—regardless of their background. This vision is closely aligned with the city's broader goals of inclusivity, sustainability, and quality of life. The following pillars define Amsterdam's youth policy and ambitions for the near future:

Equal Opportunities for Every Young Person

The city is committed to ensuring that every young person—wherever they grow up—has access to equal opportunities in education, employment, well-being, and civic participation. Specific initiatives include:

- Investment in education at all levels.
- Support in securing internships and first jobs.
- Tackling youth unemployment.

- Accessible and responsive youth care.

Access to Affordable Housing

Young people are particularly affected by the housing crisis. Amsterdam's **Housing Agenda 2025** includes targeted policies to provide affordable accommodation for students, young professionals, and young families, helping to secure their future in the city.

Youth Participation and Engagement

Amsterdam actively involves young people in shaping their city. This is achieved through:

- Youth councils and participatory programmes.
- Co-creation of neighbourhoods and public spaces.
- Support for youth-led initiatives in culture, sports, and entrepreneurship.

Safe and Inclusive Living Environments

A liveable city for youth also means a safe and inclusive one. Key efforts include:

- Safer public spaces with improved lighting and supervision.
- Combating discrimination and promoting equal treatment.
- Creating community spaces where young people can connect, relax, and grow.

Health and Mental Well-being

Promoting the physical and mental health of young people is a top priority. The city supports:

- Active lifestyles through walking, cycling, and sports.
- Early intervention and mental health support.
- Tackling stress, performance pressure, and loneliness with accessible resources.

Sustainability and Future Responsibility

Amsterdam sees young people as vital partners in building a sustainable future. The city encourages youth engagement in:

- Climate action and environmental awareness.
- Circular economy initiatives.
- Conscious behaviour around energy use, waste, and nature.

In Summary

Amsterdam's vision for young people in 2025 is grounded in **opportunity, connectedness, and empowerment**. Young residents are given the tools and space to grow, thrive, and contribute to their city—through education, employment, housing, and health. They are not only supported, but also actively involved in shaping Amsterdam's future.

THE AMSTERDAM APPROACH TO YOUTH POVERTY AND COVID-19, EMPHASIZING POLICY RESPONSES, IMPACTS, AND ONGOING CHALLENGES



Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Mental Health and Social Equity

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in the Netherlands (from March 2020 onwards), children and adolescents (aged 8–18) in Amsterdam and across the country experienced marked declines in mental and social health. Compared to pre-pandemic levels, these young people reported higher levels of anxiety and sleep disturbances, poorer peer relationships, and an overall deterioration in wellbeing. Mental health issues were particularly pronounced among those

from single-parent families, larger households, families where parents lost work, or those with infected relatives[‡]

Mitigating Digital and Educational Inequities

In response to inequitable access to remote learning, the City of Amsterdam distributed thousands of laptops and Wi-Fi connections to disadvantaged families, especially in deprived neighbourhoods. These actions aimed to bridge the digital divide and ensure continuation of education for vulnerable youth.

Strengthening Community Networks and Youth Inclusion

The municipality intensified cooperation with youth-led initiatives, local organizations, community members, police, and youth workers to deliver culturally and socially accessible COVID-19 messaging and health literacy campaigns—such as co-produced videos explaining regulations and physically distanced behaviour. Such collaborations proved crucial for reaching marginalized youth beyond formal systems[§].

Enhancing Student Mental Health Support

Amsterdam piloted the role of a **student civil servant**, a student working part-time for the municipality to advocate for and support student wellbeing. Initiatives included:

- A “study room service” allowing up to **1,500 students** to study in temporarily vacant hotels during lockdown.
- The **Healthy Talks** mental health campaign, engaging over **7,000 students** in peer conversations and awareness webinars.
- Mental Health Cafés bringing together students, mental health professionals, and local initiatives to reduce stigma and expand low-threshold support options (Elliot et al. 2021).

Youth Unemployment and Labour Market Vulnerability

Research by OECD and others highlights that youth from low-income families, those with migration backgrounds, and those with special needs were disproportionately affected by pandemic-related labour disruptions. Amsterdam adopted targeted labour-market interventions, career guidance, apprenticeships, and networking support to help integrate vulnerable youth into work and education pathways^{**}.

Broader Context: Child Poverty Trends and Long-Term Risk

The broader European context shows that child poverty rose sharply during the pandemic, with a **19 % increase in material deprivation** across EU member states in 2020. Though national policy packages aimed to cushion this shock, research underscores the need for rapid interventions and long-term social investment to prevent enduring “scarring” effects on children’s health, education, and future earnings potential^{††}.

[‡] <https://globalcitieshub.org/en/global-parliament-of-mayors/>

[§] <https://monitor.eurocities.eu/eurocities-pulse-mayors-survey/>

^{**} <https://www.oecd.org/>

^{††} <https://www.imf.org/en/Home>

🧠 Fostering Youth Creativity and Resilience

In the absence of standard social outlets, Amsterdam and Dutch youth mobilised creative expression—digital art, online collaborative projects, and community initiatives—to maintain engagement and resilience. These acts of creativity served as critical coping mechanisms and platforms for inclusion during isolation.

