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# Right on track?

An explorative study of ethnic minorities'  
success in Flemish secondary education

Dissertation submitted in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree doctor in Sociology

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Illustration cover: Marie Van Praag

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БЛАГОДАРЯ

شكرا

HVALA!

DZIĘKUJĘ!

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MEDA WO ASE



## PREFACE

This doctoral dissertation is the result of four years of research at the Department of Sociology at Ghent University (Belgium), as PhD fellow of the Scientific Research Foundation Flanders (FWO). The dissertation includes an introduction that consists out of the framing of the research question which builds further on a discussion of the relevant literature. In the methodology section, the choice of grounded theory approach and procedures of data collection and analyses are set out. Subsequently, in the next four chapters, empirical studies will be presented in the way they are submitted to international peer-reviewed journals and one national journal and presented at national and international conferences. Finally, an overview of the results of this study will be given and discussed together with the existing literature. Furthermore, based on this discussion, some future research recommendations and social policy implications will be presented. An overview of the submissions and presentations of empirical studies is presented below.

### **The paradox of the cascade system in Belgium: When homogeneous grouping leads to more heterogeneity in lower status tracks**

- ❖ Submitted to *British Educational Research Journal*
- ❖ Presented at International Sociological Association Mid-term conference, 2012, in Tampa, USA.
- ❖ Presented at the Onderwijs Research Dagen ‘Over Waardenen’, 2013, in Brussels, Belgium.
- ❖ Presented at the European Sociological Association Conference: ‘Crisis, Critique and Change’, 2013, in Turin, Italy.

### **How tracking structures interethnic relations: an ethnographic study of the educational system in Belgium**

- ❖ Published as Van Praag, L., Boone, S., Stevens, P. & Van Houtte, M. (2013). Interetnische interacties in verschillende studierichtingen van het secundair onderwijs: Een etnografische studie in België. *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid*, 5.
- ❖ Submitted to *Social Psychology of Education*

- ❖ Presented at 'Colloquium 'Tien jaar GOK-decreet', Vlaams Parlement, 2012, in Brussels, Belgium.
- ❖ Presented at the European Sociological Association mid-term Conference of the network of Sociology of Education, 'Diversity in Education: Issues of Equity and Social Cohesion', 2012, in Ghent, Belgium.

### **Frames of reference for comparison of Eastern European, Turkish, and Northern African immigrants in Belgium**

- ❖ Resubmitted to: *British Journal of Sociology of Education*
- ❖ Presented at the European Conference on Educational Research: 'The Need for Educational Research to Champion Freedom, Education and Development for All', 2012, in Cadiz, Spain.

### **'Is the sky really the limit?': Exploring the attitude-achievement paradox in the Belgian context**

- ❖ Submitted to *Race, Ethnicity and Education*
- ❖ Presented at the American Sociological Association Conference: 'Interrogating inequality. Linking Micro and Macro', 2013, New York, USA.

Other sections of this dissertation are based on the following publications or/and presented at the following conferences or workshops:

### **Introduction**

- ❖ Presented as 'Why are racial and ethnic minorities successful in education?: a critical systematic literature review', at the European Sociological Association Conference: 'Social relations in turbulent times', 2011, in Genève, Switzerland.
- ❖ Based on: Van Praag, L., Stevens, P.A.J. & Van Houtte, M. (2013). Belgium, In Stevens, P.A.J., & Dworkin G.A. *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and Ethnic Inequalities in Education*. London: Palgrave.
- ❖ Poesen-Vandeputte, M. & Nicaise, I. (Eds.) m.m.v. Stevens, E., De Fraine, B., Van Praag, L., D'hondt, F., Stevens, P., Van Houtte, M., Juchtmans, G., Blaton, L. & Verhaeghe, J.-P. (2012). TIEN JAAR GOK-DECREET. *Balans van het evaluatieonderzoek van het gelijke onderwijskansenbeleid in Vlaanderen*. Research paper SSL/2012.03/5.1. Leuven.

## **Empirical research**

- ❖ ‘Do attitudes toward school influence the underachievement of Turkish and Northern African minority students in Flanders: A mixed methods approach’  
This mixed methods paper will be presented at: The Civil Rights Project ‘Segregation, Immigration, and Educational Inequality’, 2013, in Ghent, Belgium.

## **Methodology section**

- ❖ Presented as ‘Participerende observatie bij migranten in scholen’ (getuigenis), at the 4<sup>e</sup> Symposium Kwalitatief Sterk, Universiteit Antwerpen, 2012, in Antwerp, Belgium.

## **Future research recommendations**

- ❖ Submitted as ‘Future research recommendations for the study of determinants of success in secondary education of racial and ethnic minorities’ to *Race Ethnicity and Education*





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## PART I: INTRODUCTION



# 1. INTRODUCTION

In many societies, like Belgium, education gained importance as it determines to a large extent the jobs one can apply for. However, education is not only highly valued for acquiring the knowledge and the skills needed for students' future professional career, but also because of its socialising function as it teaches children the norms and values of dominant society and gives them a sense of citizenship (Durkheim, 1973; Parsons, 1959). This socialising function of education is often discussed with respect to those who are relatively new in society (i.e. people of immigrant descent) and are perceived to have distinct norms and values, frequently referred to as 'allochtons'. The term 'allochton' was designed as a neutral and value-free description of those who are seen as 'different', 'other' (Verwey-Jonker, 1973, see also Jacobs, 2012). The connotation of the term 'allochton' changed over time from a more neutral to a rather negative interpretation of otherness. Together with this change, the importance of the socialising functions of education for 'allochtons' was increasingly stressed by policy makers. Consequently, education is typically seen as both an instrument for, as well as an outcome of 'integration'. On the one hand, educational policy makers consider educational achievement as an outcome of successful integration into Belgian society and, hence, the educational achievement of immigrants and their descendants is often studied from this perspective. As a result, being 'integrated', for instance by speaking the language of the dominant group, or being oriented towards the dominant society is studied as a possible factor that could enhance educational success (e.g. Gibson, 1987; 1997; Zhou, 1997; Van der Veen, 2001; Van der Veen & Meijnen, 2001; LeTendre, Hofer & Shimizu, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Stevens, 2010). On the other hand, education is perceived as the ideal (formal) way to realize integration into the immigrant country (Gans, 1992). For example, formal education could help immigrant youth to get in contact with peers of Belgian descent and give them the tools and knowledge (of the dominant culture) to participate in Belgian society (see discussion Blommaert, Creve & Willaert, 2006; Agirdag, 2009; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Van Der Wildt, Van Houtte & Van Avermaet, 2013). This apparent circular reasoning illustrates that integration should rather be approached as a 'process' (see Crul & Schneider, 2010) and that its relationship with education is complex and rather ambiguous. Subsequently, the achievement levels of immigrants and their descendants are frequently compared with those of their peers of Belgian descent (see overview Opdenakker & Hermans, 2006; Van Praag,

Stevens & Van Houtte, 2013) and frequently used to discuss their integration in dominant Belgian society.

In this dissertation, the relationship between ethnicity and education will be further explored by focusing on the factors that are related to the success of ethnic minority youth in secondary education in Flanders. In this introduction, attention will be given to the development of this research question in the Flemish context. Consequently, previous research about ethnic inequalities in secondary education in Flanders and its relationship with existing social/educational policies will be discussed. Building further on this body of research, the focus on educational ‘success’, instead of ‘failure’, and the choice for qualitative research methods will be discussed. Subsequently, applying grounded theory, a summary of the international literature on this research topic will be provided. This literature review will be used as a starting point for theoretical sampling and to increase the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher in conducting fieldwork and data analysis.

### 1.1. ETHNIC INEQUALITIES IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN FLANDERS

Concerned with the integration of people of immigrant descent and social equality between ethnic groups, policy makers and scholars in Belgium have only recently focussed on the educational career of students of immigrant descent. Initially, when migrants were recruited from Southern Europe and later from Morocco and Turkey after World War II, relatively little attention was given to the ‘integration’ and/or educational career of students of immigrants and their children. Only some exceptional local and independent projects were set up that mainly focused on the introduction of students’ mother language in the schools (see Verlot, 2001; Leman, 1997). The aim of these projects was to relieve schools from the extra workload that migrant children placed on them (Verlot, 2001). Educational policy makers expected immigrants to return to their country of origin or adapt automatically over generations and perceived educational problems as adaptation problems. However, after some years, it became clear that many of these migrants stayed permanently in Belgium and formed tight migrant communities. More immigrants coming from these countries came to Belgium through procedures of family reunification and asylum. Finally, since 1990, a new wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe entered Belgium accompanied by a wave of undocumented immigrants (Sierens, 2006; CGKR, 2010).

The conclusion that most immigrants would not return to their country, the changing political climate, and the persistent lower achievement results compared to peers of Belgian

descent, stimulated the government to invest in the education of migrant children. Starting with the 'Educational priorities policy' (*Onderwijsvoorrrangsbeleid*) in 1991, and the 'Non-discrimination policy' in 1993, the focus of educational policies changed from children of immigrant descent to children living in deprived (i.e. lower social class) families in general. Nevertheless, it was recognized that migrants had additional challenges related to their ethnic-cultural background (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). Finally, in 2002, the 'Equal Education Opportunities Policy' (*Gelijke Onderwijskansen*, GOK) proposed a more inclusive policy that would benefit the entire school instead of giving attention to the problems of (at-risk) students, including students who live outside their family, that belong to a migratory population, speak another language than Dutch at home, live in a family with no income or a replacement income, or have a mother without a diploma (Van Avermaet, Van den Branden, & Heylen, 2010). The political climate and migration processes determined educational policies that, in turn, stimulated educational research in this area through funding and agenda setting (Van Damme, 2006). This entanglement between policy and research is clearly noticeable when revising the research that was carried out on this topic in Flanders (northern part of Belgium - since 1991, the organization of education was no longer a federal affair but organised by the Dutch, French and German speaking linguistic communities), and this interrelatedness between the national context and research was also found in many other countries (see overview Stevens & Dworkin, 2013). Although this might be true for all forms of education, in this study, attention will be given for secondary education.

Starting from 1990, ethnicity became increasingly a topic on the agenda of researchers (Van Damme, 2006). In general, mainly four domains were studied in Flanders: policy evaluation and support, the development of curriculum and pedagogy, the living environment of immigrants and the development of theory to explain the educational achievement of immigrant children (for a more extensive review see Van Praag, Stevens, Van Houtte, 2013). Resulting from these studies, some general patterns were found. Large quantitative datasets indicated that most variation is explained by socioeconomic background. However, ethnic and racial background is found to have an effect, but only in certain socio-economic conditions (Hermans et al., 2002; Hermans, Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2003). In addition, minorities experience ethnic and cultural barriers (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003) as well as an ethnic disadvantage due to institutional discrimination (Phalet, Deboosere & Bastiaensen, 2007). Another body of research focused on cultural differences. Anthropologists paid attention to cultural orientations towards education, the country of origin and the dominant ethnic majority values that prevail in the Flemish educational system

(Timmerman, 1995; 1999; Hermans, 2004). While social psychologists find that future goals can be motivating and lead to educational success when they are combined with a perceived positive school instrumentality and internal regulation of school tasks, lower achievement is explained by perceived discrimination on the labour market (Phalet, 1992; Phalet & Claeys, 1993; Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004; Andriessen, Phalet & Lens, 2006). Furthermore, one specific group of scholars has applied qualitative methods to examine educational policies concerning language. Special attention was given to the question whether mother language instruction facilitates the learning of other languages and leads to better educational outcomes (Heyerick, 1985; Jaspaert, Lemmens & van der Zanden, 1989; Leman, 1997; 1999; Blommaert, Creve & Willaert, 2006; Jaspaert, 2006). In addition, some studies have focused on racism and racial discrimination in school. While quantitative studies find little evidence of experiences of racism in school (Vandezande et al., 2009), ethnographic research shows that perceptions of racism and unequal treatment in secondary schools vary according to the way in which concepts like 'teacher racism' and 'equal/unequal treatment' are defined through interactions between students and teachers (Stevens, 2008a, b; 2010; Stevens & Görgöz, 2010). Finally, with respect to ethnic and racial inequality in education in Flanders, school effectiveness research has examined the impact of the ethnic school composition on interethnic interactions and bullying, based on quantitative datasets. The ethnic school composition was found to be associated with the amount and quality of interethnic friendships and interactions, but also with the extent one feels bullied at school (Agirdag, Demanet et al., 2011; Demanet et al., 2011; 2012; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009b). This research suggests that both the diversity and proportions of ethnic groups matters in schools for students' outcomes, and this may vary according to students' individual characteristics. Furthermore, these quantitative studies found that not only the social life of students but also their educational aspirations were influenced by the number of students of immigrant descent. This composition could possibly be related to more optimistic cultures in schools (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009b). Finally, the number of Dutch speaking students (used as a proxy for ethnicity) was not found to be related to the mathematic and linguistic achievements of students (Van Damme et al., 2001; Opdenakker et al., 2002). These varying effects were suggested to be related to the ways students are organised within schools, namely in tracks and class groups (Van Damme et al., 2001; Opdenakker et al., 2002; Demanet, Agirdag & Van Houtte, 2011; Agirdag et al., 2011). This could lead to interesting results as the ethnic or socio-economic background of tracks and class groups might differ from the overall school composition, and hence have a different impact on students' educational outcomes.

## 1.2. SUCCESS VS FAILURE

Most research focusing on ethnic inequalities in secondary education in Flanders explored factors that could explain the underachievement of ethnic minorities in school. However, these scholars did not consider the idea that exploring the factors that lead to success could help to fully understand the variation in educational outcomes of ethnic minority youth (Lindo, 1996; Modood & Berthoud, 1997; Modood, 2004; Lew, 2006a; Phalet et al., 2007; Jackson, Johnson & Rudolphi, 2012). Factors and processes that lead to educational success and failure interplay but are not necessarily the same, and it is the balance between these factors and processes that ultimately determines educational outcomes (Crul, 2000; Vigil, 2007). Therefore, examining success would help to develop a broader understanding of the educational achievement of ethnic minority students. Simultaneously, focusing on success could also help to counter the existing stereotypes of ethnic minority groups as underachieving. This might be so as patterns of underachievement of specific ethnic minority groups could result in the perception or nourish the idea that success is intrinsically related to dominant ethnic/racial groups in society (see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Consequently, this could implicate the impossibility of success for these groups (Archer, 2008; Archer & Francis, 2007; Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995) as being successful in school is often defined as the realisation of someone's capacities and ability, the belief in the value of hard work and individual effort (Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; Ballantine & Spade, 2012). When approaching success from such perspective, one assumes that students have to work hard for school and do the best they can (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). As a result, existing educational and social inequalities seem to be justified when students do not realise this potential. Thus, given the impact of the conclusions drawn from such studies – with respect to the justification of ethnic inequalities – it is important to consider the varying interpretations of and conclusions that can be drawn from particular definitions of 'success'. Success is a relative concept and should be studied and interpreted in its context, on different levels of analysis and settings, and include meanings and perceptions of the actors within these contexts. Diversity in society could further contribute to different standards of success that depend on age, social class, gender and ethnicity. In sum, exploring variability in educational outcomes and considering the relative nature of success could help to gain insight in the processes that contribute to the educational achievement of ethnic minority youth. Thus, the research question of this dissertation is: which factors contribute to or are related to the success of ethnic minority students in secondary education in Flanders. In the following



paragraph, more attention will be given to the usefulness of qualitative research methods to examine this research question.

### 1.3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Using qualitative research methods, such as ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews, helped to examine the main concept, namely ‘success’. Furthermore, these methods help to study variations in the interpretations of success according to the social contexts in which actors develop particular understanding of success, such as students’ interactions with peers, teachers and parents and broader school, neighbourhood and educational contexts. Specifically, exploring institutional factors that shape students’ definitions of success may seem crucial as countries vary in their evaluation procedures of students. These procedures differ depending on the organisation of students in tracks and the use of standardised tests to evaluate students, the assignment of students to particular tracks or enrolment procedures in higher education or honour classes. For instance, in some countries, such as the United States, standardized test scores might be decisive for students’ enrolment in the many universities (Rohler, 2012). Conversely, other educational systems, such as the Flemish one, rely more on tracks as indicator of success (i.e. academic or technical tracks, or the specialist vocational year) (see Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008). Furthermore, in the Flemish context, teachers, have considerable autonomy with respect to students’ evaluations. Students and their parents enjoy a lot of freedom concerning the tracks and schools students can enrol in. Given the importance of tracks in the Flemish educational system, the freedom of school and (to some extent) track choices of students and the power teachers have, the use of qualitative research methods seems particularly interesting as it helps to incorporate varying definitions and indicators of educational success. Additionally, the use of these methods offer the opportunity to delineate the class groups students feel they belong to, and incorporate intra-school levels of analysis in the study of educational success of ethnic minority students. This is interesting as in Flanders it is difficult to take tracks, fields of study and class groups as unit of analysis (due to changing compositions of the class group with whom one follows his or her courses and organisational school features) with quantitative research methods. These class groups are the actual groups within schools in which students spent most time in and may serve as a proxy for the groups in schools with whom students have to interact.

In general, qualitative research methods could help to combine respondents' accounts with the structural characteristics of the contexts in which students are embedded in. This may contribute to the development of particular definitions of success and the comparison of theories and results from international studies with each other. The use of qualitative research methods allows a more inductive development of theoretical explanations. While qualitative research does not primarily aim to 'test' the 'effects' of particular social contexts, it is ideally suited to explore the importance of such contexts through inductive and cyclical processes of data analysis and sampling. This is especially the case when using a grounded theory methodology. Applying grounded theory can help to consider the relativity of success and explore relevant context characteristics. During cyclic processes of data analyses and collection, the researcher focuses increasingly more on processes and social contexts that appear to play a key role in shaping actors' experiences, definitions and interactions. In addition, moving away from the myth that grounded theory assumes that the research should start from a blank slate (Urguhart & Fernandez, 2006), literature was reviewed as a basis for the theoretical sampling and the development of theoretical sensitivity of the research area. Consequently, in line with the cyclic process that characterizes grounded theory and that guided this research, an overview of the relevant international literature concerning the educational success of ethnic minority students in secondary education will be presented in the next section. In doing so, this study builds further on previously found insights and tries to expand the existing literature. At the end of this literature overview, some specific points of attention that resulted from the literature overview and that guided this study will be set out. Together with this, more details will be given about the research design and methodology used in this dissertation.



## 2. DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS OF ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS

An extensive literature has focused on the educational outcomes of ethnic and racial minority youth. A summary will be given of studies that have focused specifically on determinants of success of ethnic and racial minority students in secondary education. As variation exists in the choice and demarcation of ethnic/racial minority groups across countries and conceptualizations of race and ethnicity (Archer & Francis, 2007), achievement results of ethnic and racial minority groups are studied in contrast with those of the dominant ethnic/racial majority group. The ethnic and racial minorities studied reflect the historical, geographical, power and racial/ethnic relations of the societies and neighbouring countries in which they live (Leonardo, 2002). For instance, settler societies and recent immigrant societies differ in the ways they perceive immigrants and non-immigrant ethnic/racial minorities. When theories are used in different contexts and these studies are compared with each other, more insight can be given in the ways ethnic and racial minority students achieve educational success.

In the following five sections, an overview of the existing literature that focuses on the determinants of success of ethnic minority students will be discussed. In the first section, before summarizing the existing literature, the ways scholars perceive, have conceptualized and measured success in the existing literature will be dealt with. In the second section, studies that have focused on the *immediate social environment* in which the students find themselves, namely the family and the school will be discussed. Third, studies that have examined the *external contexts in which students' social environments are embedded*, such as the neighbourhood, and the social networks they are part of, such as religious and immigrant communities will be summarized. Furthermore, attention will be given to the educational systems that shape the importance of schools for the educational success of ethnic minority students. Fourth, research that has examined *broader cultural factors*, such as belief systems, bodies of knowledge, customs and life-styles, opportunity structures, hazards and life-course options will be discussed. As many studies have been influenced by Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory (1987, 1990; 2008), special attention will be given to this theory. After setting out Ogbu's theory, studies that departed from this theory, focusing on school instrumentality, the 'acting white' hypothesis and other theories that focus on the ethnic and racial identity and/or peer groups, will be discussed. Furthermore, religion as a macro-sociological belief system is examined as a determinant of educational success. In a fifth section, studies that have incorporated time in their approach are presented.

## 2.1. THE CONCEPT ‘SUCCESS’

Before giving an overview of the empirical studies, attention should be given to the definitions of the main concept of this study, namely ‘educational success’ and how it is used in the studies discussed. Given the relativity of success, the educational success of ethnic minority students can be studied from various theoretical approaches and contrasted with different comparison groups. Therefore, when reading the following sections, one should keep in mind that the varying interpretations of success may be related to the theories discussed and explanations offered. Nevertheless, most studies have treated the concept of ‘educational success’ as a given fact that warrants little or no scrutiny. However, when carefully examining the ways these authors have defined and conceptualised success, some indications can be given about these scholars’ ideas about the ethnic inequalities in education and the role education should play in society.

First, the educational success of a particular group should be evaluated in contrast with an appropriate comparison group (Peschar & Wesselingh, 2001; Stevens, 2007b; Gorard & Smith, 2004). These comparison groups may have a considerable impact on the interpretation of the results with respect to educational or ethnic inequalities. Educational outcomes of ethnic minority students can be compared with other ethnic minority groups, other members of the same ethnic minority group, ethnic majority students or the peers in the country of origin. Mostly, the educational outcomes of ethnic minority students are compared with those of the dominant groups in society. The choice for a particular comparison group matters as not all groups live or go to school in similar conditions, have the same opportunities or face comparable constraints. When scholars opt for a particular comparison group, this choice may give an indication about the researcher’s assumptions about factors that could enhance success. For instance, ethnic minority and majority members could be compared with each other to study overall ethnic inequalities in society. However, these groups are not fully comparable as they may have a distinct cultural/ethnic/migration background, language proficiency or experiences of discrimination. Therefore, when comparing both groups, insights can be derived in the institutionalized ways of advantaging one group above the other. Additionally, when ethnic minority groups are compared with each other, scholars might search for particular characteristics of ethnic groups that could enable these groups to face discrimination in a way that might improve or hinder the educational success of its members. In doing so, nothing could be said with respect to the overall evaluation of the educational outcomes of these ethnic minority groups in society.

Finally, there might be some variation over time and space. ‘Success’ in school could also be interpreted in terms of ‘change’ or ‘upward social mobility’. The educational achievement of immigrants is frequently studied from this approach as many immigrants migrate to achieve upward intergenerational social mobility (e.g. Kao & Tienda, 1995; Ogbu, 1990; Phalet et al., 2004). Lastly, time can be introduced when evaluating the success of ethnic minority groups in education. Different studies focus on changes in the achievement gap and inequalities in education. For example, scholars such as Gillborn and Mirza (2000) have used the ‘*percentage point model*’. In doing so, these authors compare differences in the proportion of ethnic minority groups that reach a particular achievement level (e.g. the achievement level of the ethnic majority group) and how these differences vary over time. Another example in which educational achievement can be used as an indicator of educational inequality is the ‘*proportion model*’ (e.g. Gorard & Smith, 2004). This model compares changes in achievement levels between different groups. In sum, different conclusions can be drawn about the educational success of ethnic minority students, depending on the chosen comparison group.

Second, the ways scholars perceive the role and function of education in society may have an impact on the conceptualizations of success in school. Inspired by functional theory, schooling can be seen as a way to create a functioning, integrated social system. This may be so because schooling helps to train people to fulfill new roles in society (Parsons, 1959), create moral order in society (Durkheim, 1973), or select and train individuals to fulfill all necessary positions in society (Davis & Moore, 1945). Considering this functional approach of the role of education, it is not that surprising that success is interpreted and evaluated in terms of this function of education as well (Claeys, 1972). This perspective could lead to several measurements of success. For instance, ethnic minorities can be seen as successful in education when these students are equally distributed across all positions in society, reflecting the social stratification in dominant society (e.g. Gillborn & Mirza, 2000). Or, ethnic minority students are successful in school when they have learnt all prevalent values and norms from dominant society. Consequently, education can be seen as an instrument to ‘integrate’ ethnic minority groups into dominant society and this ‘integration’ can be seen as the ultimate objective of schooling. Thus, these functionalist approaches to educational success appear to interpret the achievement of ethnic minority youth in terms of the dominant society.

As a result, success is mainly measured by similar criteria used by schools, universities or policy makers, ruled by majority agents, to evaluate all students. For instance,

‘success’ has often been measured or conceptualized by considering results of national standardized tests (e.g. Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Demie & McLean, 2007; Fryer, 2006), the enrolment in gifted or talented education programs (e.g. Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Tyson, Darity & Castellino, 2005), the track enrolled in (e.g. Van der Veen, 2001; Crul, 2000), the pursuing of higher education (e.g. Pasztor, 2010) or plans to do so (e.g. Zarate, Bhimji & Reese, 2005), average years of education (Boyd, 2002), or teacher rating of students’ academic, reading and language progress (e.g. Zarate, Bhimji & Reese, 2005). Lastly, students can be seen as successful in education if the acquired educational credentials have helped these students in their future professional life (Claeys, 1972). The use of such measures can be interpreted in terms of the functional perspective about the role of schooling for society, but could also be related to the availability of such measurements.

Nevertheless, not all scholars have agreed with the use of such measures or such functionalist approach, set by dominant society, to evaluate the educational success of ethnic minority youth. Starting from conflict theories, education can be seen as a way to re-establish existing power relations in society and maintain or even increase social inequalities, i.e. social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Although education is often seen as a great equalizer and based on individual merit and effort, these scholars question the fact that all students have similar chances to achieve success in school (Johnson, 2012). As educational standards are often set out by mainstream (educational) institutions, organized and controlled by agents of the dominant ethnic/racial majority group, evaluating the ‘success’ of ethnic minority students by such standards would lead to a biased perception of the actual success and opportunities to have success. Consequently, this could imply the impossibility of success of ethnic minority students in dominant society (e.g. Archer, 2008). Defining success from a more critical stance, could lead to the study of features of the institutions in which students are embedded and the critical interpretation of the dominant discourses that have defined success in the dominant society (see *critical race theory* in education, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For example, the possibilities of having success within a particular society should be examined together with the structures in which students are embedded (e.g. the educational system or labour market opportunities), as they could help to understand the ways in which one group is advantaged over the other. Concluding, critically analysing the construction of definitions of success, the relationship between ethnic minority groups and dominant society and (institutionalized) treatment of ethnic minority groups in this society could give more insight in the ways in which dominant groups in society try to maintain their social positions and power through education and opportunities for ethnic minority groups to

achieve success in society. Scholars who study the educational success of ethnic minority youth from a more critical point of view seem to focus more often on the construction of 'success' by dominant society (e.g. Archer, 2008), students' perceptions of success (e.g. Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), the role of education in society (e.g. Johnson, 2012), or structural inequalities (e.g. tracking systems, labour market).