🔍 Summary Table

Challenge	Amsterdam's Response	Target Impact
Mental and social health	Mental health campaigns, peer support, digital study spaces	Reduced isolation, increased resilience
Educational access	Device distribution, Wi-Fi support	Digital inclusion and continuity of learning
Marginalised youth inclusion	Youth-civic collaboration, outreach campaigns	Increased reach to underrepresented groups
Unemployment risk	Job guidance, internships, apprenticeships	Pathways to education and employment
Poverty and systemic inequality	Fiscal and labour support, community partnerships	Mitigation of pandemic-driven poverty

THE WORLD IS IN CRISIS, AND WE MUST TAKE ACTION TO ADDRESS THIS IN AMSTERDAM EDUCATION

Global geopolitical conflicts increasingly find expression within local urban contexts, and Amsterdam is no exception. The city has witnessed tangible repercussions of international proxy wars, manifesting in public demonstrations, educational institutions, and even sports environments. One particularly salient episode occurred in November 2024, when events surrounding a football match escalated into what has since been referred to as the “Maccabi riots.” On the evening of 7 November 2024, a confluence of events—both symbolic and practical—created a volatile atmosphere. The Europa League fixture between Ajax and Maccabi Tel Aviv coincided with a public demonstration opposing the presence of Maccabi supporters, as well as the annual Kristallnacht commemoration at the Portuguese-Israeli Synagogue. These overlapping events unfolded within a tense post-conflict context, following the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, which had already prompted weekly demonstrations in Amsterdam concerning the situation in the Middle East.

Tensions escalated around 17:30, when Maccabi supporters initiated a fan walk. During the procession, offensive and allegedly racist slogans were reportedly shouted in Hebrew. These were not immediately addressed by authorities due to language barriers. Concurrently, a demonstration against the presence of Maccabi supporters commenced on Anton de Komplein, with the first clashes requiring police intervention by approximately 18:00. While the Kristallnacht commemoration itself proceeded without disruption, the city’s mayor refrained from attending due to safety concerns.

The early hours of 8 November saw national and international media attention intensify, driven largely by unverified or partial reports. Notably, Israeli media reported the dispatch of rescue flights to retrieve Maccabi supporters, fuelling public and political reactions in the Netherlands. The immediate lack of clarity regarding the precise sequence and nature of events contributed to a disproportionate amplification of their perceived impact. A joint statement by three parties,

including the municipality, promised further clarification in a press conference (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2025).

These incidents unfolded within a broader context of perceived political bias. In the wake of the Hamas attacks, the Amsterdam City Council publicly expressed solidarity with Israel. This position has been criticized by various segments of the population and civil society for overlooking subsequent Israeli military actions that have led to widespread devastation in the Palestinian territories. Critics argue that the administration's stance fails to account for the humanitarian consequences, particularly the extensive civilian casualties, displacement, and destruction experienced in Gaza.

According to the Palestinian News and Information Agency (WAFA), as of 3 August 2025, the death toll in Gaza since the onset of Israeli military operations has reached 60,839, a majority of whom are women and children. Overall casualties—including the injured—total 149,588, with many victims still unaccounted for under rubble. WAFA further reports that 1,487 individuals seeking humanitarian aid have been killed, and over 10,500 wounded, highlighting the severe toll on non-combatant populations and frontline aid workers.

This case underscores how international conflicts reverberate within local European contexts, challenging cities like Amsterdam to navigate the intersection of global politics, civic protest, and social cohesion. The Maccabi riots reflect the increasing entanglement of transnational tensions with domestic public discourse and policy, revealing both the fragility and the global interconnectedness of urban governance today.



Figure 2: Amsterdam The Netherlands May 31st, Climate March

🌐 Youth Mobilisation in Amsterdam

Mass Mobilisations and Student Strikes:

- In **2019**, thousands of students joined **Youth for Climate** protests in cities across the Netherlands. Amsterdam saw approximately **5,000 students** strike on March 14,

followed by a larger demonstration of around **40,000 participants** on March 10, 2019—from Dam Square to Museumplein^{††}.

- In **November 2023**, an estimated **70,000 people**, including many young activists and Greta Thunberg, marched in Amsterdam demanding stronger climate action just ahead of the national elections^{§§}.

Youth Organisations and Advocacy^{***}:

- The **Dutch Young Climate Movement (Jonge Klimaatbeweging)**, representing nearly 500,000 young people across more than 70 organisations, played a pivotal role in national climate policy, presenting a collective **Youth Climate Action Agenda** to the Dutch government and contributing to the Dutch Climate Agreement.
- **Youth for Climate NL^{†††}**, affiliated with the education network *Leren voor Morgen*, represents students' voices in public debate and environmental policymaking.

Direct Action and Civil Disobedience:

Groups like **Extinction Rebellion** and **Code Rood** have featured youth activists in disruptive but peaceful civil disobedience actions.

- In **late 2023**, Extinction Rebellion blocked Amsterdam's A10 highway near ING's former headquarters to protest bank financing of fossil fuels; dozens were arrested, many of them youths.
- **Code Rood^{†††}**, based in the Netherlands, organised actions such as the shutdown of a coal terminal in Amsterdam in 2017, involving many young activists

Youth Perspectives and Impacts

Empowerment and Mental Health:

Research^{§§§} underscores that climate action provides a sense of agency for young people—especially when taken collectively. However, high levels of concern about climate impacts can also affect mental wellbeing. Integrating climate education across curricula—from social studies to science—is seen as essential to enhance understanding and motivation among youth.

Motive and Justification:

Investigations into protest motivations show that young activists often frame their environmental action through the lens of **social and planetary justice**. Feelings of injustice regarding policy inaction are a key driver of participation in groups like Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future (Jansma et al. 2024).

Summary

Young people in Amsterdam are at the forefront of climate activism, participating in nationwide student strikes, coordinating through influential youth-led organizations, and joining civil

^{††} <https://klimaatmars.nl/en/about/>

^{§§} <https://www.voanews.com/a/thousands-march-through-amsterdam-calling-for-climate-action-ahead-of-dutch-general-election-/7351658.html>

^{***} <https://nlplatform.com/articles/youth-voices-climate?>

^{†††} <https://lerenvoormorgen.org/en/leden/youth-for-climate>

^{†††} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_Rood?

^{§§§} <https://www.ru.nl/en/research/research-news/empowering-youth-a-call-for-action-in-climate-manifesto-to-rob-jetten>

disobedience movements that visibly disrupt public spaces. Their involvement not only draws attention to climate urgency but also fosters collective empowerment and fresh perspectives—while also exposing emotional, psychological pressures.

These youth-led efforts are reshaping the public sphere and influencing climate policy in the Netherlands, making them indispensable to understanding Amsterdam's climate landscape.

PUPILS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN AMSTERDAM ARE THE FOCUS OF THE FOLLOWING RESULTS

These results and their causes have been the subject of extensive research. In this regard, Professor Maurice Crul's work of the VU University Amsterdam is particularly noteworthy. In collaboration with Professor Crul and Frans Lelie, I have also conducted exploratory and qualitative research into the exclusion and institutional discrimination faced by children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds in primary and secondary education in Amsterdam (Crul et al. 2024).

The Dutch education system (Steinmetz, 2019), while widely praised for its structure, systematically reproduces disadvantage and deprivation for young people with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. This is particularly acute in urban centres like Amsterdam, where over 70% of pupils come from non-Western backgrounds. The structural inequalities identified in pre-pandemic analyses were significantly exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis, although not explicitly addressed in the original study.

Structural Disadvantage Before and During COVID-19

Steinmetz (2019) outlines the multifaceted disadvantages faced by (grand)children of immigrants and refugees in the Dutch education system. These include:

- **Lower educational attainment:** Only 35% of Amsterdam children with non-Western immigrant backgrounds complete education without delay, compared to 67% of native Dutch peers from highly educated households (Amsterdam Court of Audit, 2017).
- **Early educational tracking and segregation:** Pupils are streamed into vocational or academic tracks at a young age, disproportionately placing immigrant youth in vocational tracks (VMBO).
- **Culturally biased assessment mechanisms:** Teacher recommendations often underestimate the capabilities of minority pupils, reinforced by flawed standardised testing and school advice practices.
- **Psychosocial stress and invisibility:** Minority youth report greater behavioural problems, social exclusion, and a feeling of not belonging, which go largely unrecognised by teachers and peers.
- **Barriers to parental involvement:** Language difficulties, low literacy rates (up to 37% in some Amsterdam districts), and digital exclusion reduce the ability of immigrant families to advocate effectively for their children.

These trends contributed to **heightened vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic**, when school closures, remote learning, and increased economic precarity disproportionately impacted already disadvantaged groups. The crisis amplified existing inequalities, particularly in access to digital infrastructure, educational support, and mental health services.

Education, Poverty, and Mental Health

This article indirectly connects systemic educational barriers to broader issues of **poverty and youth mental health**, which became more visible during the pandemic:

- **Lower CITO scores** and poor teacher advice correlate with delayed school progress and lower labour market outcomes. This perpetuates intergenerational poverty.
- **Psychological toll**: Immigrant youth experience chronic stress due to exclusion, discrimination, and underperformance, increasing the risk of mental illness, including psychosis (Van der Ven, 2015).
- **Family support paradox**: Despite often low socioeconomic status, many immigrant parents strongly support their children's education through "extended family messages" – aspirational narratives passed down within the household (Rezai, 2017).

Governance and Accountability

Steinmetz places responsibility for systemic failure not only on schools but also on national and municipal governance structures, including Amsterdam's city council and education inspectorate. He frames education as a **fundamental human right**, referencing UNESCO (2019), and argues that failure to address discrimination and exclusion in education constitutes a **rights violation**. He calls on **civil society organisations** to hold states and municipalities accountable, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed and deepened pre-existing educational inequalities in Amsterdam, especially for youth from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Steinmetz's findings remain highly relevant: systemic discrimination, underestimation, and exclusion within the Dutch education system contribute not only to **educational deprivation** but also to **intergenerational poverty** and **psychological harm**. A rights-based, inclusive, and culturally responsive approach to education is critical to reversing these long-term effects—especially in post-pandemic recovery.

Amsterdam, a city celebrated for its cosmopolitan ethos, confronts a sobering paradox: despite progressive ideals, its education system continues to reproduce deep structural inequalities—particularly for young people of immigrant and refugee descent. Drawing on a critical body of research, Carl Hermann Dino Steinmetz offers a piercing indictment of systemic disadvantage within Dutch education. His analysis reveals that children with non-Western immigrant backgrounds are consistently tracked into vocational educational pathways, under-advised by teachers, and assessed through culturally biased metrics that underestimate their abilities and potential.

These educational inequities are not merely academic failings; they are gateways to broader social exclusion. Young people from these communities face heightened psychological stress, social marginalisation, and limited access to higher education and employment opportunities. The result is a cyclical entrenchment of poverty and alienation—exacerbated during moments of national crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet alongside this portrait of structural deprivation, Professor Dr. Maurice Crul et al. (2017) introduces a more hopeful counterpoint in *The Multiplier Effect*. His research highlights the

resilience and success of what he calls the “second generation”—children of low-educated immigrants who, through the accumulation of social and cultural capital, ascend to higher educational and professional echelons. These successes, Crul argues, are often the result of strategic familial investment, community networks, and institutional navigational skills—demonstrating that, even within constraining systems, upward mobility is possible.