When reviewing the literature with respect to the conceptualizations of success, it seems that the choice for a particular indicator depends mainly on the nature of the research questions (Kao & Thompson, 2003), the scientific discipline (Claeys, 1972), the available data, data-analysis techniques (Harris, Trujillo, & Jamison, 2008; Rong & Grant, 1992), perceptions of a successful student (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), and characteristics of (nationally specific) educational systems, particularly in relationship to evaluation and social stratification (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Smith, Schneider & Ruck, 2005; Crul et al., 2012). Scholars often do not refer explicitly to the theoretical perspectives of success. Furthermore, scholars frequently use similar indicators of success to test whether findings can be replicated (Claeys, 1972).

In sum, the difficulty and complexity surrounding the definition and measurement of educational success illustrates the variety of interpretations regarding this concept and reflects the importance of the (research, educational and national) context in shaping this, and particularly the ways scholars perceive the role of education in society. Different definitions and measurements of success can stimulate researchers to make different research questions and conclusions in relationship with ethnic inequalities in education and the possibility of achieving success for ethnic minority students. In the next chapter, attention will be given to studies that have focused on family-related factors that could explain why some ethnic minority students are successful in secondary education.

## 2.2. FAMILY

The family is an important socialising institution and therefore often perceived to contribute to the educational success of their children. Consequently, many researchers have examined processes that occur within the family, especially, family support, attitudes and parenting practices, when trying to single out factors related to the educational success of ethnic/racial minority students. To a lesser extent, structural family characteristics, such as the presence of high-achieving siblings, are considered.



Parental attitudes towards education are studied in relation to the educational success of ethnic and racial minority students. Most parents have positive attitudes towards school and promote upward mobility and educational success (Coleman et al. 1966; Grant & Sleeter, 1988; Ogbu, 1983, 2008; Kao & Tienda, 1995; 1998; Mickelson, 1990; Kao, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Archer & Francis, 2006; 2007; Raleigh & Kao, 2010; Pasztor, 2010; Shah, Dwyer & Modood, 2010; Phalet & Claeys, 1993). However, these studies have indicated that these family attitudes are often not sufficient in itself to realize educational success. Parents and pupils face and are aware of other obstacles in school, such as track choice, class and race inequalities, that have to be overcome (Mickelson, 1990; 2001). Therefore, discussing school-related topics about school activities, programs and plans seem related to school achievement (Keith & Lichtman, 1994) and enrolment in specific courses (Valadez, 2002).

Other ways in which parents try to ensure educational success, is through their parenting practices (Gibson, 1987; Lindo, 1996; van der Veen, 2001). These parenting practices appear to add to the educational success of ethnic minority students in several ways. Some studies find that parents could contribute to the educational success of their children through the restriction of their social lives (e.g. no extracurricular activities or student jobs; Gibson, 1987; Van der Veen, 2001) or when they allow their children to discuss parental decisions (Lindo, 1996). Another way parenting practices could help their children to achieve is through the transmission of educational values that are important for actual achievement (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Nevertheless, the effect of such parenting practices for educational success might vary across ethnic minority groups as they appear to depend on cultural traditions (Steinberg, Dornbusch & Bradford Brown, 2006). Nevertheless, it remains unclear why some ethnic and racial minority students benefit more from authoritarian parents and restricted social lives and others from more negotiable parenting practices. Additionally, the study of Portes and Fernandez-Kelly (2008) suggested that especially the interaction between success determinants, as a necessary condition to realize success, should not be neglected. For instance, the support of significant others, in- and outside the family, is only decisive for success in combination with targeted voluntary programs and authoritative and alert parents. Furthermore, the encouragement of the family might offer a protection against structural barriers and experiences of discrimination (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2009). Parents influence the educational outcomes of their children by countering the negative effects of racial discrimination through racial socialization. Through racial socialization, implicit and explicit messages are given that help children to cope with the realities of racism

and racial hostility (Brown & Tylka, 2011). Subsequently, it adds to the sense of control over the environment (Bowman & Howard, 1985) and helps to cope with perceived discriminatory experiences (Scott, 1996). For instance, Sanders (1997) finds that African American students with a higher racial awareness are more motivated to falsify the negative stereotypes towards African American students' achievement.

The importance of family support is examined extensively. Various supporting actors in the family are studied, such as mothers and/or fathers (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2005; Lew, 2006a; Crul et al, 2012) and siblings (Crul, 2000; Lew, 2006a; Hao & Bonstead-Burns, 1998). Parental support is mainly studied with respect to the alternative ways they try to make up for their inability to support their children in school (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2005) and parental strategies to get access to and accumulate social capital, helping their children facing structural barriers, such as navigating through and receiving information about the school system (Lew, 2006a; Crul et al., 2012). Besides parents, siblings are also studied as important supporting actors. However, it remains unclear whether the older or the younger benefit more from their family support and resources. Older siblings can substitute the help others receive from their parents, although they do not necessarily do so. At the expense of their own success, older siblings are able to give support, guidance, advice, motivation and negotiate for their younger siblings (Crul, 2000; Lew, 2006a). In contrast to this, Hao and Bonstead-Burns (1998) find that older siblings achieve better due to the greater access to family resources and because they often act as role models to the younger siblings.

In sum, family studies paid more attention to processes within the family sphere that contribute to students' success and less so to the importance of structural family characteristics, such as the presence of siblings. These processes seem to play an important role for educational success of ethnic and racial minority students but findings are inconclusive or are not sufficient factors to achieve in school. In general, while these studies point to factors and processes within the family that foster educational success, the family as a setting is extensively examined to understand the underachievement of ethnic and racial minority students. Especially family background characteristics, such as the socio-economic background of students (see: Stevens, Clycq, Timmerman & Van Houtte, 2011), have received a lot of attention when focusing on the underachievement of ethnic and racial minority students. By contrast, studies focusing on success try to grasp variations in educational outcomes within these ethnic and racial minority groups shift their focus away from family characteristics that are similar for the majority of ethnic minority students. For instance, these studies search for factors that may explain why ethnic minority students from

a lower socio-economic background can achieve success. Therefore, when trying to explain high-achievement of ethnic and racial minority students, it appears that researchers change focus from structural family background characteristics to processes that occur within this family setting. Additionally, the impact of family involvement on the educational outcomes of their children seems to depend on the features of the educational system that determine the importance of this parental involvement.

### 2.3. SCHOOL

Most studies that focus on the school setting have studied school organizational features, such as the adopted school policies and leadership, or the composition of the student population, mainly focusing on socio-economic or ethnic composition of the school. First, a group of studies focuses on the organisational school features that lead to higher percentages of ethnic minority students being successful. School characteristics of high achieving schools - such as strong leadership, using performance data for school evaluation, creative and inclusive curriculum, good parental support, coordinated support and guidance, links with the community, a strong commitment to equal opportunities, high teachers and pupils' expectations - are seen as important success determinants for black African and Caribbean pupils (Demie, 2005; Demie & McLean, 2007) in the United Kingdom. However, these studies do not compare school characteristics of high-achieving schools with those of low-achieving schools. Similar results are found in studies commissioned by the UK government (Blair & Bourne, 1998; OFSTED, 2002). Howard (2010) adds the acknowledgement of race and community engagement to this. A final organisational school feature that would enhance educational success is being taught in smaller classes (Krueger & Whitmore, 2002; Arias, Faltis, & Cohen, 2007). In general, these studies seem to be related to country-specific evaluation criteria and policy practices.

A second group of studies explores both the direct impact of the composition of schools on students' outcomes, as the ways a particular composition of the student body in a school might affect students with specific individual characteristics differently. One of the most extensively studied structural school factors, with respect to success, is the school composition. Schools with a higher socioeconomic status may have more students with higher grades (Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991; McCallum & Demie, 2001). However, also the racial/ethnic school composition seems to have an impact on ethnic/racial minority students' educational success. For instance, according to the study of Lee (2007), racial

between- and within school segregation is associated with a racial achievement gap. However, the ethnic/racial composition of the school population appears to be studied mainly because of its influence on the processes that occur in school. In particular, many researchers focused on the 'acting white' hypothesis of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) which states that black Americans have constructed a collective identity that is opposed to the white culture. Achieving in school is seen as a way of 'acting white', and therefore, blacks develop an oppositional school culture. In ethnically segregated schools or in schools with a lower amount of same-race peers, ethnic and racial minority students are less likely to fear losing the membership of their ethnic/racial community (Fryer, 2006) and have lower social costs (Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010) when achieving than in multi-ethnic schools. In multi-ethnic schools, a higher number of cross-ethnic friendships leads to higher interracial tensions and the membership of the ethnic/racial community becomes contested (Fryer, 2006). In contrast, Lew (2006b) suggests that the presence of other, same-ethnic students, helps to establish and strengthen peer relationships and provides support. Furthermore, in predominantly white schools, higher salience may be an important factor in the ways racial beliefs are associated with school behaviour and the interpretation of specific school events (Carter, 2009). The importance of the 'acting white' hypothesis and experiences of ethnic and racial minority students may depend on the curriculum of the student (Tyson, Darity & Castellino, 2005) and (advanced) courses and programs in which ethnic and racial minorities are enrolled (Conchas, 2001).

Although these studies demonstrate the importance of school characteristics, such as organizational school features, and the composition of the student body in a school, few studies have combined both. Furthermore, most of these studies have focused on schools as units of analysis. Nevertheless, the school context can be seen as a series of hierarchically ordered, interdependent levels of organization, ranging from the level of the classroom to the cultural systems in which schools are embedded (Eccles & Roeser, 2010), but hardly any study covers this range of levels. Despite this gap in the existing literature, scholars have already suggested the importance of the particular characteristics and compositional features of tracks and class groups for the establishment of friendship relations (Demantet, et al., 2011; Agirdag, Demantet et al.2011).

Building further on a conflict perspective about the role of education in society, a third body of research focuses on how school culture perpetuates social and ethnic/racial inequalities. Schools value, transmit and reproduce the cultural capital of dominant and mainstream society (see Bourdieu, 1986). Although schools appear to be neutral, they might

structurally discriminate specific lower class or ethnic/racial minority groups (Gould, 1999). When (non-dominant) cultural styles and capital of ethnic/racial minority students are not acknowledged or appreciated, cultural conflict may arise, for example in domains such as speech and language (Carter, 2005). By acknowledging students' culture, language and ethnicity, ethnic and racial minority students will have more access to the general curriculum (Arias, Faltis & Cohen, 2007) and achieve in school (Carter, 2005). Consequently, various scholars have proposed and studied the use of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in which student cultures and prior knowledge are used to empower students (Irizarry & Antrop-González, 2007; Villegas, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2009; Arias, Faltis & Cohen, 2007; Unger Palmer, 2007; Sleeter, 2012). This pedagogy assumes that learning differs across cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2009). By adapting pedagogical practices, teachers can meet the specific educational needs of ethnic/racial minority students in order to realize success for ethnic and racial minority students in school. For example, the use of a more holistic approach of teachers and the establishment of meaningful relationships between students and teachers was proposed to lead to success for ethnic minority students (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). Another suggestion to improve the educational success of ethnic minority students is to apply a subversive pedagogy in which the system is questioned, challenged and critiqued by teachers and students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Nevertheless, more evidence should be presented to make conclusive claims about the importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for educational success (Castagno & Bradboy, 2008; Sleeter, 2012).

Finally, various school characteristics interact and are closely related to each other. For example teaching style and expectations are related to the number of ethnic and racial minority students in a school (van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010). But they do not affect all students equally and individual characteristics matter. For instance, although the perception of a positive racial climate in a school leads to higher educational outcomes and less discipline problems, the perception of a negative school racial climate matters more for the educational outcomes of 'whites' and boys than for African Americans and girls (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Furthermore, selection effects occur in school choice before effects of structural school characteristics may take place (Lee et al., 1991). In short, when focusing on 'success', most scholars tend to focus on how structural characteristics of schools might have an impact on the processes that occur within these schools and are influenced by the larger society. Nevertheless, more attention should be paid to how this interaction between structural characteristics and the processes that occur within the school actually work.

These findings do not only suggest the importance of particular school characteristics, such as a strong school leadership, the ethnic and social class composition of the school and the nature of the pedagogy taught, but also indicate that more research should not only focus on one particular setting. Few studies have explored the interaction between school and other settings, such as home and the immigrant community. Most of their findings suggest that school effects fortify or interact with influences from outside the school, such as the parental socio-economic status. For example, in the study of Portes and MacLeod (1996), the school context strengthens the parental socio-economic status, but only for children from disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds. Higher SES schools fortify the positive effect of the parental SES while inner-city schools substitute for the negative effect of ethnic disadvantage. Additionally, selection processes take place and influence the school composition. These selection processes are influenced by parental and children's preferences for particular schools and school choice policies (e.g. Timmerman, 1995). These studies seem to indicate that potential interaction effects between settings, such as home and school, are important in understanding educational success but complex and generally understudied. This can possibly explain why studies focusing on a similar research question in school yield mixed results, as, for example, factors outside school may have an impact on the structural characteristics of schools (e.g. ethnic/socio-economic school composition) and the processes operating within that setting (e.g. 'acting white' hypothesis, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). While the studies discussed indicate that the effect of one particular setting can be fortified in another setting, there is less clarity on whether effects of settings are multiplied or substitute each other. As a result, more attention should be paid to the influence of various settings together and how these effects may differ according to individual characteristics (see Rhamie & Hallam, 2002).

To conclude, in contrast with research that has concentrated on the determinants of underachievement of ethnic/racial minority youth, the research focusing on educational success at home or in school seems to have focused on how specific processes and characteristics could lead to more variation within ethnic groups concerning educational outcomes. Consequently, in the family, most research has focused on factors such as parenting practices or family support at home and the interaction with particular individual characteristics or peer cultures within schools. However, there are more studies that investigate the importance of the larger social environment and social networks in which the school and the family are embedded.

## 2.4. BROADER LIVING ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

In the next section, studies that focus on specific ethnic and racial minority or religious social networks, neighbourhood characteristics and features of the educational system will be discussed.

### 2.4.1. ETHNIC AND RACIAL MINORITY SOCIAL NETWORKS

The local ethnic/racial minority communities can add to the educational success as their members make use of the existing ethnic capital in these communities. 'Ethnic capital' includes both social and cultural capital. This capital does not refer to the economic capital that the immigrants lack in the immigrant country, but the capital they might still have access to in their country of origin. Sometimes, immigrant parents enjoyed education in their country of origin but this educational level does not correspond with their economic capital in the immigrant country. Thus, although the parental societal status and economic capital can change through migration, this does not necessarily lead to (strong) changes in cultural capital. Co-ethnic networks, such as cultural endowments, obligations and expectations, informational channels and enforcement of social norms, can be seen as a form of social capital. Family and broader networks inform students about the educational and labour market system. Through the internalization of high educational ambitions and the enforcement of appropriate behaviour, their initial immigrant disadvantage can be overcome. Ethnic capital is given as a success determinant for more educational successful groups ('model minorities'), such as Vietnamese (Zhou & Bankston, 1994), Korean (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Lew, 2006a) and Chinese immigrants in the US (Zhou & Bankston, 1994; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Archer & Francis, 2006), British Pakistani (Shah, Dwyer & Modood, 2010) and British South Asians (Archer, 2008). Between-family social capital varies according to the ethnic group one belongs to and the characteristics of these communities, for example, being part of larger immigrant communities gives more access to ethnic social capital (Levels, Dronkers & Kraaykamp, 2008). Structural characteristics of ethnic/racial minority networks, such as quantity, are mainly important for the interactions that may occur within these networks.

In sum, having ethnic capital helps the educational outcomes of the children through the transmission of values, information and high educational expectations by families, significant relatives and other community members and the inclusion of ethnicity. The distinction between social and cultural capital fades out. This ethnic capital can be obtained

in the country of origin and be derived from ethnic/racial minority networks. However, while ethnic capital might be related to the achievement of a group as a whole, it is less useful in understanding variations in achievement within a group.

#### 2.4.2. RELIGIOUS NETWORKS

Although the ethnic/racial networks and the religious community have distinct characteristics, they are often entangled or related with each other. Scholars have focused on two aspects of religion, namely religious networks and religiosity, which will be discussed separately. First attention will be given to the networks in which students find themselves. While research that considers religion as a belief system, with customs and lifestyles, will be discussed together with other studies focusing on cultural beliefs and habits.

When studying religious networks, some scholars have focused on the downside of such networks. For instance, the study of Darnell and Sherkat (1997) focuses on how fundamentalist Protestant cultural orientations might discourage students to achieve in education. However, one should consider families and immigrant communities as they may matter for the religious socialization of their children, and consequently for the religiosity of their children (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2011). Furthermore, through religious involvement and participation in church-related activities, a supporting network can be created (Sikkink & Hernández, 2003) that gives access to the necessary forms of social and cultural capital that are often not available for students from disadvantaged families or areas (Barrett, 2010) or immigrants (Lew, 2006a). Religious involvement is found to promote intergenerational closure, help-seeking behaviour and access to mentorship and advice (Antrop-González et al., 2005). Moreover, such involvement is related to positive attitudes and behaviours towards education and long-term future goals. These attitudes and behaviour can protect young people against their involvement with an oppositional culture, and as such contribute to educational success (Barrett, 2010). Religious networks should be considered together with other factors. For example, parents who participate in religious networks appear to spend more time with their children (family) and encourage opportunities to participate in local organizations (neighbourhood or ethnic/racial networks) (Sikkink & Hernández, 2003). Additionally, religious networks could be more accessible for families with specific characteristics, such as parents with a higher income or better working conditions (family) (Lew, 2006a), but are found to have a higher impact on students from impoverished neighbourhoods (Sikkink & Hernández, 2003). In sum, religious networks seem to give more access to social and cultural capital, information, guidance and protection from anti-school peer networks. Nevertheless,



strong involvement in particular religious networks can restrict students' connections outside the community and conflict with dominant educational aspirations and achievement.

#### 2.4.3. NEIGHBOURHOOD

The neighbourhood is a geographic area, in which the family, the school, ethnic/racial minority or religious communities are embedded. Different aspects of the neighbourhood can be studied, such as the influence of the neighbourhood composition, networks, the available resources, the local organizations and activities. Most neighbourhood studies focus on negative outcomes, such as dropping out school or youth delinquency, rather than focusing on educational success (e.g. Johnson, 2010). Studies that do relate the neighbourhood with educational success find that ethnic and racial minority students living in more advantaged areas (McCallum & Demie, 2001) or more stable neighbourhoods or neighbourhoods with a better quality (measured by residential mobility, urbanisation, home ownership and single households) (Fleischmann et al., 2011), have better educational results than those who live in other areas. Additionally, the availability and accessibility of the neighbourhood resources construct a social environment that is beneficial for the educational outcomes of the children of the neighbourhood (Zhou, 2009). Furthermore, differential neighbourhood effects between ethnic groups in the same neighbourhood are related to an unequal access to neighbourhood resources. Thus, neighbourhoods could have a positive effect on students' educational outcomes through the participation in social networks. Nevertheless, the organisation of such networks may be racially organised and its impact may vary across ethnic groups. In a study of Ainsworth (2010), the presence of advantaged 'whites' has a positive influence on the educational outcomes of 'black' children because 'white' adults, in contrast to 'black' adults, play an active role in neighbourhood networks. Successful 'whites' are seen as a role model and have more access to the advantageous resources of the neighbourhoods.

In many of these neighbourhood studies, it seemed difficult to disentangle the impact of particular neighbourhood features as many are correlated with each other. For example, in the Belgian study of Fleischmann and colleagues (2011), for Moroccan Belgians, neighbourhood quality was found to be associated with school completion. Nevertheless these groups live mostly in neighbourhoods with a low quality, characterized by high levels of urbanization, and low levels of home ownership. By contrast, for Turkish Belgians, under the conditions that they live in a municipality with a stable residential composition, the impact of ethnic density on school completion is moderated. Remarkably, for Italian Belgians, living in a neighbourhood with many other Italian Belgians seems to be a resource

for those who live in less stable and low-quality areas. Conversely, living together with a considerable proportion of Italian Belgians in more stable and higher-quality neighbourhoods was found to be a hindrance for educational achievement. Furthermore, it should be remarked that the neighbourhood and the immigrant community sometimes overlap with each other. Neighbourhood effects operate through immigrant community resources and capital (Zhou, 2009) and supportive networks (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2011).

Concluding, the neighbourhood influences the educational outcomes of its inhabitants in various ways. Not only structural neighbourhood characteristics, such as the available resources and living in an advantaged area, are important, but having access to the resources that occur in the neighbourhood and the interaction with other neighbourhood processes might affect educational success for ethnic and racial minority students. Finally, neighbourhoods are not the only geographical areas in which variation in educational success or achievement gaps has been studied, also variation across states (Lee, 2007) or countries (e.g. Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008) are examined. For example, Lee (2007) found substantial variation in achievement gaps and racial segregation patterns across states in the United States.

#### 2.4.4. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Students and schools are subject to educational policies and the educational systems in which they are embedded in. According to the ‘comparative integration context theory’, the integration context matters for the level in which people are able to participate in social organisations and belong to local communities. Consequently, as institutional arrangements of educational systems are part of this integration context, differences in these educational systems may result in varying educational outcomes, social and cultural participation and belonging (Crul et al., 2012). Most research focusing on educational systems does not explicitly focus on success, but mainly explores variation in educational outcomes of different ethnic/social groups across countries. These studies start from the observation that ethnic groups are unequally distributed across tracks (Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1983; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Hallinan, 1996; Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1997; Duru-Bellat, 2000; Ditton, Krüsken & Schauenberg, 2005; Gillborn, 2005; Jacob & Tieben, 2009; Baeriswyl, Wandeler & Trautwein, 2011; Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013). Hence, as tracking practices appear to advantage students in high ability groups more compared to those in lower ability groups for a variety of outcomes (Kerckhoff, 1986; Shavit & Featherman, 1988; Natriello, Pallas & Alexander, 1989; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Hallinan, 1994;

Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1997; De Fraine, Van Damme & Onghena, 2002; Van Landeghem et al., 2002; Van Houtte, 2004; 2005; Van de Gaer et al., 2006; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010b), these practices seem to contribute to the reproduction of social/ethnic inequalities in society. However, specific characteristics of tracking systems might strengthen or weaken these social inequalities (Jacob & Tieben, 2009; de Heus & Dronkers, 2010; Dronkers, van der Velden & Dunne, 2011; Crul et al., 2012; Crul, 2013; Lavrijsen, 2012). This is not that surprising as tracking systems differ considerably with regard to the age at which first tracking takes place, the extent of curricular specialization, inclusiveness, the rigidity of tracking – whether students can switch between tracks –, the procedures of track allocation and the centrality of the organisation of tracking systems (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Kerckhoff, 2001; LeTendre, Hofer & Shimizu, 2003; Jacob & Tieben, 2009; Kelly & Price, 2011; Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Kelly & Price, 2011; Lucas & Berends, 2002; Crul et al., 2012).

Building further on the ‘comparative integration context theory’, Crul and colleagues (2012) suggest the importance of the interaction between school system characteristics for students’ educational outcomes, especially when considering outcomes at the ends of the educational spectrum (i.e. early school-leavers and those enrolled in higher education). Specific features of school systems seem to affect the school careers of students of immigrant descent differently. Depending on these features, the impact of parental support and students’ personal achievement motivation appears to vary. Findings of this study indicate that school systems vary in the intensity and type of role parents are expected to play during varying stages of students’ school career. The time span between the first entry in education and the moment of streaming into different tracks appears to be important for the educational achievement of students enrolled within these systems. Additionally, in a study of Dronkers and colleagues (2011), effects of parental background on track assignment are more important in stratified tracking systems compared to comprehensive systems. Additionally, these authors find that ethnic minority students in low-level tracks appear to have best achievement results in comprehensive tracking systems, while ethnic majority students at this level obtain best results in both comprehensive and strongly stratified systems, suggesting the impact of parental background for making educational outcomes.

Nevertheless, despite these institutional arrangements, it seems that it is also important to consider the practices that occur and are possible within this structure. Depending on these tracking structures, parents, students and school staff have varying space for the individual agency and tracking systems may be characterized by specific tracking

practices. For instance, in Belgium, where education is organised by two linguistic communities, distinct tracking practices and tendencies can be observed, despite the similar structure of the tracking system. While failing students in the Dutch linguistic community are more often oriented towards technical and vocational tracks, students in the French linguistic community are more encouraged to repeat their year when results are not satisfactory in order to improve achievement in the following year (Ouali & Réa, 1994; Varin, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2009; Phalet et al., 2007; Crul & Vermeulen, 2003). These regional differences in the implementation of tracking systems appear to some extent responsible for distinct educational outcomes of ethnic minorities in the Dutch linguistic community of Belgium compared to the French linguistic community. Thus, in sum, particular features of educational systems may have a varying but multiplying effect on the educational outcomes of students of immigrant descent.

Summarizing previous research on the wider social contexts and networks in which students are embedded, we can state that ethnic/racial networks might matter for students' educational outcomes as they might generate ethnic capital. Furthermore, religious networks are found to provide students access to social/cultural capital, intergenerational closure, guidance and motivation for school and protect against other detrimental networks. Additionally, also the neighbourhood in which students live might contribute to the educational success of its inhabitants. The effect of the neighbourhood appears to depend on the available resources, quality and stability of the neighbourhood and models of success. Finally, government policies are found to affect students' outcomes through the structure of their educational system, with more successful outcomes for ethnic minority students when parental involvement is limited.

## 2.5. CULTURAL FACTORS

So far, studies ranging from the immediate to the broader environment in which ethnic/racial minority students live are discussed. Throughout the distinct studies discussed, a more overall pattern can be found, namely culture. Cultural factors refer to belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs and life-styles, opportunity structures, hazards and life course options. In a first section, the cultural-ecological theory of Ogbu (1983; 1984; 1987; 2008; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) is set out. Second, research about the role of school instrumentality, studied from the future time perspective, is presented. Third, the 'acting white' hypothesis and more studies that have focused on the ethnic identity or peer groups are

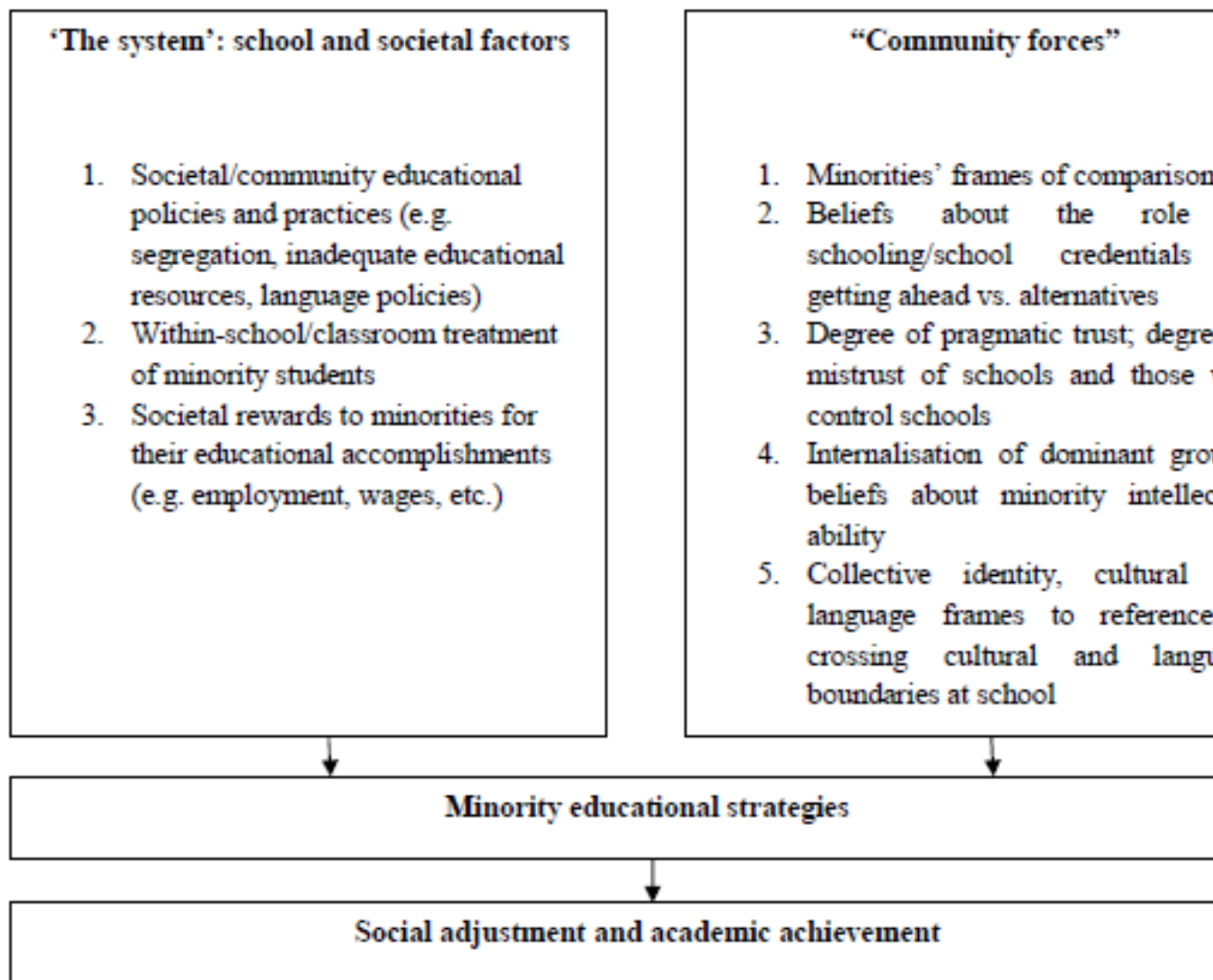
discussed. Finally, religion, as a belief system, is related to the educational success of ethnic minority students.

#### 2.5.1. OGBU'S CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL THEORY

**ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL THEORIES IS OGBU'S CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL THEORY (1984; 1987; 2008) THAT RELATES THE MIGRATION MOTIVATION OF ETHNIC AND RACIAL MINORITY GROUPS TO THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF THEIR CHILDREN. HE ARGUES THAT SCHOOL AND SOCIETAL FACTORS, REFERRED TO AS 'THE SYSTEM', AND 'COMMUNITY FORCES' INFLUENCE MINORITY EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES AND, CONSEQUENTLY, SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT (SEE FIGURE 1**

Figure 1). In his cultural-ecological model, Ogbu proposed a 'two-part solution for a two-part problem' (Ogbu, 12, 2008). The first part of this theory exists out of the distinct treatment of ethnic minority groups by dominant groups in society. In this part, Ogbu refers to the ways ethnic minorities are treated in education. He finds that educational policies and practices, within-school treatment and societal rewards for the educational credentials of ethnic minority students, were the main factors that characterized the treatment of ethnic minorities in dominant society. The second part of his theory concerns the ways ethnic minorities perceive and respond to such treatment by society, which he refers to as 'community forces'. Ethnic minorities have found collective solutions for the collective problems they perceive. Additionally, these community forces seem to depend on the collective history ethnic minorities have with the dominant society. Especially in this part of his theory, Ogbu makes a distinction between ethnic minority groups. In settler societies, 'voluntary' immigrants (including autonomous, voluntary immigrants, refugees, migrant or guest workers, undocumented workers) and 'involuntary' minorities (including binationals, involuntary or non-immigrant minorities), and descendants or later generations, seemed to collectively adapt to the treatment by dominant society in a distinct way. Four main factors constitute these community forces, namely dual frames of reference, relationships with the system, issues of identity, culture, language and ability and beliefs about the instrumental value of education.

**FIGURE 1: OGBU'S CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL (P. 12, 2008)**



The distinct development of community forces across ethnic minority groups will be illustrated by one community force: 'the dual frame of reference'. Voluntary immigrants have developed a positive dual frame of reference as most of them still refer to their situation in the country of origin. As a consequence, the balance of this comparison is positive as they perceive more opportunities in their new immigrant country, compared to their country of

origin. Due to this positive dual frame of reference and social upward mobility aspirations, these immigrants are willing to accept a less than equal treatment in the immigrant society. Conversely, 'involuntary' ethnic minorities' dual frame of reference consists out of the comparison between their socio-economic status in the United States and those of middle class white Americans. Consequently, they evaluate their situation in the United States as rather negative. In general, due to their voluntary migration and upward social mobility expectations, these voluntary immigrants have developed distinct community forces from involuntary minorities and, hence, are expected to achieve better in school (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Ogbu, 2008).

Despite its influential status, Ogbu's theory has been criticized for not taking important factors, such as societal racism and the daily school experiences of black students, (adequately) into account. In addition, his theory fails to account for within-group variations, and is considered too structural-deterministic, focusing too much on the underachievement of African Americans and insufficiently incorporating identity and educational success (see Gibson, 1997; Akom, 2003; Foster, 2004; Kalekin-Fishman, 2004; Luciak, 2004; Foster & Gobbo, 2004; Foster, 2005; Ogbu, 2008; Matute-Bianchi, 2008).

Concluding, the value of Ogbu's ecological theory is that it encourages scholars to consider the importance of specific migration histories of each ethnic/racial group and related experiences and perceptions of in-out group relations in developing particular strategies that lead to educational success. This is also found in research based on Ogbu's theory. For instance, Hermans (2004) applies Ogbu's theory to the study of Moroccans in the Netherlands and Belgium. His research suggests that it is not the initial migration motivation that matters but rather the history of becoming a minority in the immigrant country. The community forces of the so-called voluntary Moroccan immigrants are similar to those that Ogbu describes for involuntary non-immigrants. Most Moroccans do not compare their situation with the country of origin as they do not intend to return. Moreover, they mainly referred to the immigrant country and strive to achieve the European standard of living. Furthermore, Moroccan parents often mentioned that they did not share similar values about schooling. Additionally, schools do not fully value their religion, languages and culture. Finally, these parents express some ambivalent attitudes towards the value of education and educational strategies. While they hold high educational aspirations for their children, they see that this is often insufficiently rewarded in society for Moroccans. In sum, Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory is heavily criticised, but has influenced many scholars

considerably. This will be visible throughout the next paragraphs where studies will be discussed that build further on Ogbu's concepts and theory.

### 2.5.2. FUTURE TIME PERSPECTIVE

Starting from Ogbu, different migration histories lead to other beliefs about the instrumental value of education. The future time perspective has studied the perceptions of school instrumentality for future opportunities more in detail. A lack of school instrumentality causes a resistance to schooling. But, when activities, such as schooling, are perceived to be instrumental to achieve valued future outcomes, individuals are more motivated to succeed and participate in those activities (Okagaki, 2001; McInerney, 2004; Phan, 2009; Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004). Phalet and colleagues (2004) argue that positive instrumentality and internal regulation (i.e. the perception that future goals are self-set) are necessary to accomplish intrinsic motivation and adaptive learning in multicultural classrooms and, consequently, to achieve success. Someone's future opportunities are shaped by the school context, the immigrant community (Portes & MacLeod, 1996), cultural identity, class and historical origin (Phan, 2009) and living environment (Phalet et al., 2004). In sum, the context in which someone lives and the perception of this context shapes the ethnic and racial minority students' perception of school instrumentality and, subsequently, their motivation to succeed in school.

### 2.5.3. ETHNIC OR RACIAL IDENTITY

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory has not only influenced research on the future time perspective of cultural/ethnic groups, but also on the importance of ethnic and/or racial identities. Ethnic and racial identities refer to shared group identities which characterise a dimension of culture (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). The following section reviews three streams of research on the importance of race/ethnic identities on educational success: the 'acting white' hypothesis and two other streams of research that build on this hypothesis and relate ethnic/racial identities or peer group cultures to educational success.

#### 2.5.3.1. THE 'ACTING WHITE' HYPOTHESIS

The 'acting white' hypothesis from Fordham and Ogbu (1986; 2008; Fordham, 1988) is framed into Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory. African Americans came involuntarily to the United States and their underachievement as a group is a reaction towards their limited social and economic future opportunities. They are insufficiently rewarded when succeeding and are



perceived as being incapable of academic success. In reaction to this, African American students are found to develop an oppositional collective or social identity and an oppositional cultural frame of reference towards education. This collective group identity is based on fictive kinship with certain inclusion criteria. Attitudes and behaviours, such as academic success, are characterized as 'white', and in conflict with group loyalty towards the 'black' community and the 'black' identity. However, high achievers who want to retain their collective identity, use coping strategies to avoid being seen as 'acting white'. By doing so, they camouflage their abilities from peers, are engaged in cloaking activities and attribute their success to their natural talent. This hypothesis suggests that having a raceless identity would facilitate academic success. However, when testing this hypothesis, results are mixed. Some authors confirm (Farkas, Lleras, & Maczuga, 2002; Farkas, 2008) or refine the 'acting white' hypothesis, for example by adding time and place (Cousins, 2008), while others do not find support for this thesis (Bergin & Cooks, 2008; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998).

The 'acting white' hypothesis appears to be related to two additional lines of research: a first group focuses on the relationship between a racial or ethnic identity and educational success, and a second group examines the degree to which peer cultures and friendships with same or different peers have an impact on high achievement.

#### 2.5.3.2. ETHNIC/RACIAL IDENTITY AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

A first group of studies that departs from the 'acting white' hypothesis examines the significance of the racial and ethnic identity for educational success but finds no evidence that raceless identities lead to better educational outcomes. The relationship between racial and ethnic identities and educational success are found to be less straightforward and more complex than suggested by Fordham and Ogbu. This is not surprising as ethnic/racial identities depend on historical and social processes and vary over time (Allen, 1994) and their meaning depends on the situation (Lew, 2006a). Consequently, students' ethnic/racial identities vary across their migration background, the ethnic/racial group they belong and associated stereotypes and their relationship with the dominant group (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

One group of scholars has studied the relationship between ethnic/racial identities and educational outcomes as a process of intergenerational adaptation and these scholars focus on assimilation and acculturation (Gibson, 1987; 1997; Mehan et al., 1994; Zhou, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2001; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008).

The 'segmented assimilation' theory is a very influential theory, developed by Portes and Zhou (1993). According to this theory, students with a 'thin' racial-ethnic identity, who acculturate to the mainstream norms, are more likely to be associated with academic achievement. In addition, students with 'bicultural' racial-ethnic identities, who follow a rather segmented assimilation, that combines a strong racial-ethnic identity with aspirations to succeed in the broader society, are also expected to have good educational outcomes. By contrast, students with 'thick' racial-ethnic identities have a downward assimilation and do not experience success. This trend of downward assimilation is assumed to be due to the rejection of mainstream institutions after experiencing discrimination and the devaluation of their group (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Gibson, 1987; 1997). More research suggested that this relationship may depend on the importance of the context (e.g. home or school, Andriessen & Phalet, 2002) or the migration history of ethnic minorities (Gibson, 1987; 1997). Additionally, in these studies, language is often used to illustrate assimilation/adaptation preferences, patterns and processes as it is one of the first obstacles that immigrants have to face when arriving in the immigrant country. Therefore, language proficiency of the instruction language or language of the ethnic majority in the immigrant country is often related to higher study motivation and achievement (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel & Martin, 2009; Barrett et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it is not only the acquisition of the language of the immigrant country that helps to achieve, but it may be also related to fluent bilingualism and the recognition of students cultural and linguistic heritage (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). In sum, the formation of racial/ethnic identities and the process of assimilation is complex, and does not necessarily follow a linear process. Furthermore, the relationship between ethnic identities and educational outcomes is not similar for all ethnic groups and immigrant generations (Rong & Brown, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

As the ethnic/racial identity of students with a recent immigrant background are studied in relation to acculturation or assimilation to mainstream society (see exception Mehan et al., 1994), more attention is given to the content, deconstruction and perception of ethnic and racial identities of 'involuntary' ethnic/racial minorities (as Ogbu refers to them, 1987; 2008). From a more critical race perspective, the association between school achievement and race and ethnicity is explored. In doing so, definitions of success, ethnic identities of ethnic majority and minority groups are examined. It seems that only when achieving is perceived by ethnic minority students as intrinsically related to the dominant ethnic group, it appears to be impossible to have positive educational outcomes. However,

when students do not perceive achieving to be intrinsically related to the dominant ethnic group, they are able to achieve success in school (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995). For example, in Carter's (2008a; 2008b; 2009) study, for African American students, being conscious about the role 'race' may play in society and being more critically aware of racism in society appears to result in a higher school motivation. Subsequently, understanding the ways in which race and racism operate and are related to success in society, can help to perceive oneself as an African American achiever. Consequently, success is interpreted by high achieving students as an individual and collective racial group achievement.

Additional studies suggest rather positive effects of developed ethnic/racial identities might protect students against negative social contextual influences, such as discrimination, and motivate students to achieve (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Chavous et al., 2003; Harris & Marsh, 2010; Carter, 2008a; 2008b; Altschul, Oyserman & Bybee, 2006; 2008; Lew, 2006a; 2006b; Owens & Lynch, 2012), strengthen students' self-esteem (Portes-Fernandez-Kelly, 2008), and provide social advantages, such as the membership in an academic honour society (Cook & Ludwig, 1997). The development of ethno-racial cultures can serve as a gain of strength for students as they provide students with a sense of belonging, connection, kinship and teach them how to cope and critique social inequality (Carter, 2005; Carter, 2008a; 2008b). Nevertheless, strong racial/ethnic identities are not necessarily positively related to educational success, they are only related to better school results when these racial-ethnic identities help to overcome obstacles (Altschul et al., 2006; 2008).

Furthermore, the relationship between the racial and ethnic identity and education appear to be context-specific and only relevant when students experience negative stereotypes and are stigmatized. Structural factors, such as the racial-ethnic concentrations in schools, neighbourhoods and peer groups, may determine the connectedness with racial-ethnic in-group members and the broader society and can help to develop the identity of ethnic and racial minority students. Schools are important social contexts for the creation of a positive school identity (Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010). The impact of ethnic/racial identities may depend on students' discourse, such as talking about school, future plans (Carspecken and Cordeiro, 1991) and vary according to individual characteristics, such as gender (Wortham, 2002; Carter, 2005).

Finally, when focusing on the ethnic/racial identities of ethnic minority students, less attention has been paid to the role the ethnic/racial identities of students of the dominant group play in constructing these identities. Research in this area may be interesting as it may

construct classroom knowledge and can be incorporated in teachers' pedagogy. For example, Giroux (1997) suggests that white students should be made more aware of their identity, privileges, racial and cultural differences and involved when discussing other ethnic/racial groups. When reforming education, students of the dominant group should be more involved and should create more equal opportunities to achieve success.

In sum, the ways in which ethnic/racial identities of students may be related to better educational outcomes depends on how these students perceive this relationship, the specific ethnic/racial groups in society, the context (school, society) and reactions of the dominant group.

#### 2.5.3.3. PEER GROUP CULTURES, RACIAL/ETHNIC FRIENDSHIPS AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

A second group of scholars that departs from Ogbu's theory has studied the relationship between peer pressure and/or having same-race friends, and achievement. Most of these studies build further on the idea that the development of peer group cultures would be related to the avoidance of academic achievement. High achievers are found to have more contact or friendships with different race students (van der Veen, 2001) or participate in multicultural peer networks (Antrop-González, Vélez & Garrett, 2005). In contrast to this, Datnow and Cooper (1997) find that, in predominantly 'white' elite independent schools, formal and informal peer networks of African American students help them to reaffirm their racial identities, facilitate the adjustment to certain settings and support educational success. However, it is important to note that the relationship between same-race friends and school achievement varies according to the ethnic group studied (Lundy & Firebaugh, 2005; Warikoo & Carter, 2009) and individual characteristics such as gender (Farkas, Lleras & Maczuga, 2002). Additionally, having more same-race friends is found to strengthen other processes that are related to success. For instance, in the study of Kao (2000), ethnic and racial minority students react to the kinds of stereotypes they experience, such as the stereotypes of 'blacks' as less successful in education, Hispanics as manual labourers and Asians as high achievers. Experiencing these particular stereotypes results in 'blacks' avoiding failure, Hispanics that do not want to be associated with manual labour and Asians that want to live up to the high educational expectations. These reactions are strengthened when these students have more contact with same-race peers. To conclude, the relationship

between peer group culture, friends and educational success is still unclear, but previous studies indicate that this relationship varies according to the context and the stereotypes ethnic minority students are confronted with.

In sum, the relationships between educational success and racial/ethnic identity and racial/ethnic peer group culture depend on the structural characteristics and processes of the settings in which they occur. Consequently, they should be contextualized and incorporate individual characteristics in order to fully grasp their impact on the educational success of ethnic and racial minority students. Nevertheless, it seems that in contrast to what the ‘acting white’ hypothesis predicts, racial and ethnic identities are not detrimental for educational success, however, mixed results are found in the relationship between peer groups and educational success.

#### 2.5.4. RELIGION

When considering cultural factors, religiosity can be seen as part of the culture of a subgroup (which could be different from a religious network). Religiosity may consist out of several components, namely religious identification, worship, dietary practices and political religion (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2011). However, few studies have related these components separately to the educational success of ethnic minority students. Individual’s attachment to religious beliefs are considered beneficial for ‘black’ students in achieving high in school because it gives guidance and focus, it helps to build their character and through prayers gives them hope and a source of stress relief. According to Byfield (2008), religion offers a protection against gang membership, developing oppositional cultures, or using drugs. With respect to educational success, the belief in God is a way to develop goals and school instrumentality, serves as a study motivation and validates the instrumentality of education (Byfield, 2008). Thus, although there is little research on the effects of religiosity, attachment to such beliefs seems to help ethnic minority students to achieve in school as it motivates and students perceive the school as instrumental. Nevertheless, these effects vary according to the characteristics of the populations and religions studied (Jeynes, 2002; Fleischmann & Phalet, 2011). Furthermore, research in primary schools in Flanders already found that the relationship between Islamic religiosity (religion of the majority of pupils with an immigrant descent in Flanders) with educational achievement is rather curvilinear, instead of linear. This research suggests that moderately religious students seemed to have the lowest achievement results (Agirdag, Hermans & Van Houtte, 2011).

In sum, a less hostile, historical relationship to the dominant group in society, the extent to which a given cultural group tends to perceive education in a positive, instrumental fashion, the attachment to collective racial/ethnic identities and religious values seem important for educational success for two main reasons. First, they protect against negative factors, such as racism and the pull of more anti-school subcultures, and second, they enhance the importance of education and motivation to study. However, the influence of these characteristics seems to vary according to the particular characteristics of the settings and individual characteristics. Hence, future research could further explore these interactions between these systems, include other relevant identities, such as gender and class, and pay attention to the specific moments in which ethnic and racial identities are activated or strengthened (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Additionally, the described educational inequalities should be framed into broader social inequalities that influence learning, such as child rearing practices, health needs, mobility rates and financial assets (Rothstein, 2004).

## 2.6. TIME

Few studies consider changes over time in studying how ethnic and racial minority students can be successful in education. Time can be introduced during the lifetime (e.g. Elffers & Oort, 2012; Tyson, 2002) or school career (e.g. Crul, 2000), but can also be considered over (immigrant) generations (e.g. Zhou & Bankston, 1994). For instance, when studying time during a students' lifetime, Crul's (2000) research suggests that school trajectories (between different tracks or ability groups) of successful students and the related characteristics differ from each other. Students of Moroccan or Turkish descent who chose directly for the higher status tracks grew up in a Dutch environment and are familiar with Dutch teachers and students. A second group of students were given a lower study advice, but managed to succeed with the long-lasting help of older siblings. A third group followed a longer school route but, because of their perseverance, had success because of the help from peers. A last group of students are fully embedded in the Turkish and Moroccan immigrant community and succeeded in high school but did not follow higher education because of previous behavioural problems for the boys and future family plans for the girls.

Although less attention has been paid to the concept 'time' as a crucial factor for someone's school success, the inclusion of different immigrant generations in research reflects time too. Spending a certain amount of time in the immigrant country is central in the classic assimilationist perspective and the segmented assimilation theory. Varying

educational outcomes are expected for each immigrant generation, related to their relationship with the dominant society and their maintenance of their culture. While the classic assimilationist perspective assumes that immigrants adopt almost automatically to the culture of the immigrant country, the segmented assimilation theory states that immigrant adaptation is a segmented process that leads to different (educational) outcomes. Involvement in the ethnic/racial community could enhance educational success (Zhou & Bankston, 1994). Both the classic and the segmented assimilation theories are based on the premise that the adaptation process to the immigrant country and the resources to achieve educational success change over generations and thus, time. The incorporation of time in future research in secondary school is interesting as many processes occur over longer periods of time. Sometimes, the continuation in time is a necessary condition to achieve success, such as support of older siblings (Crul, 2000). Furthermore, the migrant generations and their educational outcomes should be differentiated in order to understand their distinct educational outcomes.







### 3. RESEARCH AIMS

This literature overview demonstrates that the determinants of success of ethnic/racial minority students in education appear to be related to a broad range of inter-related and embedded factors and processes. These factors range from interactions between family members, over characteristics of schools, to ethnic minority and religious networks and broader cultural and socio-historical characteristics of ethnic and racial minority groups and their relationships with each other and the dominant groups in society, and the educational system. In line with grounded theory, this literature overview has been a basis for theoretical sampling and helped to increase theoretical sensitivity.

#### 3.1. DEFINING ‘SUCCESS’

When discussing the concept of ‘success in education’, it seemed that two factors had to be considered to incorporate the relative nature of this concept. The first one refers to the comparison group that is used to evaluate the success of ethnic minority students. The second factor concerns the different ways to define the success of ethnic minority youth in education.

First, in this dissertation, several comparison groups will be used to evaluate the educational success of ethnic minority youth. The choice for a particular comparison group could have an impact on the educational success of ethnic minority youth. Several options are possible. A first strategy that one can apply is to compare the determinants of success of ethnic minority and majority students. This way, more insight can be derived in structures and processes that help people that are not part of the dominant group in society to achieve success (chapter 5). Starting from this dichotomous approach could lead to a further examination of the interplay between structural characteristics of the environment in which students are embedded, such as the educational system, treatment by society or economic conditions, and how this might affect the processes that occur within these schools (chapter 8). For instance, as suggested by the Future Time Perspective (e.g. McInerney, 2004; Brown & Jones, 2004; Phan, 2009; Phalet et al., 2004; Okagaki, 2001), when students perceive a lack of instrumental value of education on the labour market, they may opt for alternative strategies to react against this. Based on this theory, it seems that ethnic minority students perceive more often limited future opportunities and fewer rewards for their educational credentials, compared to ethnic majority students. Nevertheless, it could be that applying such approach would help to explore the possibilities and opportunities of achieving success in school or broader society. Moreover, by contrasting these groups with each other, it could

be that such an approach would mainly explain the lower achievement of ethnic minority youth, compared to ethnic majority youth, instead of variability within this ethnic minority group.

A second strategy could focus more on the group-specific factors and hence, compare ethnic minority groups with each other. This way, characteristics of ethnic minority groups that could play a role when obtaining educational credentials could be identified. For example, attention could be given to the structure of an immigrant network or the migration history of particular ethnic minority groups (Ogbu, 1990; 2008; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Again, using such approach would help to examine the impact of structures of ethnic minority groups and how they relate to processes that happen within these structures (chapter 6). Nevertheless, the comparison of the educational successes of ethnic minority groups might lead to the perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes (Sanders, 1997; Kao, 2000; Hermans, 2004; Tyson et al., 2005; Phalet & Heath, 2011; Foner, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Lew, 2006a; Steinberg et al., 1992), justify ethnic inequalities in education (van Dijk, 1993; see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or implicate the impossibility of success for certain ethnic minority groups (Archer, 2008; Archer & Francis, 2007; Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995).

A final strategy that could explain overall variation in educational achievement is to focus on variability within one specific ethnic minority group. For instance, ethnic minority students may have found distinct ways to deal with a particular negative stereotype or experiences of discrimination that are directed at the ethnic minority group this student belongs to. Nevertheless, it seems important to not only focus on individual characteristics that could enhance success, but examine how students react to structural characteristics or perceived limitations/opportunities, such as discrimination (Mellor, 2004) or are socialized to do so (Sanders, 1997). To conclude, it seems interesting to explore whether particular factors that are related to educational success vary between and within ethnic minority groups (chapter 7 and 8) and how these factors might relate to the dominant ethnic majority group (chapter 5 and 6).