Together, these works present a dual narrative: one of entrenched structural exclusion and discrimination, and another of determined ascent. They compel policymakers, educators, and civil society to reflect on the duality of the immigrant experience in Amsterdam: a reality where opportunity is not equally distributed, but where potential, when nurtured, can flourish.

For the city to honour its vision of belonging and justice, its educational institutions must move beyond colour-blind formal equality and embrace a model of equity—one that recognises structural barriers, values diverse forms of capital, and affirms the right of every child, regardless of origin, to thrive.

National Snapshot (Applicable to Amsterdam)

1. Student Distribution by Track

Approximately **60%** of Dutch students follow the **VMBO** (pre-vocational) track, around **20%** are in **HAVO** (senior general secondary), and the remaining **20%** pursue **VWO** (pre-university).

2. Class of 2024 Exam Pass Rates

- About **79%** of students in **HAVO** passed their final exams.
- Meanwhile, **84%** of students in **VWO****** achieved passing results

3. Number of Final-Year Students (2025 Data)

- Approximately **93,200** students sat for **VMBO** finals.
- Around **55,300** sat for **HAVO**.
- 37,500** students††† took their **VWO** exams

Summary Table

Track Final-Year Candidates (2025) Pass Rate

VMBO ~93,200	(Not specified)
HAVO ~55,300	~79% passed
VWO ~37,500	~84% passed

SECONDARY EDUCATION EXAM OUTCOMES IN AMSTERDAM (2025)

The *Schoolloopbanen 2025* report provides a comprehensive cohort-based analysis of secondary education outcomes in Amsterdam, focusing on final examination success rates, diploma attainment in relation to primary school advice, and progression patterns across educational levels. The findings indicate persistent and, in some cases, widening disparities between Amsterdam and national outcomes, particularly in the VMBO-t and HAVO tracks (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2025).

**** <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/>

††† <https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl/>

Exam Success Rates in Amsterdam vs. National Averages

In the 2022/2023 school year, the **final examination pass rates in Amsterdam** were consistently lower than national averages across all educational levels. The most significant discrepancies occurred in:

- **HAVO**: 72% passed in Amsterdam vs. 84% nationally.
- **VMBO-t**: 79% passed in Amsterdam vs. 91% nationally.

This gap has widened in recent years, particularly following the return to standardised assessments post-COVID-19. The previous pandemic-related exam leniencies (e.g. the "duimregeling") had temporarily boosted pass rates nationwide, but the reintroduction of regular exams in 2022/2023 revealed a stronger regression in Amsterdam compared to other major cities and national figures.

Diploma Attainment and Completion within Seven Years

Among students who began secondary education in 2017, **19% in Amsterdam failed to obtain a diploma within seven years**, compared to:

- 16% in Rotterdam,
- 14% in The Hague and Utrecht,
- 12% nationally.

This shortfall is particularly notable among students who began with **HAVO and HAVO/VWO primary school advice**. For example, non-completion rates rose from 20% to 24% (HAVO advice) and from 14% to 17% (VWO advice) between cohorts 2011 and 2017.

Alignment of Diploma Level with Primary School Advice

Approximately **60% of Amsterdam students** obtain a diploma that matches their original primary school recommendation. Notably:

- 8% exceed the expected level,
- 12% fall below it.

However, the proportion falling short has **declined**, particularly in the VMBO tracks. For instance, the share of students with VMBO-K or VMBO-T advice achieving **higher-level diplomas** has risen.

Effectiveness of Broad Bridging Classes (Brede Brugklassen)

Broad bridging classes, offered by 11 schools in Amsterdam, have proven effective in promoting upward mobility. Students in these classes are more likely to attain a **higher diploma than advised**:

- 16% of students in broad bridging classes surpassed their primary school recommendation, compared to 10% city-wide.

The positive effect was most pronounced for students with lower initial advice (VMBO-B to VMBO-T), whereas those with VWO-level advice were slightly more prone to underachievement in this structure.

Diploma Stacking (Diploma Stapeling)

A notable strength of the Amsterdam education pathway is the practice of **diploma stacking**. This refers to students earning a second diploma at a higher level after completing their initial qualification:

- **14% of VMBO-T graduates** proceeded to obtain a HAVO diploma.
- **5% of HAVO graduates** went on to achieve a VWO diploma.

This upward trajectory suggests a degree of post-initial flexibility in Amsterdam's educational landscape, even in the face of early tracking and lower average pass rates.

Conclusion. The findings reveal a complex educational terrain in Amsterdam: while students face **lower-than-average pass rates** and **higher dropout risks**, especially in HAVO and VMBO-T tracks, there are also signs of resilience and mobility through **broad bridging programmes** and **diploma stacking**. The report underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions, particularly to support students with HAVO and VWO advice, and calls for continued investment in equitable and flexible pathways that better align with the diverse urban student population of Amsterdam.

COMMENT 1 ON THESE FINAL AMSTERDAM EXAM RESULTS IS THAT THERE ARE TEACHER SHORTAGES

Teacher Shortages in Amsterdam's Primary and Secondary Education. The OCO report^{***} provides a snapshot of teacher shortages across Amsterdam's educational landscape, reporting a nuanced and evolving situation as of October 2024:

Extent of Shortages in Different School Types

- Primary Education: Amsterdam faces a substantial teacher shortage of 15.5%, equating to approximately 611 full-time equivalents (fte). This marks a notable improvement compared to 2023, when the shortage stood at 18.7% (circa 806 fte).
- Special Primary Education: Schools in this category report the most acute shortage, with a rate of 23.7%.
- Special (Secondary) Education: The shortage here is 13.3%.
- Secondary Education (VO): The shortage has remained stable at 6.5%, unchanged from the prior year.