Second, explicit attention will be given to the ways students approach success in school. Therefore, it will be interesting to examine how ethnic minority students define success and which strategies they use to safeguard future success. In so doing, students will be asked about their interpretation of success in education and how they think one can achieve such success. Attention will be given to variations in definitions of educational success between and within ethnic minority groups. Moreover, these perceptions of success will be considered together with the indicators used in the Flemish educational system to

define someone as successful and evaluate students and the treatment by dominant society. This way, different theoretical approaches concerning the role that education in society should play can be combined or explored in this research. In sum, the relativity of the main concept of this dissertation, namely 'success', will be considered when studying the determinants of success of ethnic minority students in secondary education. By studying the educational success of ethnic minority youth from various perspectives, more insight will be derived in the factors that could contribute to the educational achievement of ethnic minority youth.

### 3.2. INCORPORATING THE CONTEXT

Determinants of success of ethnic minority youth vary according to the unit of analysis (e.g. family, school, neighbourhood, ethnic/religious community, educational system). Previous research already indicated that the incorporation of context characteristics when studying the educational success of ethnic minority youth could give an insight in the pathways to success. Hence, a further exploration of these contexts seems theoretically important. Therefore, this dissertation not only explores the factors that contribute to the educational success of ethnic minority youth, but also how particular context characteristics can enhance processes that lead to success. One example of the potential of exploring the interaction between structural characteristics of educational systems and the processes that occur within is research builds further on the 'Acting white hypothesis'. Based on a case study in 'Capital High School' in Washington D.C., Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described several strategies of African American students to hide their efforts and willingness to achieve in school. This way these students tried to meet the prevailing oppositional school culture of their ethnic community (based on fictive kinship) and succeed in school. Research that tried to test this hypothesis in other settings, found that the processes that occurred in school mainly seemed to depend on the structure (e.g. school characteristics) (see Fryer, 2006; Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010; Lew, 2006b; Carter, 2009; Tyson et al., 2005; Conchas, 2001). This example illustrates the importance of the interplay between structure and processes when examining determinants of educational success of ethnic minority youth.

Studies focusing on the lower achievement levels of ethnic/racial minority groups in education appeared to be influenced by or related to social and educational policies, and political, economic and democratic processes. Subsequently, most scholars in this area of research looked at factors that could explain the achievement gap between ethnic minority

and majority students. In doing so, attention was given to structural factors, such as the family and social class background, structural school characteristics or differential treatment by society and schools that helped to understand these overall lower achievement results of ethnic minority groups (see Stevens & Dworkin, 2013). However, many of these factors, such as the lower socio-economic background of ethnic minorities, cannot account for the variability within ethnic minority groups. Thus, resulting from this literature overview, it seemed that studies focusing on educational ‘failure’ focus primarily on structural characteristics to explain ethnic minority ‘underachievement’. By contrast, determinants of ‘success’ of the same ethnic groups seemed to relate to processes that occur in school, often dependent of or related to the structure in which they take place. As a result, it is exactly this interplay between structure and processes that occur in school that forms the starting point of this dissertation. Consequently, attention will be given to this interplay in the study design of this research. In so doing, the hierarchical structure of schools (Eccles & Roesler, 2010), and the importance of the structure of the educational system will be given considerable attention. Inspired by previous research, using an ethnographic approach might help to specify the levels on which particular processes occur or should be studied to fully understand the factors that could enhance the educational success of ethnic minority youth.

### 3.3. THEORETICAL SAMPLING AND THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY

Applying an exploratory approach might help to identify the factors that may contribute to the educational success of particular groups of ethnic minority students and incorporate the relative nature of the concept ‘success’. Furthermore, the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) may help to explore determinants of educational success at different levels and consider context characteristics. Opting for a grounded theory approach, the literature overview presented served mainly as a guide for theoretical sampling. Schools, and class groups within schools, are chosen as a starting point to select respondents. This way, a wide variety of comparison groups could be included in the sample (e.g. students of Belgian descent and students from various ethnic minority groups). Additionally, three schools were selected in one particular city to be able to compare the characteristics of the specific ethnic minority groups living in the surrounding school area or neighbourhood. These schools were chosen based on the track composition offered in these schools. This might help to fully explore the impact of the educational system on the success of ethnic minority youth. Variation in tracks has to be considered as tracks determine access to higher education in the

Flemish educational system and can be seen as part of the evaluation of students in school (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013).

Second, some areas of interest could be identified based on this literature overview. This summary helped to develop the topic list for the semi-structured interviews and resulted in some 'sensitizing concepts' that could be used during fieldwork and data analyses. The most important sensitizing concepts are discussed below. First, Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory (1987; 1990; 2008) provides an interesting starting point as structure and processes, action and reaction are incorporated in one large ecological model. Building further on this theory, the relationship ethnic minorities have developed with the dominant society and how this might relate to historical processes and migration motivation was considered. Nevertheless, theory was insufficiently tested with respect to the interaction between 'community forces' and 'the system'. Therefore, during semi-structured interviews, students were asked about their future goals, dual frames of references, the educational strategies they use and the instrumental value of education. Second, many studies have indicated the importance of some form of support, coming from family members, peers, other members of ethnic minority/religious networks, or teachers for educational success of ethnic minority youth. Because of this, students were asked about the possible actors that provide support. Third, previous research has examined the role ethnic identities and associated peer cultures may play to achieve in school. To consider this body of research, students were questioned about the ethnic group they feel they belong to and how this might relate to their educational outcomes. Fourth, attention was given to the coping strategies students use to deal with perceived constraints, ethnic stereotypes and students' perceptions of other ethnic groups. Fifth, ethnographic observations were used to explore school characteristics, interactions between students, teacher-students interactions and the development of peer cultures. Applying an ethnographic approach could be interesting given the specific nature of these topics. For example, it could be interesting to compare students' experiences and interpretations of interactions in the classroom (semi-structured interviews) with observed classroom interactions (ethnographic observations).

In sum, the overview of the existing literature, that has explored the determinants of success of ethnic minority students in secondary education, helped to guide theoretical sampling and increased the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher. Therefore, during fieldwork and interviews, special attention was given to the relationship ethnic minority groups have developed with the dominant society, different supporting actors and forms of support, ethnic identity/stereotyping and the interactions that take place in school. Lastly, it

should be noted that, despite these sensitizing concepts, the researcher tried to remain an open attitude towards the data and no specific hypotheses were formulated before entering the field. In addition, while an abundance of data is collected with respect to all these characteristics, the researcher will only focus on those characteristics that seem theoretically relevant to explore more in detail.





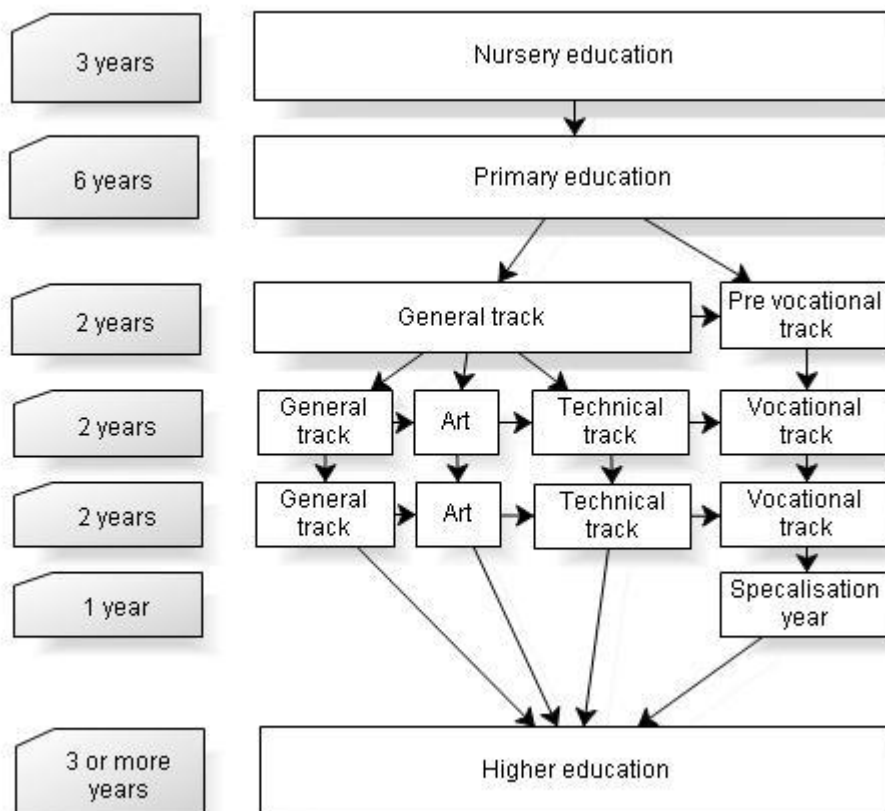


## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. THE FLEMISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

In Flanders, education is compulsory for all children between the ages of six and eighteen. Before the age of six, children have the possibility to go to nursery education. Both primary and secondary school take six years. Primary school is similar for all children. In contrast to this, students choose between four tracks: general or academic (ASO), artistic (KSO), technical (TSO) and vocational (BSO) secondary education. Within these tracks, a variety of specific fixed programs of subjects are offered for students. The secondary school system of Flanders exists out of 3 cycles of each two years.

**FIGURE 2: SCHOOL STRUCTURE IN FLANDERS**



A different status is given to the tracks and study programs within the tracks by parents, teachers and pupils. Academic tracks are given more status than the 'lower', more practical tracks (Van Houtte, 2004; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Changes are possible from the more general to the vocational tracks. However, the other way round seldom occurs. The educational system is characterized by the trend to start in higher academic tracks and to 'fall

down' to lower tracks when not successful, often referred to as the 'cascade system'. The chosen track is important because it determines the entry to higher education. Only students in academic, artistic and technical tracks have the possibility to enter university. Students in vocational tracks should first follow a specialization year before they get their diploma of secondary education. Higher education is heavily subsidized and thus relatively cheap for the students. Apart from some exceptions (medicine, dentistry and audiovisual and fine arts), no entry exams are organized.

Schools have different track compositions: multilateral schools offer all the tracks while categorical schools only offer mainly ASO or TSO and BSO. Most common are the categorical schools, usually distinguishing between schools for academic education and technical/vocational schools. Although different sectors (private and public) organize education, all schools are funded by the Flemish government and have the same curriculum. In Flanders, there is no centralized evaluation system and no comparable national tests are used. Teachers have considerable autonomy because they are responsible for designing, administering, and marking the examinations of the pupils they teach. In addition, at the end of each school year, teachers come together to decide whether the pupils they teach should retake their school year or pass to the next (higher) school year and to which educational track, a decision that is based on pupils' exam results and motivational and behavioral characteristics of the pupils (Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011).

## 4.2. GROUNDED THEORY

In this chapter, the methodological framework of this study based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is set out. First, a brief summary of basic principles of grounded theory is given. Second, the factors on which theoretical sampling is based and associated sample characteristics are discussed. Third, data collection procedures of both the ethnographic fieldwork and the semi-structured interviews are described. Doing so, particular challenges experienced by the researcher during her fieldwork are discussed; challenges that are important as they might have influenced the process of data collection. Special attention is given to the time spent in each track, the process of gaining access to the field, research roles and field-relationships and taking field notes. Subsequently, an overview of the procedures and general structure of the semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and students is provided. Fourth, to give the reader a better idea of how the data analysis was carried out, coding procedures are carefully described. Fifth, some reflexive thoughts are given regarding

the ways in which the data collection and analysis might be influenced by specific characteristics of the researcher. Sixth, a discussion is given on the strategies employed by the researcher to realize certain quality criteria in relationship to the research. Lastly, a short description is given of the presentation of the data in the papers included in this dissertation.

A grounded theory methodology was used to develop a better understanding of the determinants that could lead to educational success of ethnic minority youth, using ethnographic fieldwork (see also Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) and semi-structured interviews. Although a considerable number of scholars have debated and developed different understandings of this methodology, this study is mainly guided by the general logic behind grounded theory, as first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory helped this research as it provided a more explicit and systematic conceptualisation of theory by constantly linking theory to actual research. The use of a systematic set of procedures facilitated the development of an inductively derived grounded theory. In the present study, the researcher went with an open approach to the field and only connected the data with the theory when there appeared to be some similarities. One of this procedures is the *constant comparative method*. This method refers to a cyclic process of data collection, analysis and theorising. This cyclic process was clearly noted as periods of fieldwork were contrasted with the coding of the data and reading of the literature. Furthermore, data collection was based on *theoretical sampling*, selecting only students from particular fields of study in specific schools. Additionally, the systematic coding of data helped to compare students' accounts with respect to particular themes systematically with each other. Furthermore, data collection was guided by the use of *sensitizing concepts* that served as a bias for the structure of the interviews. This cyclic process continued until *theoretical saturation* was reached and the researcher felt that collecting more data would not add anything substantially to the already developed theory. Grounded theory was applied to consider the perspectives and voices of respondents in the interpretation of the data. In sum, the methodology of the present study follows the logic of the grounded theory. The exact procedures used and how they were applied in this study will be discussed more in detail in the next paragraphs.

Applying a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), respondents were selected based on *theoretical sampling*. Through this sampling procedure, cases are selected based on concepts or 'variables' that have proven theoretical relevance in the development of theory. In this study, attention was given to the hierarchical nature of schools. Consequently, respondents (students and teachers) were selected based on the schools and subsequently, on the class groups they were enrolled in, instead of focussing directly on specific persons.

#### 4.2.1. SCHOOLS

Schools were selected based on three criteria: the geographical location, the track composition of the schools and the number of students of non-Belgian descent in each school. First, to make schools better comparable, only schools in the city of Ghent (Belgium) were included. In addition, this made it possible to include characteristics of immigrant communities that live in Ghent. Ghent is an interesting study setting as there is a relatively large group of Turkish immigrants in this city. Nevertheless, Ghent is also the home of many other immigrant groups, who have more extensive immigrant networks in other parts of Belgium (e.g. Moroccan immigrant community) or who recently arrived in Belgium (e.g. many immigrants coming from Eastern Europe) (Verhaeghe, Van der Bracht & Vandeputte, 2012). Second, based on previous research (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009a; Vandenberghe, 2006), track composition of schools, which refers to the particular tracks offered by schools, was found to have an influence on school life and students' outcomes. Variation in track composition of schools was included in the sample so more insight could be gained in the possibly varying processes that occur within these schools. Therefore, one multilateral school, offering academic, technical and vocational tracks, and two categorical schools, offering only academic or technical/vocational tracks, were selected. Third, as research shows that the ethnic composition of schools matters for a variety of educational and wider outcomes (e.g. Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009b; Agirdag, 2011; Agirdag, Demanet et al., 2011; Agirdag et al., 2011; Poesen-Vandeputte & Nicaise, 2012) and this study requires the availability of sufficient ethnic minority students to be interviewed and observed, it seemed important to focus on schools that welcome a considerable number of students of non-Belgian descent. Nevertheless, due to the specific track composition of each school and the socially and ethnically biased allocation of students to tracks (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013; Foster, Gomm, & Hammersley, 1996; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999), it appeared to be difficult to find schools with a similar ethnic school composition. Schools that offer vocational and technical tracks have a higher share of students of immigrant descent, compared to schools that only offer academic tracks. Nevertheless, all schools selected had a substantive amount of students of immigrant descent enrolled. Lastly, the choice to include schools based on these three factors could have an impact on other school characteristics as well, such as the socio-economic school composition. Consequently, an overview of several characteristics of the schools is presented in Table 1.

Based on this theoretical sampling, three schools were selected: St. Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College (pseudonyms). St. Bernardus is a Catholic school that offers vocational, technical and academic tracks with 444 students. Mountain High is a school with 1159 students that only offers academic tracks and is run by the city authority. Lastly, Catherine College is a school, funded by the Flemish government, with 404 students that offers technical and vocational tracks.

**TABLE 1: SCHOOL COMPOSITION (SCHOOL YEAR 2009-2010)**

<b>Names of schools</b>	<b>St. Bernardus</b>	<b>Mountain High</b>	<b>Catherine College</b>
<i>School characteristics</i>			
<b>Tracks offered</b>	Academic Technical Vocational	Academic	Technical Vocational
<b>Total number of students</b>	444	1159	404
<b>% students that speak a different language at home than Dutch</b>	42	14	48
<b>% students with a mother without a certificate of secondary education</b>	60	20	48

Based on official school data, in St. Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College respectively 41%; 14% and 28% of the students spoke a different language at home than Dutch and 60%, 19% and 47% of the students had a mother without a certificate of secondary education. When comparing these schools with the mean percentage of all schools in Flanders (2009-2010), all schools have considerably higher numbers of students that speak another language than Dutch at home (frequently used as an indicator of immigrant descent by the Flemish government), as this is only 9,9 % in Flanders (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). However, as most immigrants and their descendants live in specific regions and cities, it is more appropriate to compare the selected schools with the other schools in Ghent. In this city, 14 % of the students spoke another language than Dutch. Although the language spoken at home was not questioned in the short questionnaire, in general, interviews indicated that there was considerable overlap with language spoken at home and students of immigrant descent (indicated by country of birth of maternal grandmother). Consequently, it can be stated that St. Bernardus and Catherine College have a higher share of students of immigrant descent, than many other schools in Ghent. In addition, language spoken at home appeared to be associated with the socio-economic composition of the schools. The socio-economic composition of the schools is measured by the percentage of

students with a mother without a certificate of secondary education. This indicator is frequently used by educational policy makers as to measure the socio-economic family background of students. When comparing the proportions of these students in my sample with other schools in Flanders (25%) and Ghent (26%), it seems that both St. Bernardus and Catherine College have a higher share of students with a mother without a certificate of secondary education than the overall mean, which might be partly due to the tracks offered in these schools and the higher share of students of immigrant descent. Finally, although schools were selected based on the geographical location, ethnic and track composition of the schools, in the end, more variation was found between these schools with respect to school organizational features (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2: SCHOOL ORGANISATIONAL FEATURES BASED ON FIELD NOTES**

<b>Names of schools</b>	<b>St. Bernardus</b>	<b>Mountain High</b>	<b>Catherine College</b>
<b><i>School organisational features</i></b>			
<b>Geographical location</b>	Suburb of Ghent	Centre of Ghent	Centre of Ghent
<b>Recent fusion with other schools/departments</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Teacher teambuilding</b>	Informally organised afterwork drinks on Friday, teacher barbecue, new years' reception, funding activities organised for students' fieldtrips, during school trip (only a few teachers)	Funding activities organised for students' fieldtrips, during school trip (with only a few teachers)	Formally organised teambuilding weekend and teachers' party, sports for teachers (organised by teachers during breaks), during school trip (all teachers were invited and many joined)
<b>Digital learning platform</b>	Smartschool	Dokeos	Smartschool
<b>School trip</b>	Voluntary participation during Easter holidays	In the beginning of the school year, organised in groups of more or less two fields of study	In the beginning of the school year, together for all students of fifth year
<b>Extracurricular activities offered at school</b>	Driver license courses, Sports after school	Driver license courses, science project with insects, School journal, sports after school	Driver license courses, bike repair, sports after school, fitness
<b>Students evaluation system</b>	Individual teacher Evaluation	Standardized evaluation system	Individual teacher evaluation
<b>Contact of students with principle/school board</b>	Direct contact of school board with students and teachers	Hardly any contact with principle for students and teachers (coordinators)	Direct contact of principle with teachers, pedagogic coordinator for students

Differences and similarities of organisational features of schools are important to consider to fully understand the process and opportunities of data collection but also when interpreting

the data. With respect to the data collection, school organisational features such as teambuilding activities, digital learning platform and whether teachers already knew each other seemed to help to build rapport with respondents and ask permission to enter into teachers' classrooms. For instance, having full access to Smartschool, an easily accessible internet-platform to share information (e.g. the photos of the students, remarks about their behaviour or family background) between teachers, to have contact with students and teachers and to follow students, facilitated the data collection, compared to having access to Dokeos, which was merely used to send e-mails to teachers and hand in school tasks. Furthermore, it seemed that due to recent fusions of different schools or departments of schools, teachers had to get to know each other as well. These recent fusions were still visible during breaks, as teachers grouped together with other teachers from their old school/department. Consequently, as teachers' colleges were composed out of distinct groups of teachers, the presence of the researcher was less noticeable for the teachers. Finally, as the researcher could participate in team building activities with teachers, teachers became more familiar with the purpose of the research, the researcher and felt less threatened when the researcher followed their courses. Especially the fieldtrips organised at the beginning of each school year, in schools, like Catherine College and Mountain High, provided the opportunity for students and teachers, and also for the researcher, to build rapport and get to know each other in a more informal way. In contrast, this period of bonding, with both students and teachers, was absent in St. Bernardus. Only a selective group of students and teachers made a field trip during Easter holidays which appeared to create a distinction between those who went on a school trip and those who did not. The researcher did not participate in this facultative field trip. Nevertheless, there were some other opportunities to create a bond with this teacher corps, namely during Friday night drinks after school.

Other school features, such as the extracurricular activities at school, the student evaluation system and the contact of the students with the principal at school, can give more insight in the ways these schools work and were interesting to keep in mind when analysing the data. For instance, Mountain High appeared to be more characterized by a formal distinct relationship between the school board and the students, as hardly any student knew the principal. Furthermore, the student evaluation system was more standardized compared to other schools, as students could calculate how much grades they had to had to be able to pass on to the next year. If students were not able to get the required number of grades for some courses, they knew that the teachers would decide whether they would be able to pass or not, based on progress, effort, behaviour in school and perceived abilities. While this more distant



relationship in a large school seemed to be in line with the more academic tracks taught in these schools, the other two schools were more characterized by informal relationships with respect to students' evaluations, contact with the principal and teachers. All schools organised additional activities that were in line with the tracks taught in these schools. In Mountain High, there appeared to be a science project with insects, which one could easily follow (even through facebook), in Catherine College, a mobile bicycle repair team was sent out to help students in other schools, and in St. Bernardus, students and teachers set up a student shop to teach students how to run a shop. Although this was part of the curricula, in other schools that offer the same field of study (Sales), students had to build up a fictive shop. These extracurricular activities illustrate the willingness of teachers to motivate students for their subjects and to organise voluntary additional school-related activities.

In sum, the sampling procedure of schools was guided by previous theoretical insights, as is common in grounded theory, selecting schools based on three characteristics: the geographic location, track and ethnic school composition, which seemed to be associated with other school characteristics as well. In the next paragraph, more information is given about the sampling of respondents within these schools.

#### 4.2.2. CLASS GROUPS

Following a multi-staged sampling procedure, within these schools, class groups were selected based on: the tracks/fields of study and the specific year of secondary education students were enrolled in and number of students of immigrant descent within these fields of study. Given the ethnographic approach, all actors in these classrooms were observed and interviewed. First, given the hierarchical tracking structure that characterises the Flemish educational system (Boone & Van Houtte 2010; 2013), tracks and fields of study were sampled to include a large variation of fields of study/tracks within regular secondary education. Consequently, a variety of fields of study within the academic, technical and vocational track were included, based on the appreciation they perceived in society and their position in the hierarchical structure of the Flemish educational system. The artistic track was not considered as only 2% of the students in Flanders are enrolled in this track in the fifth year of secondary education. Moreover, in school year 2009-2010, within the artistic track, only 4% of the students in Ghent, or 4% of the students in Flanders did not speak Dutch at home (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2012).

Second, only students in the fifth (penultimate) year of secondary education were included. Selecting students from the penultimate year of secondary education was interesting

as students could talk retrospectively about their entire school career and give more information about the choices they have made and the problems they had to face. Nevertheless, previous theories, like the Future Time Perspective (e.g. McInerney, 2004; Phan, 2009; Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004; Okagaki, 2001), have suggested the importance of setting future goals for the achievement of ethnic minority students. Students in the last year of secondary education are often stimulated to think about their future perspectives, as they have to find a job soon or choose a subject for higher education which is less the case for students in the fifth year of secondary education. As the researcher wanted to have more insight in the impact of future goals for a variety of processes (e.g. educational choice making, motivation to achieve in school) during the entire school career of students, it seemed interesting to opt for students in fifth year of secondary education. One exception was made as during the fieldwork the school board of one school suggested to include one 'seventh' year of secondary vocational education as the students enrolled in this year were perceived by school staff as the most successful students enrolled in vocational tracks in their school. This 'seventh' year is an additional, non-obligatory post-secondary year that provides students in vocational tracks the opportunity to enhance professional skills, take part in school-based apprenticeships and get a diploma so they would be able to enter higher education.

Third, in line with the sampling procedure of the schools of this sample, only classrooms were selected in which at least one student of immigrant descent was enrolled, which biased the choice for fields of study in a particular way. In all three schools, there were some fields of study with no students of immigrant descent. These fields of study were typically the most prestigious fields of study that were offered in these schools, such as 'Latin-Mathematics' or 'Mathematics-Sciences', or the specialisation year 'Truck driver Special transport'.

Considering the three criteria to select class groups, ten fields of study are included in this study: Commerce, Store management, Industrial Sciences (technical tracks), Sales, Car mechanics and Construction (vocational tracks), Latin, Economy-Modern languages, Sciences-Mathematics, Human sciences, Modern languages-Sciences (academic tracks). In Table 3, descriptive information is given of the students enrolled in each school.

**TABLE 3: STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERVIEWED STUDENTS IN EACH SCHOOL**

Student characteristics	St. Bernardus	Mountain High	Catherine College
Number of students interviewed	48	55	26
Fields of study included	Mathematics-Sciences (5) Latin-Sciences (4) Latin-Modern Languages (1) Sciences-Modern Languages (1) Commerce (13) Sales (17) Store management (7)	Latin-Modern Languages (4) Economics-Modern Languages (25) Human Sciences (26)	Industrial sciences (5) Car Mechanics (16) Construction (5)
Number of students of non-Belgian descent*	32	27	18
Number of students with mother without a certificate of secondary education	15	10	5
Girls	33	38	0

\*: based on country of birth maternal grandmother

Classroom characteristics should be considered as they might have an impact on the interactions within these classrooms. Furthermore, details about the differences between ethnic groups are given in Table 4 with respect to highest completed educational level of the father, the tracks students are enrolled in and gender.

**TABLE 4: HIGHEST COMPLETED EDUCATIONAL LEVEL FATHER BY ETHNIC DESCENT (BIRTHPLACE MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER)**

Ethnic descent	Highest completed educational level father			
	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>	<i>Higher studies</i>	<i>Missing</i>
West-European	9	26	16	5
Turkish	10	20	1	2
North African	7	7	2	1
Eastern European	2	7	5	2
Other	0	2	2	3
<i>Total</i>	28	62	26	13

Table 5 shows that fathers of students of Western European descent had followed more often higher education compared to other ethnic groups. Furthermore, more students of Western-

European descent were enrolled in academic tracks, compared to students of another ethnic descent.

**TABLE 5: TRACK AND GENDER BY ETHNIC DESCENT (BIRTHPLACE MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER)**

Ethnic descent	Track student is enrolled in			Gender	Total
	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Technical</i>	<i>Vocational</i>	<i>Female</i>	
West-European	37	7	12	33	56
Turkish	14	4	15	21	33
Northern African	5	2	11	8	18
Eastern European	8	3	4	9	15
Other	2	2	3	0	7
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>129</i>

Finally, only teachers that taught in these fields of study were observed and some were invited to participate in the interviews. Teacher sample characteristics seemed to depend mainly on the tracks offered in each school. First, vocational and technical tracks in Flanders are often very gender-specific, and vary from nursing, elderly or child care (typically female-populated fields of study) to mechanics, bike repair, truck driving (typically male-populated fields of study). Consequently, vocational/technical schools have often a specific gender composition of the staff, which seemed to be associated with the gender composition of the student body (see also Van Houtte, 2007; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). Especially in Catherine College, the staff existed mainly out of male teachers that taught technical and vocational courses, as this school offered typically male dominated tracks, such as ‘mobility’ or ‘construction’. In this school, female teachers taught more general and language courses (e.g. Mathematics, Dutch, French). As described earlier, no female students were enrolled in the fifth year of secondary education at the time of the fieldwork. Second, the tracks offered in each school were associated with the educational background of the teachers. While in Catherine College, a higher share of the staff had only enjoyed a technical or vocational training, almost all teachers in Mountain High had followed higher studies or had a university degree (both complemented with a teacher training). Moreover, due to organisational features of the school building and a lack of space in Mountain High, separate teacher rooms divided staff members by the grades in which they taught. As only teachers with a university degree are able to teach in the last grade of academic tracks in secondary education, in the staffroom of the teachers observed, only teachers with a university degree were present. Finally, in all

schools, there were hardly any teachers of immigrant descent, due to a shortage of qualified people. School boards tried to compensate this by hiring other personnel (student coordinator or administrative staff) of immigrant descent.

Besides these general teacher staff characteristics, the following statistics include the 27 teachers interviewed: 12 teachers were interviewed in St. Bernardus, 6 in Mountain High and 7 in Catherine College. Additionally, two coordinators were interviewed in St. Bernardus.

**TABLE 6: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERVIEWED TEACHERS IN EACH SCHOOL**

<b>Sample characteristics</b>	<b>St. Bernardus</b>	<b>Mountain High</b>	<b>Catherine College</b>
<b>Number of teachers interviewed</b>	14	6	7
<b>Female (male)</b>	12	4	2
<b>University degree</b>	11	6	2
<b>Teachers with a low socio-economic background<sup>1</sup></b>	5	2	1
<b>Teaching the following tracks:</b>			
<i>Only academic</i>	3	6	-
<i>Only technical</i>	2	-	1
<i>Only vocational</i>	1	-	5
<i>Academic, technical, vocational</i>	3	-	-
<i>Academic and technical</i>	4	-	-
<i>Technical and vocational</i>	1	-	1

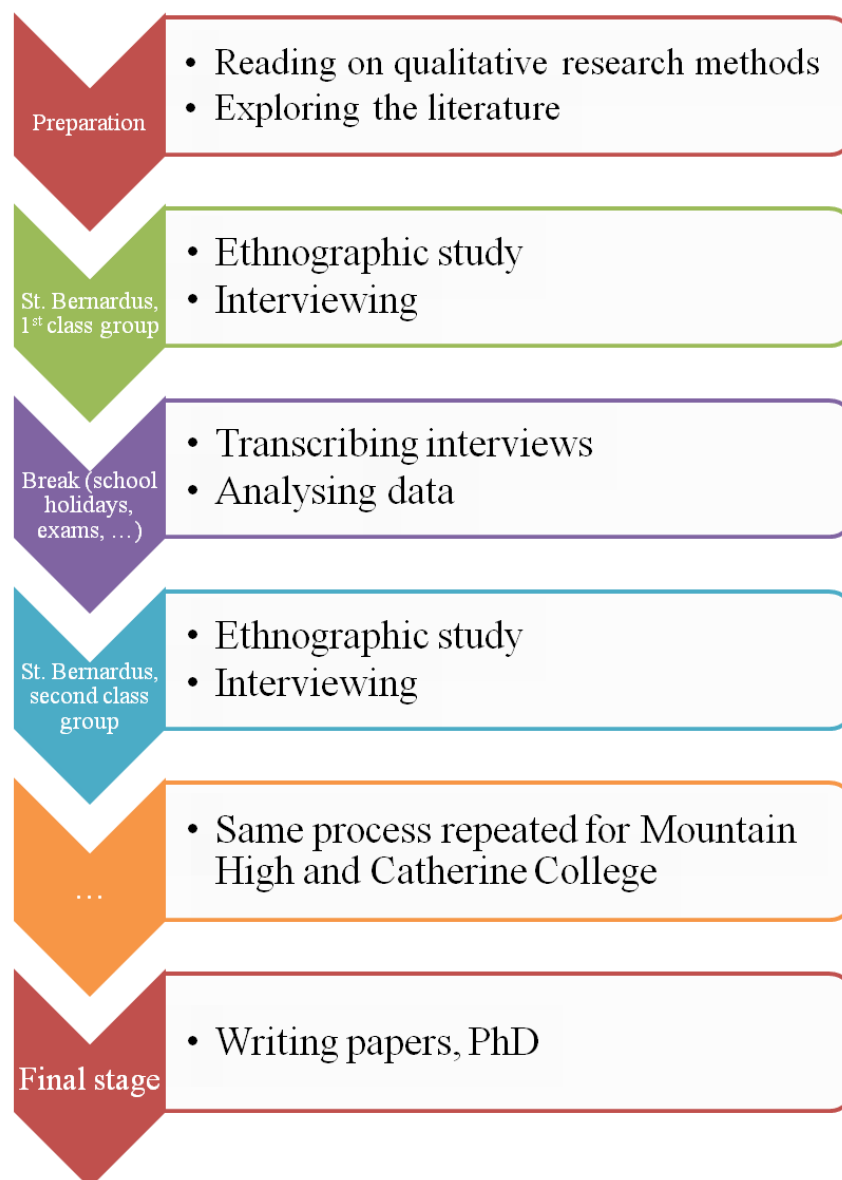
<sup>1</sup> Measured by teachers with a mother without a certificate of secondary education

To conclude, theoretical sampling was used as guidance to select schools and class groups. Schools were included based on the number of students of immigrant descent, the track composition and the geographical location. Within these schools, class groups were selected, again based on the number of students of immigrant descent, fields of study and tracks, and year of secondary education. Based on this sampling procedure, three schools were included and ten fields of study. By selecting all students within these class groups, 129 students and 27 teachers were observed and interviewed. Theoretical sampling guided merely the criteria on which students were selected. Following the cyclic process that characterises grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), more factors have to be discussed to get a full overview of the data collection process.

### 4.3. DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected according to a cyclical process of collection, analysis and theorizing (see Figure 3). The data collection of this research existed out of two stages in each class group. Ethnographic fieldwork was combined with semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. Data collection procedures during ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews will be discussed separately in the next paragraphs.

**FIGURE 3: CYCLIC PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND THEORIZING**



#### 4.3.1. ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

##### 4.3.1.1. PERIOD OF TIME SPENT IN EACH TRACK

Ethnographic class group observations were conducted between 2009 and 2011. All students were observed for two or three weeks (approximately 80 hours for each group) and later invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Most class groups were observed immediately after a school holiday, as this assured the researcher that she could spend sufficient time in this classroom without being hindered by the organisation of holidays or exams. Furthermore, this seemed to facilitate the process of gaining access to the setting, as teachers and students would be otherwise less keen on participating in the research as they would be preoccupied by exams or taking the last tests of the semester. In line with the main idea of grounded theory, class groups were observed until theoretical saturation was reached within this setting. Theoretical saturation became apparent when field notes were increasingly repetitive and the researcher experienced some form of field fatigue (e.g. taking less notes or paying less attention). When theoretical saturation was achieved within this setting, the researcher started to invite students and teachers to participate in semi-structured interviews. Applying this form of methodological triangulation helped to challenge and critically revise the findings of ethnographic observations (see also Fielding & Fielding, 1986).

##### 4.3.1.2. GAINING ACCESS TO THE FIELD

Several strategies were used to gain access to these schools. All three schools selected through theoretical sampling were contacted during the period of application of this research proposal and agreed to participate because of their interest in the topic. However, finding schools that were willing to participate in this research was only the first step in gaining access to do fieldwork. Teachers were asked for permission to take notes during their courses. Before starting the fieldwork, teachers were informed during a teachers meeting (St. Bernardus and Mountain High) or when going on a fieldtrip with all students from the fifth year of secondary school (Catherine College). This way, teachers were informed more easily and became familiar with the idea that someone had chosen their school as a research topic. After this first general introduction to the school board, teachers were asked for their informed consent (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Irvine, 1998; Davies, 2008) through the digital learning platforms (Smartschool or Dokeos) available at each school (Appendix 3). This way, teachers had the opportunity to deny permission to observe in their classroom. Due to expectations of heightened classroom deviancy, some teachers were not particularly fond of

letting someone into their classroom. Nevertheless, only three teachers initially denied the researcher access to their classroom. Eventually, two of these three teachers allowed the researcher access to their classroom under the condition that students would behave normally and the courses would not be disturbed, while only one teacher (Catholic religion course) denied the researcher access to the classroom.

As many students in the fifth year of secondary education were younger than 18 years, informed consent was asked to their parents (Appendix 2). In addition, all students had the possibility to withdraw during the research, or not participate in the interview, irrespective of the approval of their parents. To limit the amount of work for teachers and to increase the likelihood that parents and students would want to participate in this research, parents were only asked to fill in a form when they did *not* agree with the research participation of their child. At the end, no parents or students refused participation with this research, except for eight students (two in Sales and six in Economics-Modern Languages) who refused to participate in the interviews. In Catherine College, the school board decided that they had full responsibility over students during the courses. Consequently, parents were not asked for permission as the school board already had agreed to participate. Nevertheless, students were still informed that they could withdraw from the research and ask to be left out of the observations at any time. Before coming to the classroom, students were informed by a short presentation of the research topic, the research process and objectives, and the researcher. In these presentations to provide more information about the research, students were told that the researcher would follow their class group for some weeks and would make notes during the courses. These notes would remain confidential and would not be shared with anyone. Students and teachers were asked to do what they would normally do, without paying attention to the researcher. The researcher told the students that mainly attention would be paid to how they interact with each other and their teachers, without being evaluated in any way.

#### 4.3.1.3. RESEARCH ROLES AND FIELD-RELATIONSHIPS

Depending on the actual setting and demands of the respondents within this setting, the researcher role, as described by Gold (1958), varied to some extent from ‘complete participant’ to ‘complete observer’. However, the researcher was present in the classroom, during breaks, or during school activities, trying to be as discrete as possible, without evaluating or influencing teachers and students in their ways of behaving, speaking and acting. This research role could be best categorized as ‘observer as participant’. Nevertheless,



to build rapport with students and teachers, and to become accepted by them, being an ‘participant as observer’ appeared to lead in some situations to richer data. Moreover, in some particular situations, participating in activities appeared to be the best or only way to observe respondents. This was for instance the case during extracurricular activities, such as Friday night drinks with the teachers, lunches, teacher parties or fieldtrips, or specific activities during courses, especially during Physical Education courses, or tasks where the students could leave the classroom (going to the supermarket, handing out flyers for the school shop). Balancing between the ‘observer as participant’ role during courses and the ‘participant as observer’ role during extracurricular activities seemed a precondition to build a natural, reciprocal relationship with and trust between the respondents. Furthermore, by altering the focus between students and teachers, the researcher could prevent taking up specific fixed (working) roles (e.g. being seen as a teacher) (Schartzman, 1993). Finally, changing between perspectives of students and teachers helped to get a better understanding of student-teacher relations and school processes.

Student-teacher conflicts or tensions, the assurance of respondents’ anonymity in conversations with other respondents, the maintenance of the confidential position of the researcher (Fontana & Frey, 2004) and being confronted with racism, appeared to be the most difficult challenges the researcher was confronted with during ethnographic observations. These three factors appeared to be related to each other. It was sometimes difficult to stay out of student-teacher conflicts, as illustrated by the followed field note in Sales in St. Bernardus:

“The student coordinator enters the classroom, and wants to support the teacher by just standing at the back of the classroom. Shelly is rude to the teacher. Marina asks the teacher to give her more information. When she has to read the assignment herself, she starts to get angry. The teacher responds and tells her to ‘think logically’. It seems that Miranda takes this remark personally. The coordinator enters the conversation and says to all students that they have to listen to each other and ask information when they don’t get it. The student coordinator asks me how the students had behaved the rest of the day. I tell her that she knows it as well as I as she was almost always there. She asks all students to change their behaviour and how they want the class group to change. Everyone wants the class group to be changed. When she asks Marina, Marina says that she wants to learn and when she doesn’t get it, she wants the teacher to explain it. While the students think of themselves that they are rather quiet, the teacher finds that the students behave rather aggressively and then they ask my opinion...I don’t know what to say, but then suddenly the teacher says that I shouldn’t respond as I am a ‘neutral observer’. End of discussion. Saved by the bell!”

Furthermore, as taking notes and observing was the main preoccupation of the researcher during courses, some respondents wanted to use this in their advantage. For instance, teachers

frequently asked whether students had cheated during the test or had shown deviant behaviour while the teacher was in another classroom. Students frequently tried to get help when making a test or masking deviant behaviour (e.g. putting make-up on or texting friends). Additionally, as most teachers could only observe students' behaviour during their own courses, the 'neutral' opinion of the researcher was sometimes asked to evaluate teachers' performance in the teacher's and other teachers' classrooms. Mostly, the researcher tried to avoid such questions by referring to the lack of professional (pedagogical) knowledge. Instead, the researcher mentioned that she learned a lot from the teachers and does not have the same training and skills to evaluate their pedagogic performances properly. Attention was drawn away from the researcher by asking additional questions to the teachers, by listening to the teachers' story or changing the subject. In the cases where the researcher was asked about possible cheating, most of the times, she pretended to not have seen anything. This sometimes appeared to have led to a more reserved attitude of this teacher towards the researcher. However, it should be noted that this was hardly the case as most teachers just wanted to tell their story and say what was on their mind. In general, most of these conversations ended by listening carefully to the teacher and comforting the teacher when talking about difficulties with respect to controlling the class group. Finally, it should be remarked that these problems occurred mainly in class groups that were more difficult to teach and in which the teacher felt more insecure. This was in general more often the case for the lower status tracks/fields of study within these schools (e.g. Human Sciences in Mountain High, Sales in St. Bernardus or Car Mechanics in Catherine College) or for teachers that did not teach one of the main courses in a particular field of study (e.g. teaching Chemistry in Human Sciences or Languages in Sciences-Mathematics).

A last difficulty the researcher was confronted with during fieldwork appeared to be the confrontations and/or experiences with racism. Reacting or better not reacting towards racism, trying to be open for all respondents' opinion and not insulting any party appeared to be difficult. The researcher tried to make sure to all respondents that she was open for all opinions and tried to give as little opinions as possible about such topics, as illustrated in the next field note made during Physical Education in Catherine College (Car mechanics):

"Half of the students are playing soccer, the other half sits on the bench: Mark, Boris, Wim, Mourad, Kadir, Mohammed en Pirin. Mark constantly makes jokes about Edgar, A Kurdisch boy, who is, according to Mark, a gipsy who couldn't make it today to school because he had to move his caravan. Mark says he smells out of his mouth because he eats camel shit. Mark would even think of pissing in his mouth, just because he is already used to it. He constantly makes jokes and refers to himself as

Geert Hoste [a local comedian]. When I ask him why he doesn't make jokes to everyone who sits at the bench, he says he doesn't make jokes with 'non-whites'. 'Many students think I just say these things to make fun, but I actually mean them'. He says this loud enough so anyone can hear him. At the same time, the other students also hear that I'm not responding to such manifest discriminatory remark. I laugh a bit without really responding to anything. Simultaneously, Mark makes a joke together with the students of Moroccan descent about the students of Turkish descent, these boys laugh with his jokes. Mark says he has the '*camelsyndrome*'."

In this field note, remarks are made about what Mark says, but also about the presence of others, and the role and concerns of the researcher. By not reacting towards overt racism, the researcher feared to lose her confident relationship with students of immigrant descent, that were sitting next to her at the bench. The researcher felt initially uncomfortable with this complex situation, however, it seemed that most students of immigrant descent were aware of the non-discriminatory and open attitude of the researcher and used to such expressions of racist attitudes of their peers. Later, special attention was given to this during one-to-one conversations with students. Finally, facing racism in the classroom was not only difficult to manage, with respect to attitude and behaviour towards other respondents, but appeared to result in some form of emotional backlash for the researcher. Consequently, the researcher needed some time after school to be able to deal with such experiences of racism and took considerable energy from the researcher.

In sum, to assure the confidential position of the researcher and anonymity of the respondents, it was mainly important to stay out of these student-teacher conflicts, to avoid questions or personal evaluations about observations in other settings or about things the actor did not see him/herself and take sufficient time to emotionally process the periods of fieldwork.

#### 4.3.1.4. FIELD NOTES

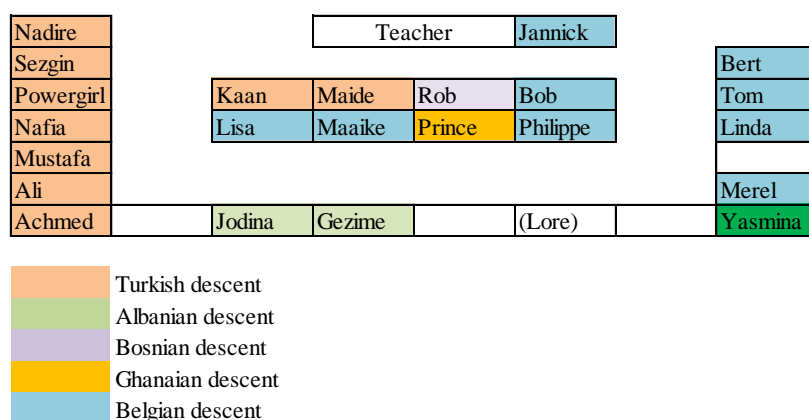
Due to the personal familiarity with school settings, starting to write up field notes appeared to be a little bit strange at first (see also Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gordon, Holland & Lahelma, 2001). To critically question and study this familiar setting, fieldwork started in a vocational track. The researcher was previously enrolled in an academic track and less familiar with 'school life' in vocational tracks. In each classroom, field notes were made about student-teacher and peer interactions and friendships, extracurricular activities, classroom deviancy, study involvement, track and gender differences, interethnic friendships and communication, teaching practices, discrimination and language policies. During the first

days of fieldwork in a new school, additional school documents were collected, and the researcher was mainly focused on getting to know the students and teachers and building rapport with them. To ease and facilitate this process, students' names and photos were asked to facilitate taking notes. Field notes were made, visibly, during courses, but not during breaks or during conversations, and full notes were written immediately after exiting the field (Berg, 2004). In each field of study, the researcher made first detailed, descriptive observations, writing down carefully what happened exactly in the classroom and how students and teachers interacted and reacted towards each other. These field notes were more descriptive in nature and tried to grasp the (automatic) routines in the classroom and ways of structuring the classroom, as illustrated by the field note of a course Latin of the students of Latin-Modern Languages in Mountain High:

“The students ask the teacher to write on the blackboard, while the teacher asks questions. The students respond simultaneously. The teacher gets annoyed when she sees that most students are not able to follow immediately or respond to her question, she doesn't like it. She asked Johan to answer the question. Laura says quietly that she almost falls asleep; she is a bit sick and coughs all the time. The teacher sees that the students have troubles analysing the text she gave them and helps them by indicating the main points of interest.”

These descriptive notes were complemented with systematic data concerning students' seating patterns. The researcher made each course a new scheme of the seating patterns of the students. These schemes were complemented during data processing with the ethnic descent of the students as this appeared to follow a specific pattern, as illustrated in Figure 4.

**FIGURE 4: STUDENTS' SEATING PATTERNS ACCORDING TO ETHNIC DESCENT (1<sup>ST</sup> COURSE, ECONOMICS-MODERN LANGUAGES, MOUNTAIN HIGH) (FICTIVE NAMES)**



In writing field notes during classroom activities, the researcher frequently registered conversations between participants, sometimes paraphrasing respondents, as illustrated in the field note during Electromechanics Course (Industrial Sciences, Catherine College):

“The students want to have two hours of informatics and joke that the teacher has to do it because it’s in the curriculum. The teacher continues teaching Electricity. Kadir answers ‘Next time, I’ll bring vodka’, Giorgio responds ‘I did not even bring a pen’. Egon adds to this ‘I did not bring my brain’. In general, all students in this classroom seem to joke with each other, despite their ethnic in-group preference (visible in their seating pattern). They have one common goal: laugh with school. Nevertheless, they follow their courses and seem interested.”

Over the course of the ethnographic fieldwork, more analytic notes were written that compared distinct settings with each other. Furthermore, attention has been given to the subjective reflections of the researcher, including notes about specific situations, experiences or personal feelings that could be interesting when analysing the notes (Berg, 2004). Immediately after school was finished, the researcher wrote down her notes on her computer, adding some additional reflexive notes or remembering things she could not write down during the day (e.g. conversations during breaks). The amount of notes taken in each class group and time spent on writing down the field notes appeared to depend on the number of students within these classes, their school misconduct, and the sorts of courses they followed. For instance, in a normal day of seven theoretical courses of fifty minutes, it took approximately two hours each day to complete these notes as field notes were very detailed. In Sales, after two and a half week of taking field notes in a class group of eighteen students, this resulted in more or less 80 pages of field notes. In contrast, in class groups with only seven students that hardly showed any misconduct and that followed mostly practical courses, such as Construction, only sixteen pages of field notes were gathered in two school weeks. Finally, additional information was gathered for each school which mainly consisted out of the achievement results of the students and behaviour of each student noted on a digital learning platform (when available). Additional information about the school was gathered from the school website.

#### 4.3.2. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

After each period of participant observations, semi-structured, face-to-face, in depth, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 129 students, 27 teachers and two school coordinators (approximately 35 and 100 minutes for each interview). In St. Bernardus and Catherine College, semi-structured interviews were conducted during courses, after a period

of ethnographic observations (see topic list Appendix). As students were often keen on missing out on a course, they were easily persuaded to participate in the interviews. In Mountain High, all interviews had to be conducted during lunch break or after school, which complicated the organisation of the interviews somewhat. Nevertheless, as many students were interested and curious about the research and the interviews, the majority of the students wanted to participate. Only six students in Mountain High did not want to participate (mainly boys enrolled in Economics-Modern Languages). Teachers were often supportive and stimulated students to participate in the interviews. Only teachers that taught in one of the class groups observed were asked to participate in the interviews. For each field of study, the aim was to include teachers that taught these students for their chosen main subject (and often for more hours each week) and teachers that taught a subject that would contribute to their general personal development and background knowledge. For instance, after interviewing all students enrolled in Car Mechanics, two teachers that taught Mechanics and one teacher that taught the General course were asked to participate in the interviews.

First, as proposed by Witzel (2000), a short questionnaire was administered with questions about students' socio-economic and migration background, religion, family composition (Appendix 1). In this short questionnaire, data that could be retrieved through closed questions was gathered to allow more time for open-ended questions in the actual interview. In some cases, these short questionnaires provided a starting point for narratives about students' school career. The development of such narratives was especially interesting, and was promoted by the researcher, as they might lead to new information and broaden the topic in unexpected ways. Furthermore, reflections about classroom interactions or previous knowledge were in many interviews used as a starting point for the interviews (Witzel, 2000). Based on a general topic list (see Appendix), questions concerned students' achievements in school, their definition of educational success, experienced support from family, peers and teachers; their future aspirations sense of school belonging, educational trajectories, and migration background. Frequently, students were asked to put themselves in the position of significant others, and to reflect about their opinions and expectations as well. For instance, when students were asked about their definition of success, the following questions concerned their perceptions of how significant others defined success. In general, the semi-structured interviews followed a specific logic and sequence, making the respondents more at ease with the interview setting (e.g. short questionnaire and starting with an introduction question), and trying to go beyond ideal and socially desirable answers and instead probing respondents' personal experiences and perceptions about the research topic (see also Berg,

2004; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). Finally, as suggested by Witzel (2000), at the end of each interview, the researcher aimed at filtering out inconsistencies and contradictions of the statements of respondents. Moreover, this helped to deepen the understanding of the researcher by summarizing the interview, mirroring about what has been said and controlling for the interpretation of the researcher. The structure and questions of these semi-structured interviews were slightly adapted during fieldwork, as additional questions emerged through the cyclic process of data collection and analyses, or when going to different settings.