Spatial Variations Across Amsterdam's Districts

Teacher shortages are unevenly distributed across different districts:

- High shortage zones (primary education):
 - ❖ Zuid-Oost: 24.1%
 - ❖ Nieuw-West: 18.4%
 - ❖ Noord: 17.3%
- Lower shortage areas:
 - ❖ Centrum: 7.5%
 - ❖ Zuid: 8.6%
 - ❖ Oost: 12.1%

^{***} <https://www.onderwijsconsument.nl/hoe-groot-is-het-lerarentekort-in-het-basis-en-voortgezet-onderwijs-in-amsterdam/>

- ❖ West: 14.6%
- ❖ Weesp (adjacent area): 17.6%.
- Secondary Education: Differential Shortages by Subject and District
- District-level variation:
 - ❖ Nieuw-West: highest shortage at 9.8%
 - ❖ Noord and Oost: both at 7.0%
 - ❖ Zuid: approximately 3.8–4.2%.
- Subject-level disparities:
 - ❖ Large deficits were identified in technical subjects, physics, chemistry, and informatics.
 - ❖ Substantive shortages also exist in Dutch, mathematics, PE, French, German, Latin, economics, geography, history, and VMBO-specific practical subjects.

Implications and Strategic Response

The data reveal pronounced and unevenly distributed teacher shortages across Amsterdam's educational sectors:

- The primary and special primary segments are particularly affected, with shortages exceeding 15%, and even 23% in special primary education—raising concerns about the capacity to maintain quality instruction, especially for vulnerable communities.
- While the secondary sector shows a more moderate shortage, the pronounced deficits in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and language subjects pose significant challenges to curriculum delivery.
- The geographical clustering of shortages underscores growing educational inequities across districts.

In response, the Amsterdam Lerarenagenda 2023–2027 has been implemented, targeting:

- Teacher retention and recruitment,
- Equitable distribution of teaching capacity,
- Professional development,
- Support measures such as housing and mobility incentives for teachers.

Conclusion: The OCO article delineates a complex and persistent teacher shortage problem in Amsterdam, with marked disparities by school type, subject area, and district. The improvement in overall primary-level shortages is a positive development, but hotspots—especially in special education and specific urban areas—continue to demand targeted, robust strategies. Amsterdam's systemic response via the Lerarenagenda reflects a proactive, multi-pronged approach that will require sustained investment and policy coherence to fully address these staffing challenges. The argument often put forward in relation to these figures is that “good (white) teachers” would rather not work in multicultural neighbourhoods which lag behind in many areas. Such areas tend to have overcrowded and dilapidated housing, extreme poverty, poor health and high unemployment.

COMMENT 2 ON THE FINAL AMSTERDAM EXAM RESULTS: PROLONGED SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF 'THUISZITTEN' IN AMSTERDAM

In Amsterdam, a clear and pressing relationship exists between prolonged school absenteeism and the phenomenon of *thuiszitten*—a term referring to pupils who are officially enrolled in

school but who, for a variety of reasons, do not attend for extended periods, often exceeding four consecutive weeks. *Thuiszitten* is not only a symptom of deeper structural and individual challenges but is formally recognised as a specific form of *langdurig verzuim* (prolonged absenteeism). The convergence of these patterns presents significant risks for the educational, social, and emotional development of affected youth.

Typology of Absenteeism^{§§§§}

Amsterdam's educational monitoring framework distinguishes three categories of school absenteeism (Onderwijs Consumenten Organisatie):

- **Relatief verzuim:** Absence without a valid excuse, despite formal school enrolment.
- **Absoluut verzuim:** Non-enrolment in any educational institution, despite the legal obligation to attend school.
- **Thuiszitten:** A specific subset of prolonged absenteeism involving enrolled students who do not attend school for an extended period, typically due to complex personal or systemic factors.

Underlying Causes (Mulckhuyse et al. 2023)

The roots of prolonged absenteeism and *thuiszitten* are multifaceted, encompassing:

- **Medical issues**, including physical or psychological illness.
- **Socio-emotional challenges**, such as anxiety, trauma, or behavioural disorders.
- **Lack of suitable educational provision**, particularly for students requiring tailored or specialised support.
- **Adverse home or social environments**, including instability, neglect, or economic hardship.

Consequences of Prolonged Absence

The consequences for students who disengage from formal education are severe and often long-lasting:

- **Cognitive and academic delay**, contributing to significant learning deficits.
- **Social isolation**, which impedes peer development and emotional resilience.
- **Future barriers** to labour market entry, vocational training, or higher education participation.

Policy and Local Interventions (Lubberman, 2025)

To address the rising incidence of *thuiszitters*, Amsterdam has implemented a coordinated local strategy through the **Amsterdams Thuiszitterspact**. This initiative brings together school boards, the municipal education authority, partnerships for inclusive education (*samenwerkingsverbanden passend onderwijs*), and youth welfare services. The approach emphasises:

- Early detection and personalised interventions.
- Expansion of suitable educational placements and flexible learning arrangements.
- Intersectoral cooperation to offer holistic, child-centred support.

^{§§§§} <https://www.nji.nl/cijfers/schoolverzuim>

Recent Data and Trends: In the **2022–2023 academic year**, **3,881 Amsterdam students** experienced prolonged unauthorised absence (*relatief verzuim*), of whom **2,797 were out of school for more than three months**. These figures represent an increase over the previous year, signalling a deepening challenge in ensuring sustained educational engagement for all pupils.

Conclusion: The issue of *thuiszitten* in Amsterdam reflects broader systemic tensions in educational inclusivity, youth mental health, and social equity. While *thuiszitten* is formally a subset of prolonged school absenteeism, its implications reach far beyond attendance statistics—it constitutes a warning signal of unmet educational, emotional, or social needs. The city’s concerted efforts to tackle this phenomenon through integrated policy and cross-sector collaboration are critical, yet continued vigilance, innovation, and investment will be essential to ensure every child has access to meaningful, appropriate, and sustained education.

Data Trends (Amsterdam & National Context)

According to **Onderwijsconsument (OCO)**, the number of *thuiszitters*—students enrolled but absent for over four weeks—has increased notably:

- From **31 cases in 2022–2023** to **38 cases in 2023–2024**, marking over a **30% rise**. Most involve students in secondary or special education affected by psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, or trauma.
- This trend aligns with broader national patterns: the count of *thuiszitters* in the Netherlands rose from **3,246 in 2021–2022** to **3,881 in 2022–2023**, of whom **2,797 were absent for more than three months**.
- Non-enrolled absentees (*absoluut verzuim*) also climbed, from **13,707 in 2022–2023** to **17,500 in 2023–2024******.
- The **Jaarverslag Leerplicht 2022–2023** (Amsterdam) identifies **222 registered *thuiszitters***, up from **149 the previous year**, validating similar local increases (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022–2023).

Definitions and Depth of the Phenomenon

OCO distinguishes key categories††††:

- **Relatief verzuim:** enrolled yet absent without valid reason beyond four weeks.
- **Absoluut verzuim:** not enrolled despite compulsory attendance.

These administrative metrics likely undercount the true scale, as they exclude medically or psychologically justified absences—suggesting that actual figures are significantly higher.

Underlying Causes

- The majority of documented *thuiszitters* are affected by **severe psychological challenges**, including trauma, anxiety, and depression.
- Earlier research (e.g., via Underground initiatives) underscores how educational, emotional, or social dissonance—such as pressure to perform within non-supportive educational structures—often contributes to prolonged withdrawal from schooling.

**** <https://www.onderwijsconsument.nl/toename-dossiers-thuiszitters-wat-is-er-aan-de-hand/>

†††† <https://www.nji.nl/cijfers/schoolverzuim>

Implications and Observations

- Even at modest official numbers, the trend is concerning—especially given potential underestimation.
- Early warning and detection systems (e.g., among schools and municipal education departments) are vital to prevent escalation and address underlying challenges proactively.
- Programmatic responses like **Underground** (an alternative coaching and online education model) show promise in re-engaging isolated learners and offer transferable insights for broader educational settings.

COMMENT 3 ON THE FINAL EXAM RESULTS: READING, WRITING AND ARITHMETIC SHOULD BE MASTERED IN PRIMARY SCHOOL *****

Early Education and Targeted Support

As of December 1, 2024, Amsterdam hosted **268 preschools**, serving nearly **7,000 toddlers** aged 2–4. About **3,650 children**—approximately 20% of the city’s preschool population—qualified under specific risk indicators for language or educational delay (*doelgroepindicatie*), with **70%** of these children attending a preschool institution.

Primary Education Landscape

In the **2024/25 academic year**, Amsterdam had **208 primary schools**, with nearly **60,000 students** enrolled. Enrolment numbers are projected to decline until around **2033/34**, after which a gradual increase is anticipated.

Group 8 students’ performance in 2023/24 showed:

- **Reading proficiency:** 75% met the goal level,
- **Language proficiency:** 53% achieved the standard,
- **Numeracy proficiency:** 45% reached the benchmark.

These results are broadly in line with national averages. School advice trends indicate that:

- 27% of primary school graduates received **VWO-level** recommendations,
- 16% received **HAVO/VWO** combined advice,
- Fewer students were advised for **practical or VMBO-B** pathways

Special Education Provision

In 2024/25, the city supported **11 primary special education schools** and **31 (v)so** institutions, divided across four clusters based on students’ specific needs (sensory, speech/language, physical/intellectual, behavioural/emotional). Enrolment in special education has remained stable in recent years.

Secondary Education Snapshot

Amsterdam had **78 secondary schools** in 2024/25, enrolling over **47,000 students**. While enrolment had increased over recent years, a downturn is expected from the **2025/26** school year onward.

***** <https://onderzoek.amsterdam.nl/artikel/onderwijs-in-cijfers-2025>

Socio-Educational Composition

Increases in parental educational attainment are notable. In 2012/13, **38%** of secondary students had at least one parent with HBO or WO education; this rose to **55%** in 2022/23. Similar trends are observed in primary schools, contributing to spatial and social segregation patterns.

Student Retention and Qualifications

- **Annual repetition rates:** Approximately **10%** of students repeat a grade between year 1 and exam years (vs. 8% nationally). The highest repetition rates occur in **HAVO**, particularly in the fourth year; in 2022/23, **20%** of HAVO-4 and VMBO-GT-3 students repeated a grade.
- Among **youth aged 23–26** in 2022, **92%** held a start qualification (HAVO/VWO, MBO 2–4, or higher). Among those from low socio-economic backgrounds, this rate was lower at **81%**. **7%** lacked both qualification and current enrolment.

Teaching Workforce Dynamics

Between school years 2016/17 and 2022/23, the number of teachers in **primary and special education** decreased from **5,445 to 5,210**. In contrast, the **secondary sector** experienced growth in teacher numbers, partly due to new hires and fewer retirements; some of this increase is attributable to the inclusion of **Weesp** in Amsterdam post-2022.

Despite these trends, both primary and secondary teacher education programs are facing **declining enrolments**.