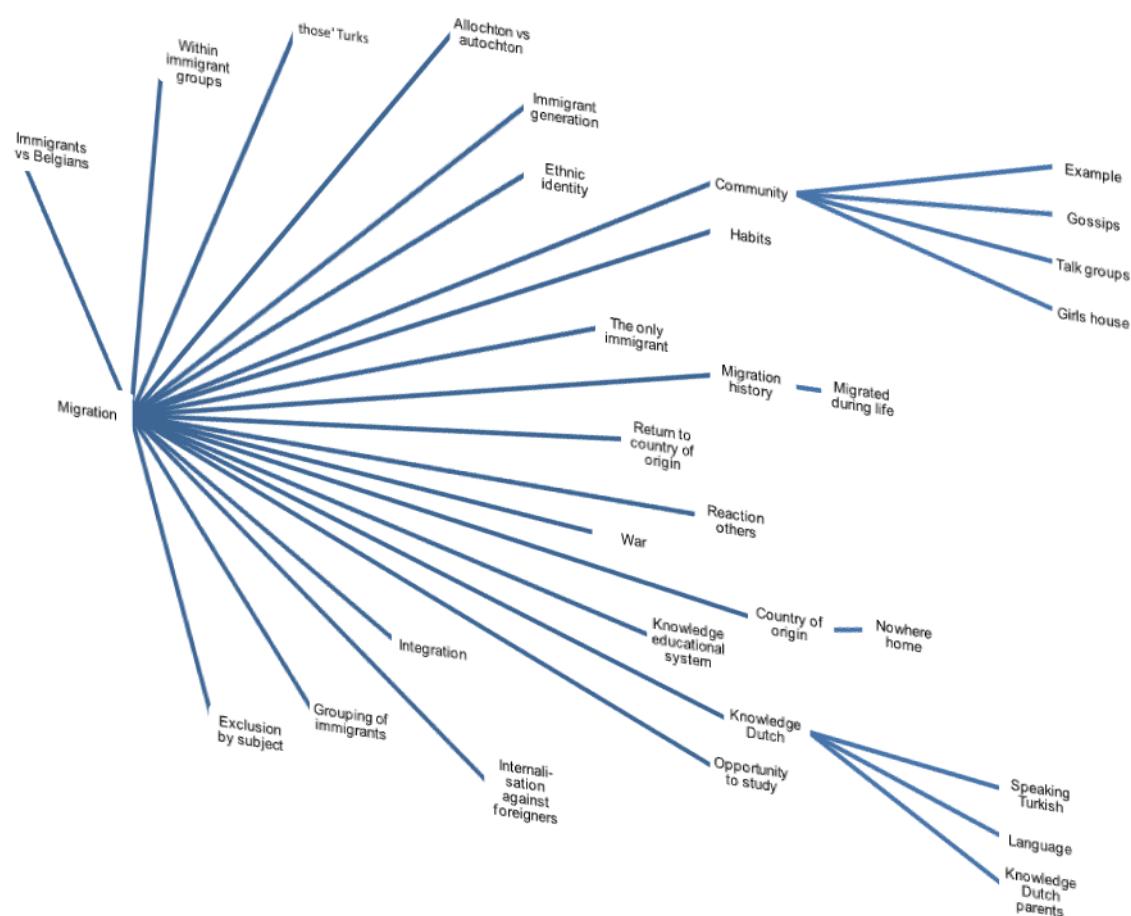
Semi-structured interviews of teachers followed a similar structure. Nevertheless, teachers were mainly asked about the students in the class groups they taught. They were asked to give their definition of a successful student. Consequently, they were asked to name the most and the least successful students in the observed class group. Additional questions focused on teachers' strategies used to help students to be successful, their perceptions on classroom processes, such as being in a classroom with many students coming from different tracks or classroom misconduct and controlling the classroom. Furthermore, teachers were asked about their perceptions on the gender differences they perceived between students and their opinion about the gender composition of the class group, the importance of ethnicity in the classroom, and teachers' perceptions about racism, ethnic class group and school composition, and whether they perceived students' socio-economic background to play some role in achieving in school or interactions with other students. Furthermore, they were also asked about the importance of their own gender, ethnic background and socio-economic background for teaching and supporting students. In the interviews with teachers, more attention was given to school features, such as teachers' ideas about the school climate, school board and the organisation of tracks. Due to the nature of their jobs, namely speaking in front of a class group, most answers of teachers were well-structured and more extensive compared to the student interviews. Consequently, interviews deviated to a larger extent from the prepared semi-structured topic list.

In sum, semi-structured interviews complemented the ethnographic observations and helped to get more insight in respondents' perspectives and living environment. As the focus of this research was to get more insight in the determinants of success of ethnic minority youth, most attention was given to students and their school career and teachers' ideas about this.

#### 4.4. DATA ANALYSES

Data analyses started from the carefully collected data, existing out of (electronic) field notes and transcriptions of full-tape recorded interviews. The systematic digital organisation of field notes and interviews made it possible to use computer software (Nvivo) to facilitate comprehensiveness, application of principles of grounded theory, the constant comparative technique, and method triangulation (i.e. combining both ethnographic observations and semi-structured fieldnotes, see below) (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Fielding, 2001; Richards & Richards, 1994; Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson, 1996). Data analyses were in line with the general coding processes as formulated by grounded theory. First, open coding was applied after and during each period of data collection in each setting (one class group) and involved asking questions about the data, discovering and naming categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This way, data collected could be evaluated during fieldwork and interesting emerging topics that recurred from the data could be further explored (see Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5: CODING SCHEME ‘MIGRATION’**





As shown in Figure 5, with respect to the category 'migration', open and more specified codes were grouped together about this topic when students referred to something related to 'migration', such as 'community', 'immigrant generation', 'migration history', 'the only migrant' and 'ethnic identity'.

This process of open coding was sometimes guided by the use of sensitizing concepts (see also Blumer, 1954; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bowen, 2006). For example, starting from the literature overview, before and during the fieldwork, and based on the Future Time Perspective and Ogbu's cultural-ecological model (1987; 2008), students were asked about the role the future played in their motivation to succeed in school. Additionally, when students of immigrant descent frequently referred to their country of origin, which could be in line with Ogbu's model, more attention was given to students' specific frames of references with respect to the country of origin/immigrant country.

Although only some students referred explicitly to this distinct frame of reference, other interviews were analysed with respect to the ways these students referred to their country of origin or their relationship with the immigrant country. Consequently, one specific code emerged, namely 'frame of reference', in which students' extracts were categorized that referred explicit to (or countered) Ogbu's theory. When analysing students' frames of references more carefully, it appeared that a distinction had to be made between general frames of references and more daily comparison groups, which made the researcher analyse all interviews over again.

During open coding, memos were written which helped to identify patterns in the data. Consequently, in the period of fieldwork following this initial open coding, 'new' data could be reflected against these preliminary findings and ideas (see also Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). For example, one memo was written after a student of immigrant descent mentioned that she did not like to be the 'only immigrant' in the class group and later changed her school because of this. Later, the experiences of other students and the explanations they mentioned were reflected against the interview of the first respondent. Additionally, the use of memos helped to develop a more analytical and theoretically informed understanding of the data which stimulated the researcher to change the focus of subsequent periods of observation and interviewing where this was considered beneficial for the further development of theory. For example, coding class group observations with respect to school misconduct appeared to lead to a very large amount of small codes that had to be understood within the context and often referred to many more remarks made or things that occurred that

day. For this specific topic, it seemed more interesting to summarise some field notes systematically in memos (related to specific nodes or interviews in Nvivo).

Finally, due to the importance of tracks and the ways tracks structured school life, new categories emerged throughout the data collection process, across tracks. As a result, over the course of the data collection process, new categories emerged, old categories were adapted and the relationship/interactions between categories were systematically investigated, constantly adapting the broadly defined coding schemes in Nvivo. Sixteen main ‘tree’ codes were used as general categories. These broad categories were further divided into smaller codes (see example Figure 5 and Figure 6), namely neighbourhood, definition success, discrimination, family, religion, gender, marriage, country of origin, migration, motivation, research, school structure (including codes like track, class group, school features), socio-economic background, future, friends, extracurricular activities.

These general categories and themes, with more specific child codes, were used as a starting point for actual data analyses. Thus, the use of Nvivo facilitated the organisation of the data and made it easier to systematically retrieve all accounts of respondents concerning a specific subject. Moreover, it helped to organise data by specific background characteristics, like ethnic descent, gender, or context characteristics, such as track or school enrolled in. Only the categories or background/context characteristics that seemed relevant during open coding were used for more specific analyses. This seemed to be more in line with what Corbin and Strauss (1990) referred to as ‘*axial coding*’. Codes were examined and related to each other, often in terms of context, intervening and causal conditions, action/interaction, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**FIGURE 6: CODING SCHEME ‘CLASS GROUP’**



Based on memos, theories were developed and written down on paper. For example, when writing down the results, after open coding, some exploratory memos were written about the

ways students interacted with each other in each track. Consequently, when exploring these initial ideas written during the open coding process more carefully, codes such as ‘track’ and many migration-related codes such as ‘allochtons in the classroom’, ‘classroom dynamics’, ‘size class group’, ‘heterogeneity’, ‘humour and ethnicity’ and ‘perceived differences in ethnicity’ were requested (mostly combining different codes in a Query in Nvivo) (see Figure 6). These results were further elaborated on in more specialised memos. In the final coding stage, more specific Nvivo queries were carried out to control for negative incidences and to elaborate on existing theories. Finally, some selective coding was done, reconsidering previously made codes and memos, especially when returning to the field. In sum, data analyses followed general guidelines as suggested by grounded theory.

#### 4.5. REFLEXIVITY AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The myth of the ethnographer as an objective, neutral person that would not influence his or her research findings has been outdated. Therefore, some information, reflexive thoughts about the ways the presence of the researcher and personal characteristics may have influenced the data (Davies, 2008, see also grounded theory Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Being aware of the specific impact personal characteristics of the researcher might have on the data and how these characteristics might interact with characteristics of the respondents helps to get a better insight in the data collection process as well as in possible researcher biases. To limit the impact of personal characteristics of the researcher on the data collection, the researcher tried to make the respondents at ease with the presence of the researcher, and give them the idea that, regardless of their personal opinions and characteristics, all opinions and personal attributes are of great value in this study. The researcher stressed that respondents would not be evaluated and that this research tried to capture respondents’ personal opinion, behaviour and interactions between different actors. During the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, reflexive thoughts were noted to estimate possible ways in which the data could be distorted or biased. In the next section, special attention will be paid to the presence of the researcher, age, ethnicity, educational background and social class, as these characteristics appeared to matter during fieldwork.

First, respondents (both teachers and students) mentioned to be more aware of their behaviour during the first days of the fieldwork. Nevertheless, according to the majority of the respondents, this awareness seemed to decrease over the course of the fieldwork. The periods of observation in each class allowed the researcher to build a rapport with respondents and make detailed observations of classroom, playground and staffroom

interactions. At the end of each interview, the respondents were asked about the change in behaviour of fellow classmates and teachers, to be able to incorporate the impact of my presence for the data and to be able to estimate the ways in which respondents changed their behaviour. Most students reported that teachers applied rules stricter in the beginning of the fieldwork and attached more importance to school rules. Conversely, teachers mentioned that students showed more disturbing and deviant behaviour in the classroom but hardly remarked any changes to their own behaviour. Due to the location of the researcher in the classroom (at the back, visible for the teacher but not for the students) and the professional role of teachers (in contrast with students), teachers seemed to be more aware of the presence of the researcher and sometimes mentioned to feel evaluated. Consequently, some teachers felt, especially in the beginning, that they had to account for their actions. For instance, after putting the students to work, a teacher remarked that she did not want to give them too much work, as they still did not have their copies. Although the researcher had explained that the focus of the research would be on classroom interactions and behaviour, and not on pedagogy, some teachers appeared to be more concerned about the ways of teaching their curricula.

Second, the age of the researcher seemed to facilitate building rapport with all different actors. As this was similar to the mean age of a beginning teacher (24-26 years old), most teachers seemed to perceive the researcher as a young teacher that was not familiar with the school setting. Because of this, they provided additional information about the organisation of the school and school practices. As schools are frequently visited by teachers in training, teachers were used to new people in their schools that needed some additional guidance and information. Conversely, due to the relatively young age of the researcher, compared to the mean age of the school staff, students did not necessarily perceive the researcher as part of the school staff. Additionally, when standing together and talking with students, teachers sometimes mistook the researcher for a student.

Third, gender structures social life and was an important factor during fieldwork and interviews (Oakley, 1981; Davies, 2008). Due to the gender composition of the schools, gender played a different role in each school. Tracks, especially vocational and technical tracks, have a specific gender composition. While the gender composition of St. Bernardus and Mountain High were mixed (but predominantly female), all students and the majority of the teachers in Catherine College were male (see Table 6). Consequently, in the first two schools, gender appeared to play a smaller role, compared to the latter. In Catherine College, nearly all teachers of the professional and technical courses observed, such as construction

and car mechanics, and all students were male. As a result, being the only female in the classroom appeared to lead to a rather courteous treatment. Despite some flirty remarks or compliments, this did not hinder hardly any course as most students became increasingly used to the presence of a researcher in the classroom (although some exceptions were noted, mainly in the beginning of the fieldwork or when other students were involved). Nevertheless, it seemed that that gender and giving attention to the presence of the researcher could be sometimes seen as a way to show deviant behaviour in the classroom. Additionally, confirming all stereotypes concerning gendered topics of interest, it was clearly noticeable that the researcher did not have any background knowledge about cars, the construction of houses or the making of industrial machines. This made it acceptable to ask an abundance of questions related to these subjects and show interest in the work and daily practices of the respondents. This (relatively new) interest of the researcher in these subjects, such as car mechanics, was genuine, and helped to built rapport with teachers and understand classroom practices (and learn more about these topics).

After doing some interviews with male students, it appeared to be easier to interview boys together in groups of two or three, instead of conducting one-to-one interviews. Students were asked to participate in the interviews alone, but could always ask somebody else when this would make them feel more comfortable. As in general, girls were more talkative, it was preferred to interview them alone. The opposite was true for boys. It appeared that boys, especially those of immigrant descent, could speak more freely about their ideas about gender roles and future family lives, when being interviewed with two. This can be illustrated in the following interview extract. In this extract, respondents talked about the importance of being married and respecting women by marriage:

Interviewer: "And what do you think of 'the Belgians?'"

Ielias laughs

Yasin: "I don't think it's normal."

Interviewer: "Don't you?"

Yasin: "Can I say my opinion?"

Interviewer: "Off course"

Ielias: "Like you, when you have a boyfriend, you go and sleep with him."

Interviewer: "Hmm"

Ielias: "That's maybe normal for you, but when my sister would do that...Aiaiaiaiai"

Yasin: "It won't happen. She can't even walk outside."

Ielias: "It won't happen, do you understand?"

(both students have a Turkish descent, Car mechanics, Catherine College)

Although mainly ethnic differences were discussed in this quote, the researcher had the idea that, in contrast with other interviews, these boys felt comforted by the presence of another male student. This was especially the case as this extract concerns gender expectations and rules. In the rest of their interview, both boys mentioned that they highly valued respect for women. However, these boys did not want to be disrespectful toward the female researcher by stating how much they attached importance to these gender rules and disregarded other habits.

The last quote relates to the fourth issue, namely ethnicity. The ethnic background of the researcher, namely being of Belgian descent, was used in several ways during fieldwork. The Belgian descent of the researcher seemed to make Belgian respondents feel more comfortable in expressing racist and discriminatory remarks, resulting in rich data concerning this topic. At the time of the fieldwork, students of immigrant descent (as there were hardly teachers of immigrant descent) seemed to like the idea that the researcher had a Peruvian boyfriend. This relationship seemed to be a signifier of her non-racist attitudes. Furthermore, this eased conversations about cultural/ethnic differences and immigrant adaptation problems, resulting in a more reciprocal relationship. Most students of Belgian descent seemed to be aware of this non-discriminatory attitude of the research. Nevertheless, it seemed that they were mainly happy about the specific ethnic background of this boyfriend, namely not being part of the typical immigrant group (e.g. Turkish, North African and Eastern European immigrants), which made him 'different' than all others. To counter possible reservations of students of Belgian descent, the researcher made sure that she never made any explicit non-racist remarks and tried to avoid showing her negative evaluation of racist remarks. In general, having an open attitude towards all opinions and being honest was appreciated by all respondents, regardless the ethnic descent and attitudes towards people of immigrant descent. While respondents with a racist attitude were aware of the open attitude of the researcher towards people of immigrant descent, students of immigrant descent were aware of the ethnicity of the researcher.

Fifth, although the educational background of the researcher (PhD student) and social class was considerably higher than that of the majority of the respondents in this sample, this only seemed to influence teachers and students during the first days of the fieldwork. After making sure that all opinions, knowledge and experience were highly valued, this appeared to be less important when spending more time in this school. The researcher repeatedly stressed that everyone has her or his specific expertise and that it is important to learn from this experience in educational settings and knowledge. Nevertheless, language use was adapted,

for instance when talking about the research, and specific academic language was avoided to stress similarities instead of differences.

To conclude, the researcher was aware of the potential influence of background characteristics that could bias the data or that complicated building rapport with respondents. Five personal characteristics seemed to shape relationships with respondents, namely the presence of the researcher, age, gender, ethnicity and educational background. Regardless these characteristics, two factors appeared to be important: the development of an open attitude and the avoidance of evaluations of respondents. First, in line with Oakley (1981), it seemed important to deconstruct existing power relations between the researcher and the respondents and develop a democratic, non-hierarchical relationship between both actors. To make this relationship more equitable, the researcher had to share some of her experiences and personal identity in the relationship as well. Doing so, the researcher strived to develop an honest relationship with and have an open attitude towards all respondents and actors in the studied setting (ranging from the school board to the cleaning ladies and administrative staff). For instance, it seemed that providing personal information about other topics, such as family life, emotions, experiences with failure or success or colleagues would not influence respondents to the extent that it would bias the data on the topics studied. Additionally, although some actors in the studied setting wanted to talk about their emotions and experiences, and gossip about their colleagues or students, the researcher tried to stay away from such discussions. Furthermore, the researcher tried to avoid making any evaluations about anyone as this would suggest that others would be evaluated as well. For instance, when talking about other teachers' performance in the classroom, one could assume that the researcher would evaluate other teachers as well.

#### 4.6. RESEARCH QUALITY

Due to the particular nature of qualitative research methods, the quality of the data is more difficult to report, measure and control or to replicate. However, this does not mean that some attempts were made to assure the quality of the research results (Seale, 1999). First, relevant information and 'thick descriptions' of the research settings were provided where possible. This way the reader could get a better understanding of the setting in which the research was conducted. Therefore, in this methodology chapter, more information was given about the documentation of the data, methods, decisions made during fieldwork, and its end product to make the research methods more transparent. Second, four types of triangulation were



applied, namely data, theory, methodological and research perspective triangulation. This helped to retrieve different perspectives on reality and systematically test the arguments and assumptions of the researcher (Denzin, 1970). Different settings (e.g. schools, tracks, fields of study) were studied to explore similarities and differences in patterns and their relationship to each other (data triangulation). Furthermore, methodological triangulation was used as ethnographic observations were combined with qualitative semi-structured interviews. Third, although no particular hypotheses were formulated before going to the field, data was often analysed in relationship or contrasted with existing theories, resulting in theoretical triangulation. A final form of triangulation was applied, namely the triangulation of research perspectives to include complementary aspects of the phenomenon studied in the analyses (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Flick, 1992). For instance, both structural factors, such as the structure of the Flemish educational system, and the interpretations of respondents embedded in these structures, could lead to interesting insights in the determinants of success of ethnic minority youth in secondary schools. Concluding, these four forms of triangulation made the researcher more aware of her assumptions and helped to develop a critical attitude toward the data.

A last way the quality of the data was assured was through member validation. Apart from two coordinators in St. Bernardus, who liked to comment on each others' interview transcripts, most member validation was carried out during interviews or informal conversations. It was interesting to confront respondents with these ideas that recurred during fieldwork and ask their opinion. For instance, students were asked about general tendencies that were observed during fieldwork, such as heterogeneity in the classroom with respect to educational background. Students were asked about the observation that they were enrolled in courses with considerable numbers of students coming from different tracks or fields of study and were asked what they thought of this, how this made them feel and whether it had an impact on teaching and learning. Although most students tend to agree with the generally and broadly defined observations of the researcher, this proved to be an interesting question. Many respondents gave additional nuances and information about this topic during the interviews about things that were less clearly visible during the observations or were not considered by the researcher.

#### 4.7. DATA PRESENTATION

In the following chapters, data will be presented following standard presentation of data in qualitative research reports: illustrating the general statements with one or two examples resulting from the data. In the papers, more examples are given that further describe the data and give insight in de analyses performed for that particular paper. Finally, the real names of the respondents are replaced with pseudonyms chosen by them to preserve the anonymity of the respondents (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Mortelmans, 2007).



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## PART II: EMPIRICAL STUDIES



## **ALL FALLS DOWN**

Man I promise, she's so self-conscious  
She has no idea what she's doing in college  
That major that she majored in don't make no money  
But she won't drop out, her parents will look at her funny  
Now, tell me that ain't insecure  
The concept of school seems so secure  
Sophomore, three years, ain't picked a car  
She like, fuck it, I'll just stay down here and do hair  
Cause that's enough money to buy her a few pairs of new Airs

**KANYE WEST**



## 5. THE PARADOX OF THE CASCADE SYSTEM IN BELGIUM: WHEN HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING LEADS TO MORE HETEROGENEITY IN LOWER STATUS TRACKS

**Lore Van Praag, Simon Boone, Peter Stevens & Mieke Van Houtte**

### **Abstract**

Tracking and other forms of ability grouping such as streaming or setting, are general features of many educational systems in Europe. Policy makers have introduced tracking to facilitate teaching and learning. However, countries vary considerably in the ways tracking is organised and institutionalised. These tracking measures appear to affect distinct groups of students differently. Consequently, more insight in the consequences of specific tracking features would help to understand the outcomes of specific student groups and evaluate characteristics of educational systems. In this study, we will examine the impact of the structure of the tracking system in Flanders (northern part of Belgium) on learning and teaching. Results are based on data from participant observations and interviews with students from fifth grade of secondary education in three multi-ethnic schools in Flanders. Our findings suggest that due to the cascade-like structure of the Flemish educational system, there appears to be a higher heterogeneity in terms of previously followed educational trajectories in less appreciated tracks at the end of secondary education, compared to higher appreciated tracks. This higher heterogeneity appears to contrast with initial tracking objectives and complicate teaching and learning, influence classroom behaviour and study motivation.



## 5.1. INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research examines differences in educational outcomes between students by looking at institutional arrangements in schools (Crul et al., 2012). Many educational systems vary in the way they have organised and institutionalised tracking. Tracking practices were installed because policy makers have tried to improve teaching efficiency by grouping students with similar abilities and performance. This way, teachers can adapt their teaching methods to the particular needs of their students (Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Metz, 1978; Hallinan, 1994; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Sierens, et al., 2006) and prepare them for different futures (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010a). However, more insight is needed in the impact of these specific tracking characteristics on learning and teaching as not all students or tracks benefit equally from tracking practices. To start, with respect to learning, homogeneous grouping is found to be beneficial for stronger students, but has less positive consequences for weaker or mediocre students. In contrast, heterogeneous grouping is not necessarily harmful for the stronger students (Hallinan, 1994; Van de Gaer et al., 2006). Additionally, students in low ability groups were found to achieve less, to repeat a year more often, to drop out more often (e.g. Kerckhoff, 1986; Shavit & Featherman, 1988; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Natriello et al., 1989; Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1997; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Van Houtte, 2004) compared to students in more prestigious tracks. Furthermore they are found to have higher feelings of futility (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010b) and lower wellbeing (De Fraine et al., 2002; Van Landeghem et al., 2002; Van Houtte, 2005) as well. In general, tracking practices appear to advantage students in high ability groups more compared to those in lower ability groups.

These unequal consequences of tracking practices seem to contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities in society as students of different social/ethnic backgrounds are distributed unequally across tracks (Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1983; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Hallinan, 1996; Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1997; Duru-Bellat, 2000; Ditton et al., 2005; Gillborn, 2005; Jacob & Tieben, 2009; Baeriswyl et al., 2011; Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013). However, specific characteristics of tracking systems might strengthen or weaken these social inequalities (de Heus & Dronkers, 2010; Dronkers et al., 2011; Crul et al., 2010; 2013; Jacob & Tieben, 2009). This is not so surprising as tracking systems differ considerably with regard to the age at which first tracking takes place, the extent of curricular specialization, inclusiveness, the rigidity of tracking – whether students can switch between tracks –, the frequency and procedures of track allocation and the centrality of the

organisation of tracking systems (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; LeTendre, Hofer & Shimizu, 2003; Jacob & Tieben, 2009; Kelly & Price, 2011; Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Lucas & Berends, 2002, Crul et al., 2012). As a result, examining features of tracking systems can help to get more insight in how specific groups are advantaged over others. For instance, effects of parental background on track assignment were found to be more important in stratified tracking systems compared to comprehensive systems. Ethnic minority students in low-level tracks appeared to have best achievement results in comprehensive tracking systems, while ethnic majority students at this level obtained best results in both comprehensive and strong stratified systems (Dronkers et al., 2011). In general, these findings tend to capture how tracking practices may affect daily lives in schools and educational outcomes of distinct groups in society.

Tracking structures appear to leave a varying space for the individual agency of parents, students and school staff. Previous research has shown that teachers and students adapt their behaviour to specific characteristics of school systems. For instance, in Belgium, where education is organised by two linguistic communities, distinct tracking practices and tendencies could be observed, despite the similar structure of the tracking system. While failing students in the Dutch linguistic community are more often oriented towards technical and vocational tracks, students in the French linguistic community are more encouraged to repeat their year when results are not satisfactory in order to improve achievement in the following year (Ouali & Réa, 1994; Varin, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2009; Phalet et al., 2007; Crul & Vermeulen, 2003; Crul et al., 2012). These regional differences in the implementation of tracking systems appear to some extent responsible for distinct educational outcomes of ethnic minorities in the Dutch linguistic community of Belgium compared to the French linguistic community. Another example refers to the extent to which processes of ‘educational triage’ occur. Such processes relate to the allocation of scarce educational resources (such as additional in-class support for students) to particular groups of students in school at the expense of other students. In countries that emphasise a culture of accountability, like the United Kingdom and the United States, school management and staff seem more likely to implement a form of ‘educational triage’, in response to pressures to ‘raise achievement’ (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Dworkin, Lopez Turley & Oliver, 2013), compared to educational systems in which teachers have much more power in evaluating students and determining standards of achievement (Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011). These examples demonstrate the need to study the interaction between tracking structures and school actors when studying educational outcomes and experiences.