Post-Secondary and Higher Education Overview

- **MBO:** Four vocational institutions in Amsterdam enrolled nearly **39,000 students** in 2024/25, though **new registrations**—particularly for MBO-3 programs—are declining.
- **MBO students** who began in 2017/18 showed **70% study completion** within five years, slightly below national averages.
- **HBO and University:** The city had over **124,000 students** in 2024/25 across four universities and colleges, with substantial growth in university attendance. International student numbers surged between 2014 and 2021. However, since 2021/22, bachelor-level international enrolment has plateaued or declined.

Conclusion: The “Onderwijs in cijfers” report outlines a multifaceted educational landscape in Amsterdam. While pre-school and higher education enrolment have grown, primary and secondary levels are heading into decline. Literacy and numeracy achievements align with national benchmarks, but rising parental qualifications and student retention issues illustrate evolving inequality dynamics. Workforce stability is a concern with declining teacher numbers and training enrolments, and while post-secondary completion rates remain strong, they lag slightly behind national comparisons.

CONCLUSIONS

Amsterdam occupies a paradoxical position in the global imagination: celebrated for its tolerance, progressiveness, and cosmopolitan vibrancy, yet shadowed by a historical legacy of exploitation, colonial violence, and systemic inequality. Today, as the capital of the Netherlands, it continues to embody this duality. Its governance—dominated by progressive political

coalitions—champions sustainability, multicultural coexistence, and social equity, even as enduring structural disparities challenge these aspirations.

Migration is a defining feature of Amsterdam's history. Since the sixteenth century, the city has experienced continuous flows of newcomers from rural Dutch provinces and far-reaching parts of the globe, alongside a steady outflow of long-settled residents. This dynamic has produced a profoundly diverse demographic profile and fueled Amsterdam's economic and cultural dynamism. Yet it has also generated recurring tensions around integration, exclusion, and belonging, as seen in the historical trajectories of Jewish, Surinamese, Moroccan, and other migrant communities. In 2025, nearly 60% of young people in the city have a migrant background, with significant representation from non-Western countries. This demographic transformation has implications for education, housing, employment, and civic life, making the city a microcosm of broader European urban diversity.

For young residents—particularly those from immigrant and refugee backgrounds—the interplay between Amsterdam's progressive ideals and its structural inequities is most acutely experienced in education. Research consistently shows that the Dutch education system, while internationally praised for its structure, reproduces disadvantage through early tracking, culturally biased assessment practices, and unequal access to resources. These systemic patterns limit upward mobility, perpetuate socio-economic disparities, and contribute to intergenerational cycles of poverty and social exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and deepened these inequalities, revealing the fragility of institutional support systems. At the same time, counter-narratives of resilience and success—what Maurice Crul and colleagues term the *multiplier effect*—demonstrate that upward mobility is possible when social, cultural, and familial capital are effectively mobilized. These stories of achievement stand in tension with the statistical realities of lower-than-average examination pass rates, teacher shortages, rising absenteeism, and persistent underrepresentation of minority students in higher academic tracks.

This study situates Amsterdam's educational landscape within the city's broader socio-political and demographic context, examining how structural barriers, policy interventions, and community initiatives shape the lived experiences and future trajectories of young people. By foregrounding the dual realities of systemic exclusion and individual resilience, it seeks to illuminate the challenges and possibilities of fostering genuine equity in one of Europe's most diverse urban environments.

The following is a brief summary of the conclusions that can be drawn from this article.

Introduction: Between Progressivism and Inequality

Amsterdam's image as a progressive, tolerant city coexists with deep structural inequalities, particularly in education for children of immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Despite a multicultural population, historical exclusion and contemporary bias persist, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Demographic Landscape

- Population (2025): ~934,500; 35% non-Western origin; 15.3% Western origin.

- Youth (0-17): 60% have a migrant background (~88,800 children).
- Growth driven by foreign migration, expats, and a birth surplus.

Education Outcomes (2025)

Amsterdam lags behind national averages in secondary education pass rates, especially in HAVO and VMBO-t tracks.

Track Amsterdam/ Pass Rate/ National Pass Rate:

HAVO 72%/ 84%

VMBO-t 79%/ 91%

VWO 84%/ 84%

Systemic Inequalities

- Early tracking places immigrant youth disproportionately in lower-level pathways.
- Teacher bias and culturally skewed assessments underestimate potential.
- Parental engagement barriers: language, literacy, digital access.
- COVID-19 exacerbated digital exclusion, learning loss, and mental health strain.

Teacher Shortages (2024)

Shortages vary widely by district and subject, most acute in special primary education.

School Type Shortage (%) FTE Gap:

Primary 15.5%/ 611

Special Primary 23.7% -

Secondary 6.5% -

Absenteeism & Thuiszitten

In 2022-2023, 3,881 students experienced prolonged unauthorised absence (>4 weeks); 2,797 were absent for over 3 months. Causes include medical, socio-emotional, and systemic factors. The Amsterdams Thuiszitterspact seeks to re-engage these students via personalised interventions.

Policy Implications

Amsterdam's equity goals require culturally responsive pedagogy, targeted resource allocation, and accountability for closing achievement gaps. Flexible pathways such as bridging classes and diploma stacking show promise for upward mobility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a city that presents itself as progressive and tolerant, Amsterdam faces an urgent responsibility to confront the persistent marginalisation of substantial groups of children (immigrants and refugees) within its primary and secondary education systems. This challenge cannot be meaningfully addressed without recognising and dismantling the enduring exploitative mentality rooted in the city's colonial past. Historically, Amsterdam played a central role in the administration and economic exploitation of territories referred to as *wingewesten* (literally "profit regions"), encompassing former Dutch colonial possessions in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

For Amsterdam's native-born population, this exploitative orientation may be understood, at least in part, as an intergenerational and potentially epigenetic legacy of centuries of colonisation—perpetrated by the state, commercial enterprises, institutions, and individual citizens. The city was home to powerful financial and trading entities, including Amsterdam-based banking institutions and the corporations behind the Dutch East and West India Companies, whose networks of merchants, sailors, and suppliers were integral to systems of extraction, enslavement, and forced labour.

In the contemporary era, vestiges of this colonial mindset manifest in what may be described as neo-colonial practices. These include the Amsterdam City Council's political alignment with, and material support for, Israel's ongoing settler-colonial project in Gaza, as well as the operations of multinational corporations headquartered in the Netherlands—such as Unilever and Shell—which continue to profit from the exploitation of land and labour in African nations. Addressing educational marginalisation in Amsterdam thus requires not only policy reform but also a critical reckoning with the structural and historical forces that reproduce inequality. Without such an acknowledgment, the city risks perpetuating a long-standing cycle of dispossession under the guise of progressive governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY OF AMSTERDAM: ADVANCING EQUITY, JUSTICE, AND GLOBAL AWARENESS THROUGH EDUCATION



Figure 3: Amsterdam's Kings games feature the participation of Dave Ensberg (<https://ap.lc/FELBs>)

Decolonise Education

To address persistent structural inequalities and cultural misrepresentation within Amsterdam's education system, the city should adopt a comprehensive decolonisation agenda:

- **Curriculum Reform:** Integrate historically accurate, multi-perspective narratives on Dutch colonialism, slavery, and their enduring socio-economic consequences, with particular attention to the roles of Amsterdam's institutions, corporations, and citizenry. "Over the next few years, education in Amsterdam-Zuidoost will undergo a decolonisation process. During this time, parents will no longer be asked to make voluntary contributions. This is the aim of Dave Ensberg-Kleijckers, the 40-year-old

director of the district's largest primary education school board. "If there are any issues, we can discuss them further," he said (Parool, 2024)."

- **Critical Pedagogy:** Train educators in decolonial and anti-racist pedagogical methods that foreground marginalised voices, challenge Eurocentric frameworks, and encourage critical reflection among students.
- **Representation and Inclusion:** Ensure teaching materials, school governance, and leadership structures reflect the city's multicultural demographics, thereby validating diverse identities and fostering belonging.
- **Community Co-creation:** Engage with local communities—especially those descended from colonised and enslaved peoples—to co-design content and teaching strategies, ensuring authenticity and trust.

Provide Fair and Accurate Information on (Proxy) Wars and Climate Disasters (see Steinmetz, 2025)

In a globally interconnected city like Amsterdam, young people require reliable, evidence-based information to understand and navigate complex crises:

- **Media Literacy Education:** Embed structured media literacy programmes within the curriculum to equip students with skills to critically analyse news sources, detect misinformation, and understand geopolitical contexts.
- **Balanced Perspectives:** Present multiple, credible viewpoints on current and historical conflicts, avoiding political bias and promoting empathy for affected populations.
- **Climate Crisis Education:** Integrate climate science, adaptation strategies, and justice-focused discourse into all levels of schooling, linking global climate events to local actions and responsibilities.
- **Civic Engagement Opportunities:** Provide platforms for students to engage in informed debate, community initiatives, and transnational solidarity projects, fostering a generation of globally conscious citizens.

Call for Peaceful Solutions to Conflicts, Physical and Sexual Violence

Amsterdam must leverage its educational and civic institutions to cultivate a culture of non-violence, mediation, and conflict transformation:

- **Conflict Resolution Training:** Introduce compulsory modules in schools on non-violent communication, negotiation skills, and intercultural dialogue, building resilience against polarisation and extremism.
- **Prevention and Intervention Mechanisms:** Strengthen protocols for identifying, reporting, and responding to incidents of physical and sexual violence in educational settings, ensuring survivor-centred approaches.
- **Partnerships with Civil Society:** Collaborate with NGOs, religious groups, and youth organisations to co-develop peace education programmes that address local manifestations of global conflicts.
- **Role-Model Campaigns:** Highlight local figures and initiatives that have successfully championed non-violence, offering tangible examples of peaceful social change.

Work on Restorative Justice Practices

Shifting from punitive approaches to restorative justice can transform how educational and community systems respond to harm:

- **School-based Restorative Justice Programmes:** Implement structured practices such as restorative circles, peer mediation, and harm-repair agreements, particularly in schools with high disciplinary exclusion rates.
- **Training for Educators and Administrators:** Provide comprehensive training in restorative justice principles, focusing on empathy, accountability, and community repair rather than punishment.
- Setting up international **children's peace initiatives** is a vital step towards fostering global harmony and mutual understanding among children.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Integrate restorative justice into youth care, policing, and judicial processes for minors, ensuring consistency and continuity across institutional boundaries.
- **Evaluation and Scaling:** Establish robust monitoring systems to evaluate outcomes—such as reduced suspension rates, improved school climate, and strengthened community relationships—and scale effective models city-wide.

Conclusion

Adopting these recommendations would position Amsterdam as a leader in progressive, justice-oriented urban education. Decolonising the curriculum, enhancing critical global awareness, fostering a culture of peace, and embedding restorative justice are mutually reinforcing strategies. Together, they address historical injustices, counter contemporary disinformation and polarisation, and equip young Amsterdammers with the skills, empathy, and agency to shape a more equitable and sustainable future.

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