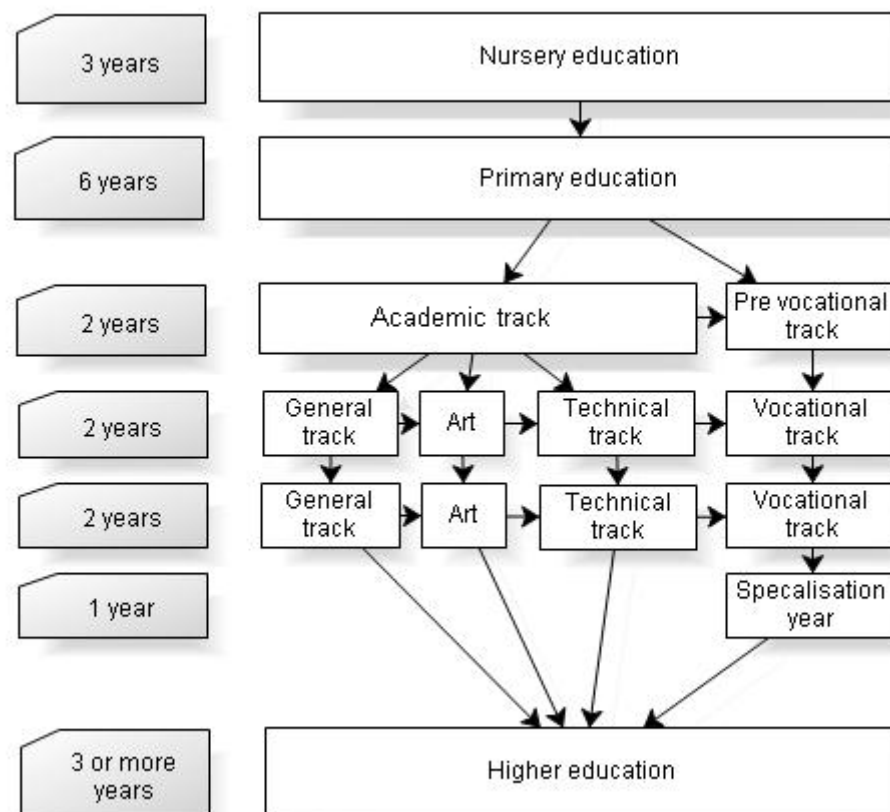
Building further on this research area, we will present a case-study of the Flemish educational system (northern part of Belgium) that offers us more insight in the impact of this specific tracking structure on students' and teachers' educational experiences in both high and lower appreciated tracks. Given the increasing focus on the impact of schools when studying the achievement of ethnic minority students, the Flemish educational system provides an interesting case for scholars focusing on educational systems in the US and UK (Stevens, 2007b; Dworkin, Lopez Turley & Oliver, 2013). After all, this system is far less influenced by the accountability movement and characterized by a rigid cascade-like tracking structure, with a teacher-centred system in which school staff have considerable power in setting educational standards and evaluating students (Stevens & Van Houtte, 2007; Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011; Dworkin, Lopez Turley & Oliver, 2013). More specifically, this study investigates interactions between tracking features and students and teachers' adaptations to these structural characteristics of the Flemish educational system. Ethnographic observations and semi structured interviews with teachers students in the three main tracks in secondary education (academic, technical and vocational) suggest that that these interactions lead to particular outcomes that are at odds with the underpinning tracking philosophy. Consequently, this might contribute to existing social inequalities in the educational system. Before focusing on our analyses, we will set out the Flemish tracking system in more detail.

## 5.2. THE FLEMISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

While primary education in Flanders takes place in heterogeneous learning groups, secondary education is rigidly stratified. Four main tracks can be distinguished in secondary education, that is, academic education, artistic education, technical education and vocational education (see Figure 7). Academic education is widely regarded as the most prestigious and demanding track and gives the best guarantee of success in higher education (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008). Vocational education on the other hand is regarded as being much less demanding. Technical and artistic tracks occupy a position in between these two extremes. Each track exists out of more specific fixed programs of subjects, referred to in this study as fields of study, such as 'Mathematics-sciences' (academic track), 'Industrial sciences' (technical track) and 'Construction' (vocational track). Students along with their parents can freely choose in which of these tracks they want to enroll. There are no standardized tests and advice given by primary school teachers is not binding. This leads to self-selection as students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to choose to enrol in technical education more often than students from high socio-economic backgrounds (Boone & Van Houtte,

2013). Moreover, primary school teachers' advice seems to be socially biased as students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more often advised to enroll in technical secondary education than their classmates from high socio-economic backgrounds (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013).

**FIGURE 7: EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN FLANDERS**



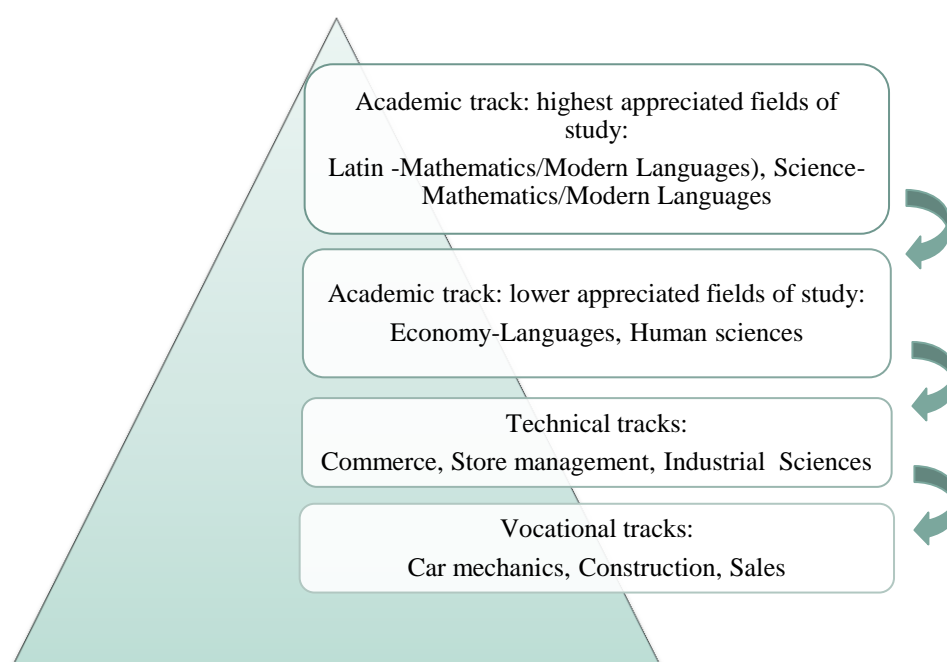
Students refine their curriculum during secondary school. Secondary education is intended to last six years, divided in three so-called grades, each lasting two years. After each grade, students have to specify their curricular choice. The final track students are enrolled in matters the most as it may restrict possibilities to enter higher studies. Students in general, artistic and technical tracks can proceed directly to higher education while students in vocational tracks can only enter higher education when completing an additional specialization year. Differentiation increases between tracks and fields of study within tracks. The choices made throughout secondary school are guided and institutionalized by certificates (A, B, C) given by teachers at the end of each school year. While an A -certificate means that a student can pass to the following year in the field of study he/she is currently enrolled in, a B certificate signifies that a student can pass but has to change to a less

demanding field of study or otherwise has to repeat his/her year. Finally, a C certificate implies that a student has to redo his/her year (Van Houtte, 2004). Teachers enjoy a great deal of autonomy when assigning grades, composing exams and evaluating students, as there is no standardized exam at the end of the year or secondary education (Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011).

### 5.3. RESEARCH METHODS

Ethnographic class group observations were conducted between 2009 and 2011 in three secondary schools in a large multi-ethnic city in Flanders. Schools were selected by means of theoretical sampling, based on the tracks they offer and their ethnic composition. St.-Bernardus, a catholic multilateral school – offering academic, technical and vocational education – , counted 444 students. The two other selected schools were categorical schools, offering only technical and vocational tracks (Catherine College, 404 students) or academic tracks (Mountain High, 1159 students). In each school, three to four class groups were selected, in order to have a variety of different fields of study which occupy another position in the hierarchical structure of the educational system. The fields of study included in our sample are: Sales, Car mechanics and Construction (vocational tracks), Commerce, Store management, Industrial Sciences (technical tracks), Latin, Economics-Modern languages, Sciences-Mathematics, Human sciences, Modern languages-Sciences (academic tracks).

**FIGURE 8: THE FLEMISH CASCADE SYSTEM: HIERARCHY OF OBSERVED TRACKS/FIELDS OF STUDY**



Only class groups in the fifth year of secondary school (the first year of the third grade), were observed during two or three weeks (approximately 80 hours for each class group). One exception was a specialization year, which is a seventh year of secondary education. In St. Bernardus, 41.44% of the students spoke a different language at home than Dutch and 59.23% had a mother without a certificate of secondary education. These percentages were respectively 13.54% and 19.41% for Mountain High, and 27.48% and 47.28% for Catherine College. Our sample included students from 33 countries of origin.

In each field of study, intensive periods of naturalistic observations were supplemented with qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which were conducted with 129 students (age range between 16 and 23 years), and with 27 teachers from distinct courses in all observed fields of study and tracks, by one researcher, as ‘observer as a participant’ (Gold, 1958). From all students observed, only six students refused to participate in the interviews. Only a smaller group of teachers was invited and encouraged to participate in interviews as they were mainly asked to contextualize students’ responses and give more information about their perspectives on educational success. The lengthy periods of observation in each class allowed the researcher to make detailed observations of classroom, playground and staffroom interactions. During the interviews, students were asked about their achievements in school, their definition of educational success; the support they receive from family, peers and teachers, future aspirations, their relationship with teachers, sense of belonging in school, educational trajectories, migration background and perceptions of tracks. A short questionnaire was also administered which contained questions about their socio-economic background, their religion, their family composition and their ethnic background.

Data were collected according to an exploratory approach, in a cyclical process of collection, analysis and theorizing, as is customary using a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to qualitative data analysis. The findings reported in this article correspond to themes that emerged during the course of this study and have therefore been ‘grounded’ in the data. Additionally, the use of data (teachers, school staff, students) and methodological (field notes and interviews) triangulation helped us to identify more clearly emerging patterns in the data and to improve the validity of the research findings. The qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo9 software. Initially, the researchers did not focus on unintended consequences of tracking, however, the research topic emerged unexpectedly, spontaneously from initial data-analysis, focused on the educational success of ethnic minority youth. Later, more systematic analyses were carried out with respect to this specific research topic. Findings resulted from the constant comparison of field notes and interviews

of students of different tracks. Consequently, clear patterns became apparent during analyses and data was analysed until theoretical saturation was reached. During fieldwork and, later again during coding, the researcher wrote systematically memos, summarizing classroom processes, cultures and problems which helped to guide the process of data analyses. Reference was made to processes that seemed to affect all students in the classroom. To warrant anonymity all names of respondents and schools are replaced by pseudonyms chosen by the respondents themselves.

## 5.4. RESULTS

### 5.4.1. HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING?

In Flanders, students are grouped according to their perceived abilities and interests after primary school. It is believed that in so doing, students can be taught in more or less homogeneous groups. Although we did not test students' (perceived) abilities, studying educational trajectories and students' school career can reveal interesting insights as they correspond with students' previously learned skills and knowledge. In the beginning of secondary education, most students have a similar educational background, namely primary school, and are grouped together in tracks. Track choices are often guided by teacher recommendations and parental preferences (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013). However, remarkably, although the initial objective of tracking was to group students homogeneously together in such ways that it would facilitate learning, over the course of secondary education, not all class groups remain homogeneous in terms of educational trajectories. In our sample, more track mobility was found in vocational and technical tracks compared to academic tracks in fifth year of secondary education. In the academic track, 92% of the respondents had never changed track while this was the case for only 33% of the students in the technical and 29% in the vocational tracks. In addition, 42% of the respondents in academic, 33% of the respondents in technical and 2% of the respondents in vocational tracks had never changed field of study (within or between tracks).

**TABLE 7: NUMBERS OF CHANGES OF FIELD OF STUDY PER STUDENT IN EACH TRACK (%) IN SAMPLE**

Track	Number of changes of fields of study (%)					
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Academic track	42,42	39,39	12,12	3,03	3,03	0,00
Technical track	33,33	16,67	33,33	5,56	5,56	5,56
Vocational track	2,22	48,89	24,44	15,56	2,22	6,67

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(changes of field of study contains only when students change to a field of study for which they did not follow the preparatory field of study)

This higher heterogeneity in educational background was especially found in the classes studied in (lower status) vocational tracks. Students in these classes had run through distinct educational trajectories but ended up together. Nearly all students that were directly enrolled in a vocational track (29 % of the vocational track students in our sample) had changed field of study within this track. However, the majority of their classmates (71% of our sample) had changed from other (academic, technical or artistic) tracks to vocational tracks:

Interviewer: “In which tracks were you enrolled?”

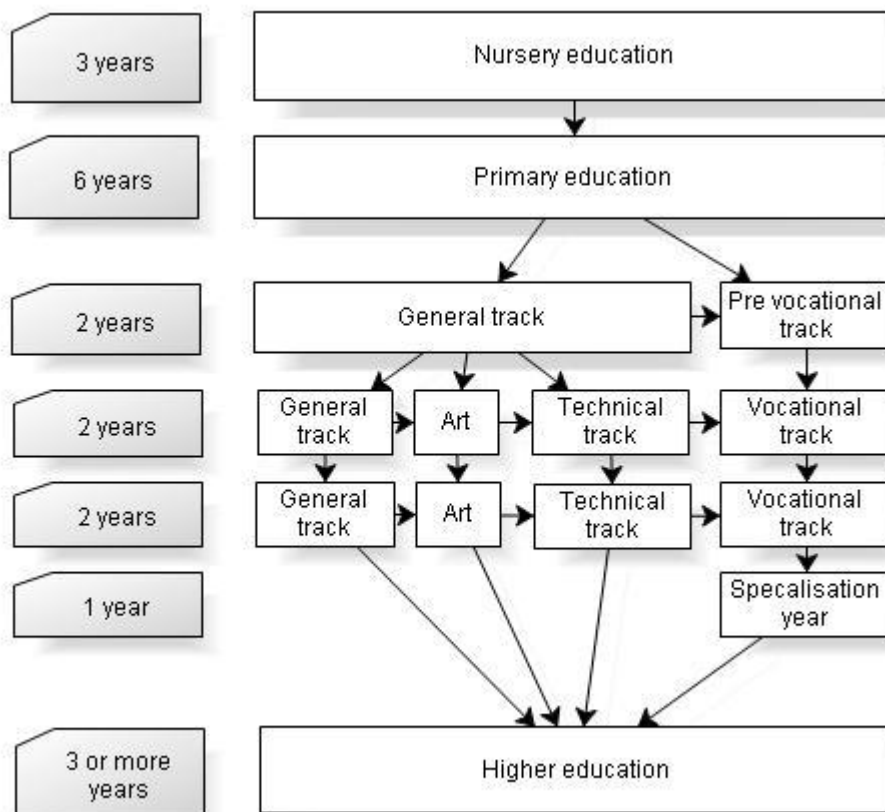
Ielias: “I started in Modern Languages [academic track, in first year] but then I changed. I had good grades, like 80, 90, 70 percent but it wasn’t my cup of tea: studying all the time. I preferred to do something with my hands so I switched to ‘Wood’. Later, I also followed other courses, like Mechanics and Electricity, and in third year, I chose to be enrolled in Car Mechanics.” (17 years, Car Mechanics, Catherine College)

Similar to Ielias, students in vocational tracks in this study went through a variety of educational trajectories before arriving in vocational tracks. For instance, in Car Mechanics, students were previously enrolled in Modern Languages (academic track), Industrial Sciences (technical track), Mechanics or Sales (vocational track). These distinct educational trajectories were the result of the cascade-like structure of secondary education in Flanders (see Figure 9).

This system allows teachers in higher status streams to maintain more easily homogeneous teaching groups by discouraging students who do not manage to obtain high educational standards to continue in the same high status streams by failing them at the end of the school year or restricting access to lower status groups. By contrast, teachers in lower status streams appeared to have fewer opportunities to do so. Moreover, as in practice it only promotes changes from more academic to more vocational tracks, this results almost automatically in more heterogeneous groups in vocational tracks with respect to educational trajectories at the end of secondary education. This heterogeneity appeared to decrease when the status of track increases.



**FIGURE 9: SCHOOL STRUCTURE IN FLANDERS**



In contrast to vocational and technical tracks, all students in academic tracks went through more or less similar trajectories as it is improbable to enter from other tracks in the academic track. Students were more likely to have changed between fields of study within the academic track. A clear hierarchy between fields of study is institutionalised by certificates given at the end of the school year, indicating the fields of study students can enter the next school year. Changes between fields of study are possible when no additional specific difficult prior knowledge is required. Even when students changed fields of study within the academic track, students had comparable study backgrounds as they all received a broad and general, theoretical formation. Academic tracks were very demanding and students had to do a lot of effort for school at home too. This seemed to have created a selection effect, suggesting that mainly able, motivated and interested students remained in these tracks. As there were a high number of students that left the academic track over the course of secondary education, academic tracks became more homogeneous in terms of their educational background and students' abilities. Additionally, students were hardly or not disturbed by the arrival of new students with totally different educational backgrounds (i.e. not coming from an academic

track). This was also reflected in ethnographic observations as these students hardly discussed issues related to students' educational trajectory.

A higher variety in previously acquired knowledge and skills in less esteemed tracks was additionally due to the higher retention rates. This was clearly noticeable when focusing on students' age in each track.

**TABLE 8: AGE OF STUDENTS IN EACH TRACK (%) IN SAMPLE**

Track	Ahead	At age	Delay		
	>0		1	2	>2
Academic	-	63,6	28,8	6,1	1,5
Technical	-	30,8	23,1	38,5	7,7
Vocational	-	33,4	40,0	15,6	11,0

Tendencies in our sample were similar to analyses on data of the Flemish Ministry of Education, indicating higher rates of retention in vocational tracks (see also Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012).

**TABLE 9: DELAYS IN THE SCHOOL CAREER IN THIRD GRADE (FIFTH AND SIXTH YEAR) IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN FLANDERS (2010-2011) FOR EACH TRACK**

Track	Ahead	At age	Delay		
	>0		1	2	>2
Academic	2,04	83,12	12,46	2,01	0,37
Technical	0,23	57,55	30,55	9,19	2,48
Artistic	0,60	53,42	31,35	11,20	3,44
Vocational	0,05	38,55	42,03	14,53	4,84

(Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2012)

Moreover, in some cases organizational and financial limitations caused schools in this study to group different fields of study together for certain subjects, thereby unwittingly creating even more heterogeneous groups.

To conclude, when comparing the variation in educational trajectories found across tracks, vocational tracks were more heterogeneous compared to technical tracks and academic tracks in terms of educational trajectories. The origins of the more heterogeneous vocational groups could be found in tracking structures and practices themselves, namely in the cascade-like structure of secondary education and teacher-centred student evaluation in Flanders.

#### 5.4.2. CONSEQUENCES FOR STUDENTS

The greater heterogeneity with regard to students' study background and age made learning in vocational tracks more difficult. Depending on their personal study background, students experienced courses differently. In vocational tracks, the curriculum exists mainly out of practical courses (such as mechanics, construction, nutrition, administration), and only a small number of hours is spent on general education. In these general theoretical courses, students having a past in academic and technical tracks were more familiar with the content of this particular course. As a result, most students perceived the level of this course to be too easy and a repetition of previously completed courses:

Brendon: "I am already enrolled in Mechanics from my third year and I know everything, except for *Car Mechanics*, in the second and third year, everything, so I went from an academic track in School X in third year to a vocational track in School Y and I had seen everything in my first school that we had to learn in the second one. Now, I am here [in Catherine College] and I have seen everything in my third and fourth year."

Interviewer: "Yes, I saw that, you knew all the formulas."

Brendon: "Everything, everything, everything, I am not saying that I master it, but I have seen it before and I recognize it. It is weird that the others are so much behind me. I actually don't like it but it is pretty handy. Handy but tiring."

Interviewer: "Why don't you like it?"

Brendon: "You learn nothing new, you learn it better, but it's nothing new. And you think, what are we going to see tomorrow 'Ah something new', but when you're there, you think, 'Okay, I remember this, I have seen it before'. Yes: it's weird." (16 years, Car Mechanics, Catherine College)

This was not only mentioned by students that had changed track, this was also remarked by their teachers and peers that did not change track. Furthermore, teachers seemed to notice that students had different expectancies about the levels of difficulty and pace of the course. Depending on the course, there would always be a group of students that experienced frustration because the pace of the course was too fast and the content too challenging, while for others, this course was too repetitive and went too slow. Consequently, it was often difficult to advance as the continual repetition of course material due to differences in study background seemed to slow down the progress made by students. This was most pronounced in the final grade – the last two years – of secondary education, as this grade is meant to enable students in vocational tracks to specialize and prepare themselves for labour market entry. However, it is exactly in this grade that differences in educational background are more pronounced.

The discrepancy in skills and knowledge between students in vocational tracks resulted in frustrations, which in turn seems to increase the likelihood of students' involvement in deviant or disruptive classroom behaviour:

Dave: "I came from an academic track, so I knew everything in the general course. In that course, everyone received a task of two hours, but after five minutes, I was already throwing with chalk and stuff. Because I had seen it already. You can easily see it 'I am bored here'." (18 years, Car Mechanics, Catherine College)

This was also clearly visible during field observations as all students frequently displayed their boredom by sleeping during courses, chatting with classmates, putting on their make-up, teasing their teachers, by imitating animal sounds with their mobile phone or by even bringing a cat into the classroom. Similar behavioural patterns were shown by students who had to retain their year. In the Flemish educational system, students have to revise their entire curriculum when failing some courses. They even have to repeat the courses they successfully passed the previous year. This appeared to add to a higher number of students who were familiar with the content of the courses, often showing more disruptive behaviour. For example, Peter (academic track, Mountain High) appeared to be a quiet student during the first time he did the fifth year of secondary education and did not show any remarkable or disruptive classroom behaviour. However, when he had to retain his year, he constantly tried to catch the attention of his classmates and show off, for instance, by being rude to teachers, lying on the floor in the science laboratory, and not noting during his courses.

By contrast, students who did not have the same study background or prior knowledge and who had to pay attention in the classroom in order to succeed, felt frustrated and lost their motivation to succeed (see also Ball, 1981):

Elvis: "Some are making a terrible lot of noise which makes it harder for others to pay attention. Or they have seen the content of the course before, or they are really not interested." (5 Car mechanics, changed from academic and technical tracks to the vocational track)

As described by Elvis, and also found in the majority of students' accounts, the misbehaviour of classmates in turn, made it difficult for others to focus, suggesting a continuing spiral of class misconduct and loss of motivation that complicated students' study involvement in vocational tracks. Although it is hard to make claims about selection and causation effects of study cultures, our findings suggest that the specific cascade-like tracking structure, resulting in more heterogeneous groups in vocational tracks, might be an additional factor contributing

to the less study-oriented study culture in vocational tracks. Besides these continuing spirals of misbehaviour or less school-oriented study attitudes in vocational tracks, field notes and interviews indicated that many students in vocational tracks had lost their study motivation due to continuing repetition of the content of courses, being in a classroom with fellow students learning at a different pace and with students who have different levels of prior knowledge and skills.

In the academic tracks, especially in the most prestigious fields of study, teachers and students hardly made any reference to problems related to students' educational trajectories. Students of academic tracks were perceived to be more obedient, quiet or studious, and more motivated to study. As academic tracks were very demanding, only those students who were more or less motivated to do an effort for school, even at home, remained. As a result, teachers could move on quickly as they could assume a specific level of knowledge and skills. They often referred to previously seen curricula when explaining new material and often remarked that students should revise these previously seen courses at home when they were not able to keep up with current courses or were enrolled in another field of study or track. Consequently, when failing, students in these academic tracks appeared to blame themselves rather than referring to distinct educational backgrounds or other students. This complex of factors seemed to make learning considerably easier, as was intended by educational policy makers when introducing tracking practices. Finally, the situation in technical tracks can be situated somewhere in between that of the academic tracks and that of the vocational tracks. As a matter of fact, due to its central position in the hierarchically stratified set of tracks, there is some heterogeneity among its students with regard to their educational trajectories. However, this does not appear to have such a negative impact on the prevailing study culture.

Hence, our findings show that while the cascade-tracking-system in Flanders has been developed to obtain homogeneous teaching groups throughout secondary education, it in fact results in some teaching groups that are increasingly more heterogeneous in terms of students' educational trajectories and age. As a result of this heterogeneity, students in lower status tracks are much more likely to experience the curriculum material as either too easy, too repetitive or too difficult, which in turn seems to result in an increased involvement in anti-school behaviour in the classroom. These findings are in line with Metz' study (1978), which found that the less appreciated tracks consisted out of a combination of students who show disruptive classroom behaviour, learn slowly, or are able but do not try or/and are rebellious at times. Furthermore, these results add to previous research that indicated that the different

quality of instruction, status deprivation, development of personal commitment to school, different future payoffs and self-fulfilling prophecy induced by teacher expectations might contribute to a less academically oriented study culture in vocational tracks (Hargreaves, 1967; Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012, in Flanders see Van Houtte, 2006; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009a; 2010a). In sum, our findings demonstrate that the experience that the curriculum is not tailored to their ability (or *a lack of* appropriate ability grouping) or previously acquired skills and knowledge, appeared to contribute to more anti-school attitudes.

#### 5.4.3. CONSEQUENCES FOR TEACHERS

Differences in heterogeneity in terms of past educational trajectory across tracks seemed to complicate teaching for teachers considerably for several reasons. First, with respect to the curriculum, it appeared for teachers in vocational tracks to be hard to get and retain students' attention as well as to reach the goals imposed by the Department of Education (*eindtermen*). Especially because teachers seemed insufficiently prepared to handle this heterogeneity and had to focus on completing their curricula in the first place. By contrast, teachers in academic tracks advance faster with new material as all students had pursued similar educational trajectories. When analysing teachers' discourses, teachers in academic tracks seemed to be more concerned with reaching end goals and maintaining the (high) level and quality of the curriculum taught, as illustrated by Mrs. Turlington, Latin teacher. She feared that when students of distinct fields of study, such as Human sciences and Latin, would be taught together, this would lower down the quality of the lessons. Thus, while teachers in academic tracks seemed to want to remain the quality of the courses as high as possible, those in vocational tracks were more worried about difficulties of teaching and involving all students to complete their curricula.

A second challenge teachers faced in vocational tracks concerned the evaluation of students. In contrast to other evaluation systems, such as the United Kingdom, teachers in Flanders have considerable power to determine the educational career of their students as they can compose their own examinations, tests, assign grades, and decide whether students should repeat a year (Stevens, 2007a; Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011). Because of this, the Flemish educational system shapes a context in which more variation exists between teachers' evaluation criteria. It became apparent from interviews with teachers, mainly in lower status tracks, that teachers did not solely focus on knowledge. Some teachers took the

progress made by students into consideration as part of their evaluation criteria when deciding if students should pass his or her year or not:

Mr. Lowie: “Usha [one of his students] is actually a good student. He recently started in Construction and he has already reached a lot. My experiences indicate that when you have new students in your classroom, you should think about ‘their personal history’, like the time you needed to master something. I think Usha is making progression.” (teacher Construction, Catherine College)

This quote illustrates the frequently occurring practice of teachers to use a students’ progress – often used as a proxy for students’ willingness to improve and succeed – as a measure of evaluation. Other teachers mainly focused on reaching the goals set by the Department of Education, regardless students’ progress made. This discretion with regard to student evaluation seemed to have resulted in more tensions between teachers and feelings of uncertainty. It is unclear or debatable which evaluation is the fairest one for all students or helps them to develop sufficient skills and knowledge to be able to exercise their profession on the labour market (see also Stevens & Van Houtte, 2010a).

Variation in evaluation tendencies was found across tracks. In vocational tracks, teachers appeared to focus more often on students’ progress, considering students’ family and socio-economic background and future opportunities. Doing so, teachers appeared to fear that students would drop out when failing (another) year and leave school without any certificate. Simultaneously, these teachers expressed some concerns about students’ skills and knowledge, necessary to survive on the labour market. For instance, in Car Mechanics, teachers would not like to pass students who cannot control car brakes as this could result in possible car accidents and deaths. By contrast, teachers in academic tracks seemed to be more worried about meeting standards of the end goals, safeguarding the high quality of the Flemish educational system. Moreover, students have more educational opportunities after failing their year, in terms of tracks or fields of study they can easily enrol in. Consequently, teachers appeared to be more selective, only passing the best students, which further contributes to the creating of homogeneous groups.

Finally, variation was found in students’ deviant behaviour across tracks, partly related to the previously seen curriculum. In academic tracks, especially in the highest appreciated fields of study, teachers often mentioned the lack of debate and variety between students. Such interactions could make their lessons more interesting and this could stimulate classroom debates. By contrast, the heterogeneous groups in terms of past educational trajectory found in vocational tracks appeared to be a burden for teachers teaching in those

tracks. Besides trying to teach students with distinct educational backgrounds, they also had to manage class groups with a higher share of students showing disruptive behaviour.

Concluding, the cascade-like structure of the educational system confronted teachers with additional challenges in the classroom, with respect to student evaluation, managing disruptive classroom behaviour and teaching the curricula. Variation in teaching difficulties was visible across tracks and could be related to the status of the tracks and the selectivity in students enrolment in these tracks. These tracking practices seemed to disadvantage especially teachers in vocational tracks who had to teach a specific curriculum to students with varying educational histories, showing more deviant behaviour and with less educational choices left when failing.

## 5.5. DISCUSSION

Although tracking practices are widespread, educational systems differ considerably in the ways they intend to group students together (e.g. LeTendre et al., 2003; Kelly & Price, 2011, Crul et al., 2013). Institutional arrangements in schools seemed to affect different groups in distinct ways, which makes it a very interesting research subject for researchers and policy makers. Exploring the impact of specific tracking structures on student outcomes and how they might add to existing social inequalities provides useful information to evaluate existing educational systems. As it appears to be difficult to design an educational system in which all students would equally benefit (Dronkers et al., 2011; Crul et al., 2013), a careful exploration of the consequences of specific tracking characteristics for distinct groups emerges.

Tracking practices advocate homogeneous grouping, in terms of abilities, in order to facilitate learning and teaching. However, these tracking policies and practices should be evaluated on their actual outcomes (Gillborn, 2008). Ethnographic observations and interviews revealed that, in Flanders, tracking structures did not lead for all tracks to the initially intended results, advantaging higher appreciated tracks. It seems that – over the course of secondary education – academic tracks become more homogeneous in terms of learned skills and knowledge, and previously followed educational trajectories, compared to vocational tracks. In vocational tracks, it becomes more difficult to realize the goals set by the Department of Education, namely to give students the opportunity to advance and specialize in their last grade of secondary education. Instead, teachers have to spend considerable time at repeating basic skills and knowledge to make sure that all students are able to participate in and keep up with their courses. This additional difficulty and complexity of being enrolled in vocational tracks is important to consider as it seems to lead to more repetition and boredom in the classroom,



often resulting in a lower study motivation. Moreover, this heightened heterogeneity in educational trajectories seems to have an additional, disadvantageous effect on study cultures in vocational tracks. By contrast, students from more prestigious tracks are advantaged by tracking practices because there is no new student inflow after first grade of secondary school. These students already enjoy a higher appreciation in society, have access to higher education and a wide range of future job opportunities (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008; Polesel, 2008; Pinxten et al., 2012).

Additionally, more analyses revealed the existence of distinct teacher strategies when evaluating students, further contributing to the cascade-like structure of the educational system. Teachers in higher appreciated tracks wanted to safeguard and control high instruction quality, to meet standards set by the Department of Education and to teach in groups of students with similar educational backgrounds. While instruction quality was also a concern for teachers in the vocational tracks, students were more often evaluated in terms of the progress they had made and more student characteristics were included in evaluation procedures. These distinct evaluation procedures were made possible by the selective nature of the higher esteemed tracks, and the cascade-like structure of the educational system.

Such educational inequalities are important to consider as tracking systems are perceived to be based on meritocratic standards with similar chances of social mobility for all. Due to the emphasis on free choice at the beginning of secondary education in Flanders, people tend to believe even more in the meritocratic character of educational careers. Tracking practices suggest that positions should be based on demonstrated competence, educational opportunity and matched to natural ability and achievement (Goldthorpe, 1996). However, in practice, hierarchically ordered tracking systems appear to justify and reinstall existing social inequalities (Gamoran & Mare, 1989). The rigidity and selectivity of the Flemish educational system seemed to have benefitted mainly students in academic tracks, which are mainly students with a higher socio-economic and/or ethnic majority background (Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1983; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Hallinan, 1996; Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1997; Duru-Bellat, 2000; Ditton et al., 2005; Gillborn, 2005; Jacob & Tieben, 2009; Baeriswyl et al., 2011; Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013).

Some remarks have to be made concerning the present study. First, our findings add to previously formulated theories concerning study cultures (e.g. Hargreaves, 1967; Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Metz, 1978; Ball, 1981). Due to the exploratory character of this study, we could identify some unforeseen factors that contributed to the development of study cultures. However, we did not elaborate further on other factors that might play an important role in

the creation of study cultures and the development of study involvement in students. Analyses seem to indicate that the tracking structure adds and interacts with other factors, such as the specific inflow of less motivated students, feelings of failure resulting from being in a low esteemed track and low teacher expectations that might explain study involvement and cultures in vocational tracks (e.g. Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010b; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012). A second remark concerns the sample of the present study. Our findings are restricted to three schools in an urban environment with a considerable amount of students of low socioeconomic and immigrant background. The inclusion of more schools with other characteristics, such as rural schools or schools with a majority of students of Belgian descent, could give more insight in the processes studied. Finally, the use of qualitative research methods, such as participant observations and semi-structured interviews with students, has been very fruitful to reveal unintended consequences of tracking practices, which were not yet considered in quantitative research. Nevertheless, replicating these findings in quantitative samples could help to test the general impact of heterogeneity in educational trajectories on teaching and study involvement.

For educational policy makers, considering the specific unintended consequences of the Flemish educational system could help to evaluate other tracking systems, get more insight in and reduce social inequalities. Although tracking structures were often debated, many have focused on the homogeneous grouping of students in terms of abilities and skills. In order to reduce social inequalities and to fully discuss the consequences of tracking practices, one should consider heterogeneity in terms of students' educational trajectories as well. With respect to these trajectories, it seems that students start in homogeneous groups in the beginning of their school career but finish in heterogeneous groups in vocational tracks or homogeneous groups in academic tracks. This divergence in homogeneity between tracks disadvantages vocational tracks as it complicates professional specialisation, progress in courses, and study involvement. One possible way to avoid this is to make more informed educational choices in the beginning, instead of over the course of secondary education. For example, the postponement of educational choices could lead to better informed educational choices and less social bias (Boone and Van Houtte, 2010; 2013; Crul et al., 2012). Additionally, this would reduce heterogeneity in previously followed trajectories, and thus in students' background knowledge and skills, in all tracks. Another possibility is to consider students' educational trajectories for track composition or to facilitate upward track transitions to correct initial track placement (Jacob & Tieben, 2009). Furthermore, these findings could help to nuance and expand debates concerning the use of standardized tests for

track assignment when weighing out benefits and exploring alternatives. A second policy recommendation to improve students' involvement is to revise the grade retention system. When students would not have to redo all courses from one specific year, when failing one or more specific courses, repetition of courses would be reduced. In line with our findings in vocational tracks, previous research (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012) indicated that the repetition of courses and being in a classroom with a high number of retained students was associated with more boredom and deviant behaviour. Additionally, the higher number of retained students in each classroom, like in the vocational tracks, appeared to have an impact on students' deviant behaviour as well. Third, social equality may be enhanced by supporting teachers to develop strategies to use the existing heterogeneity in a positive and organised way in the classroom, for example through differentiated instruction (Reis et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2003). Nevertheless, one should consider possible practical difficulties, such as student disengagement (Rosenbaum, 1999).

The present study demonstrates the importance of tracking structures for outcomes of students and teachers. The specific rigid cascade-like structure of the Flemish educational system and teacher-centred student evaluation procedures appeared to have led to varying degrees of homogeneity in terms of previously followed educational trajectories. Heterogeneous groups in terms of previously seen knowledge and skills appeared to complicate teaching and learning in vocational tracks considerably, sometimes resulting in a lower study involvement and more school misconduct, adding to already existing study cultures. It is important to recognise the distinct consequences of this system for each track, as students from all different social groups are not equally distributed across tracks and as the most vulnerable students experience the most detrimental side-effects of the education system. Finally, this study might help policy makers and researchers to get more insight in the impact of specific tracking measures for specific groups of students.





## **FACES**

I race at a pace with no shoelaces  
To racist faces, placin' disgraces  
Taste the bass of the racial facial  
Disgraceful tasteless racist faces  
Get out my face, don't bass, don't waste my time  
My brother, I'm not colour blind  
I walk the face of the Earth, face death  
Face the best and I'll just  
Rip flip and trip won't shut up or let up  
Get out my face so we can go head up  
Yo yo yo, they don't understand me?  
When they always try to ban me  
Hypin' the stereotype of a face  
And that's the problem with the human race  
Haste makes waste, don't trace to other places  
We're all the same but with different faces

**RUN DMC**



## 6. HOW TRACKING STRUCTURES INTERETHNIC RELATIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN BELGIUM

**Lore Van Praag, Simon Boone, Peter Stevens & Mieke Van Houtte**

### **Abstract**

The influence of the ethnic composition of schools on interethnic relations has been studied extensively and has received ample interest from policy makers. However, less attention has been paid to the structures and processes inside schools that organize interethnic relations. In Flanders (Belgium), secondary education is organized by grouping students in different tracks, which are hierarchically ordered and prepare students for different futures. Tracking in Flanders is intended to group students according to their abilities but together with this, students are grouped together according to their ethnic and socioeconomic background. In the present study, the interethnic relations in each track will be explored, based on ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews in three multi-ethnic secondary schools in one city. Our findings suggest that different patterns occur across three groups of tracks: the highest appreciated fields of study in academic, the intermediary (less appreciated fields of study in academic and technical tracks) and vocational tracks. According to the relative sizes of ethnic groups and track specific characteristics, interethnic relations were characterized respectively by ethnic segregation, positive experiences of interethnic contact or ethnic conflict/tensions. The ethnic composition of classrooms seemed to matter for students' ethnic in-group identifications and evaluations and perceived out-group threats.



## 6.1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a wider (public) debate about integration of ethnic minorities in society. In order to achieve this societal integration, schools are often perceived as the ideal context in which to have interethnic contact and establish interethnic friendships by policy makers and public opinion (Schofield, 1991; Feld & Carter, 1998; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999; Agirdag, 2011). From this perspective, it was assumed that ethnically mixed schools would provide more opportunities to have contact with people of another ethnic descent, compared to ethnically segregated schools. Consequently, in many countries policy makers have promoted ethnically mixed schools through school enrolment policies and/or controlled choice, school busing, financial aid or magnet schools (Orfield & Yun, 1999; Clotfelter, 2001; Moody, 2001; Felouzis, 2005; Schindler & Rangvid, 2007; Agirdag, 2011; Karsten, 2012). However, the realisation of these policy initiatives was complicated because of demographic changes, residential segregation and housing markets, freedom of school choice and educational markets (Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003; Fernandez Enguita, 2005; Johnston, Wilson & Burgess, 2005; Hamnett, 2012).

This growing interest in interethnic relations in multi-ethnic societies coincides with an increasing number of sociological and social psychological studies in this research area that focus on the factors and processes that explain the (more positive or negative) nature of interethnic relations. For example, Blau, in his structural theory (1974), argued that people prefer having contact with in-group members. However, when there are no in-group members present, contact with out-group members is preferred over having no contact at all. Consequently, ethnic minority students are expected to have more contact with ethnic majority students in schools with a lower proportion of ethnic in-group students. More theories concerned with studied interethnic contact, related contact to the development of ethnic prejudices and stereotypes. For instance, according to Allport's contact theory (1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011), intergroup contact may be important to diminish prejudice with regard to out-group members. However, this is only the case if certain contact conditions are fulfilled such as having common goals, an equal status between groups, intergroup cooperation and the support of authorities, law and custom. Finally, conflict theorists have stated that, when resources are scarce and interests are not in line with the ethnic out-group, more interethnic contact leads to more conflicts with the out-group (Bobo, 1983; Zubrinsky & Bobo, 1996; Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995). Conflict theories vary mainly in their understandings of the relationship between individual and group interests and

about whether it makes a difference whether group threats are real or merely perceived (Quillian, 1995). For example, Blumer (1958) states that dominant groups in society have developed a view, cultivated by a history of unequal power relations between groups, in which they claim certain resources. When the privileges of the members of the dominant group are perceived to be threatened, prejudices are developed as a defensive reaction. In sum, these theories have tried to get a better understanding of the nature of interethnic relations.

Nevertheless, all these theories have suggested the importance of the context in which interethnic interactions take place. In this regard, special attention has been given to the ethnic composition of schools, as having contact opportunity with students of another ethnic descent is a precondition for interethnic contact (Goldsmith, 2004; Quillian & Campbell, 2003; Moody, 2001). However, despite the numerous studies that focused on the impact of the ethnic composition of schools, findings are mixed: ethnically integrated schools could lead to both interethnic contact as conflict (Goldsmith, 2004; Schofield, 1991; Moody, 2001). These mixed findings could be partly due to the multi-layered nature and the organisation of contact within schools. Because of this, the ethnic composition of schools may give a distorted view of the actual contact opportunities students have within these schools. In many countries, students are grouped together in tracks (often organised in classgroups). In fact, tracks have been shown to play an important role in structuring interpersonal expectations and interactions in school (Rosenbaum, 1976). Especially, as allocation to tracks and track changes appear to be socially and ethnically biased (Boone & Van Houtte 2010; 2013; Foster, Gomm, & Hammersley, 1996; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999), tracks may be a more appropriate unit of analysis when studying interethnic friendships (Hallinan, 1982; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999; Moody, 2001; Goldsmith, 2004; Demanet et al., 2011).

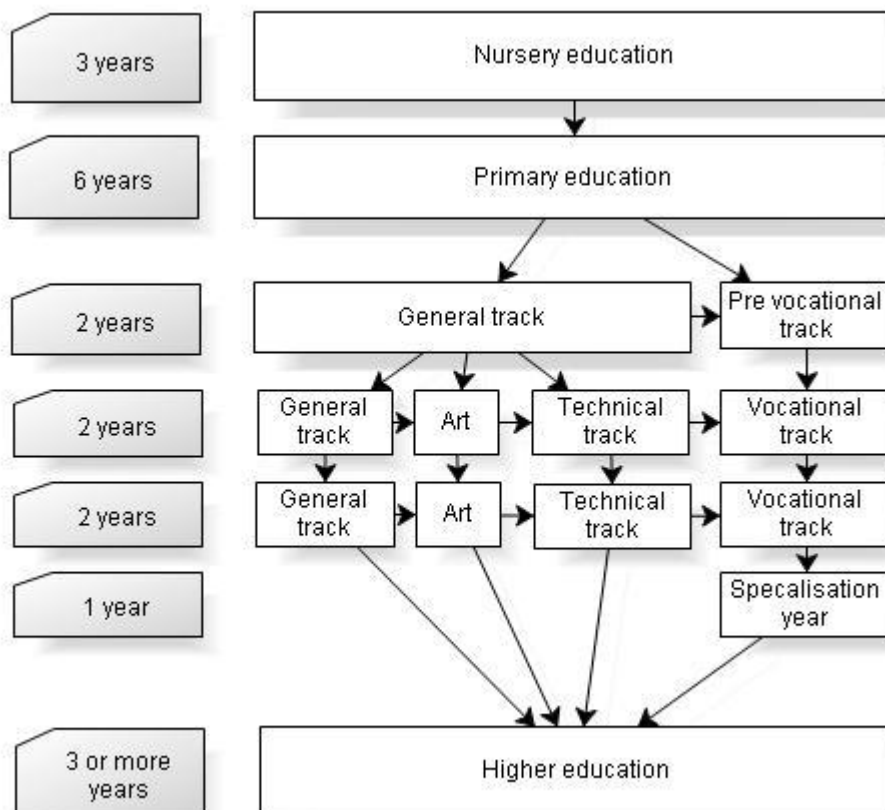
Thus, by considering the tracks and the classroom in which they are organised, a better understanding can be derived of the contact opportunities students have. Furthermore, the impact of context characteristics on interethnic relations can be explored. Consequently, in the present study, we will describe the distinct patterns of interethnic relations found in different tracks in the Flemish educational system (northern part of Belgium). In Flanders, very few studies have examined how the ethnic school composition relates to interethnic contact (exception: Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009b; Demanet et al., 2011, see overview Poesen-Vandeputte & Nicaise, 2013) and the kinds of interaction processes that occur between members of different ethnic groups. Moreover, studies that inquire into how

schooling processes influence day-to-day interethnic relations seem to be lacking altogether. To meet the explorative nature of this research question, naturalistic observations and in-depth interviews were conducted in different tracks, and fields of study within tracks, in three Flemish multiethnic secondary schools. This qualitative approach is appropriate as it is difficult to study interethnic relations at class group level through quantitative methods due to the particular organisation of tracking practices in the Flemish educational system (see below). Furthermore, through ethnographic observations, not only students' perceptions and experiences are considered but also students' behaviour in the classrooms. Finally, the present study tries to expand existing approaches and theories of interethnic contact/conflict as the different patterns of interethnic relations are studied from an ethnic majority *and* minority perspective (see also Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Ellison & Powers, 1994). In the following sections, the research setting and methods are set out. Subsequently, research findings are related to existing theories. Lastly, results are discussed and the limitations of this study and future policy recommendations are given.

## 6.2. STUDY SETTING

The institutional arrangements that characterize an educational system shape the opportunities and constraints faced by students and their parents when following an educational career (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996). Education in Flanders is highly decentralized as a result of historical and political tensions between publicly run education –organized by regional or city authorities– and privately run education– mainly Roman Catholic. Although different sectors (private and public) organize education, all schools are funded by the Flemish government and have the same tuition fees. Compulsory education in Flanders starts at the age of 6; at that moment primary school begins. Primary education lasts six years, after which pupils make the transition to secondary education, which usually also takes six years. However, some students are encouraged to enrol in a vocational track directly after fifth year of primary school, because of their higher age. The six years of secondary school are divided into three so-called grades, each lasting two years. These subsequent grades are characterized by an increasing differentiation in terms of educational tracks and fields of study within tracks. In contrast with the USA, all Flemish secondary schools are tracked and have a similar structure, which is the same for public and private schools. Roughly four hierarchically ordered tracks can be distinguished: academic (ASO), technical (TSO), artistic (KSO) and vocational education (BSO) (see Figure 10).

**FIGURE 10: SCHOOL STRUCTURE IN FLANDERS**



Tracks are commonly hierarchically classified by level of abstraction and theorizing; academic education is widely regarded as the most prestigious and demanding track and technical and vocational streams are placed at the bottom of this ladder (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010b; Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Only students in academic, artistic and technical tracks have the possibility to proceed to higher education, while students in vocational education first have to take up an additional specialization year.

Within each track, a ranked set of specific study programs are offered—for example, ‘Mathematics–Sciences’ in academic education, ‘Industrial sciences’ in technical education, and ‘Sales’ in vocational education—characterized by different subjects and accents. In the third and the fifth year, students need to refine their curriculum choice. Transitions during students’ secondary school career are institutionalized by certificates given by teachers at the end of each school year. While an A-certificate means that a pupil can pass to the following year in the field of study he/she is currently enrolled in, a B-certificate signifies that a pupil can pass but has to change to a less demanding field of study or otherwise has to repeat his/her year. Finally, a C-certificate implies that a pupil has to redo his/her year (Van Houtte, 2004). These specific institutional characteristics of the Flemish educational system seem to

result in a specific pattern of track choice. There is no standardized test at the end of primary school, and advice given by primary school teachers or pupil counsellors is not binding. This leaves parents with a great deal of discretion when it comes to planning an educational career for their children. The Flemish educational system can thus be said to be very open to individual decision-making (Stevens 2007; Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Consequently, there is a tendency to start secondary education in the most demanding and most prestigious fields of study, which offers the best prospects of success in higher education (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008). Whenever students encounter learning difficulties or lose their interest in the courses offered, they change to less appreciated and cognitively less demanding tracks or fields of study. This general tendency is often referred to as the ‘cascade system’. As the allocation and downward movement to less appreciated tracks is not equally distributed across ethnic and social groups (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013), only a small proportion of ethnic minority (and low socioeconomic background) students can be found in the highest fields of study in fifth year of secondary school.

### 6.3. METHODS

Theoretical sampling of schools was based on the track composition of the schools, the number of students of non-Belgian descent in each school and the track/field of study within a school. Ethnographic class group observations were conducted in three schools between 2009 and 2011 in a large multi-ethnic city with a high share of immigrants from Turkey. The three schools selected are St. Bernardus, a catholic school that offers vocational, technical and academic tracks with 444 students, Mountain High, a school with 1159 students that only offers academic tracks and is run by the city authority, and Catherine College, a school, funded by the Flemish government, with 404 students that offers technical and vocational tracks. In St. Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College respectively 41,44%; 13,54% and 27,48% of the students spoke a different language at home than Dutch and 59,23% 19,41% and 47,28% of the students had a mother without a certificate of secondary education.

Hence, class groups were selected based on the field of study within these tracks, in order to cover a broad range of different tracks. The following fields of study are included in this study: Commerce, Store management, Industrial Sciences (technical tracks), Sales, Car mechanics and Construction (vocational tracks), Latin, Economy-Modern languages, Sciences-Mathematics, Human sciences, Modern languages-Sciences (academic tracks). Students from nine class groups from the penultimate (fifth) year of secondary education and

one additional specialisation (seventh) year after compulsory secondary school, that allows students to take part in school-based apprenticeships and gives access to higher education, were included. All students from these class groups were observed for two or three weeks (approximately 80 hours for each group) and later invited to participate in interviews. When describing patterns of interethnic relations, we made a distinction between fields of studies and tracks based on the interethnic relations that occurred within these tracks. Consequently, we divided three groups of fields of studies/tracks, each with a distinct proportion of students of non-Western European descent: the highest appreciated fields of study within the academic tracks (40% of the students was of non-Western European descent), intermediate tracks (lower appreciated fields of study within the academic track and technical tracks, 50.7%) and vocational tracks (62.2%). In total, 129 students from 33 different countries of origin (Belgium (40,3%), Turkey (25,6%), North-African countries (14%), Eastern European countries (6,2%), and sub-Sahara African countries (2,4%)) were included in our sample (age range between 16 and 23 years old).

Class groups were observed in all their school activities for two or three weeks by one 'observer as a participant' (Gold, 1958), after which semi-structured, face-to-face, in depth taped interviews were conducted with 129 students and 27 teachers (approximately 35 and 100 minutes). While respondents mentioned to be more aware of their behaviour during the first days of the fieldwork, this awareness decreased over the course of the fieldwork according to the majority of the respondents. The periods of observation in each class allowed the researcher to build a rapport with respondents and make detailed observations of classroom, playground and staffroom interactions. Field notes were made about student-teacher and peer interactions and friendships, extracurricular activities, classroom deviancy, study involvement, track and gender differences, interethnic friendships and communication, teaching practices, discrimination and language policies. Interviews started from these ethnographic observations and students were asked about their achievements in school; definition of educational success; support from family, peers and teachers; future aspirations; teachers; sense of school belonging; educational trajectories; and migration background. A short questionnaire was also administered with questions about students' socio-economic and migration background, religion, family composition.

Several strategies were used to ensure the quality control, such as full-tape-recording and transcription of the interviews, computer software to facilitate comprehensiveness, application of principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the constant comparative technique, and method triangulation to check reliability of data interpretation.

An open coding scheme was used, resulting in codes, such as ‘feeling lonely due to ethnic descent’, ‘ethnic identity’, ‘feeling different’, ‘experiences of discrimination’, ‘racist remarks’ and ‘track choices’, which formed the basis of more extensive analyses. Replacing the real names of the respondents with pseudonyms chosen by them preserves the anonymity of the respondents. In the next sections, we will present some extracts of our interviews that illustrate the main tendencies found in the analyses and help to remain close to the speakers’ phrasing and speech patterns.

## 6.4. RESULTS

Field notes and interviews revealed three distinct interethnic interaction patterns across three groups of fields of study: the highest appreciated fields of study in academic tracks (Latin-Languages, Science-Mathematics (academic track)), the intermediate tracks/fields of study (i.e. Human sciences, Economics-Modern languages (academic track), Commerce and Industrial sciences (technical tracks)) and the less appreciated, vocational tracks (Car mechanics, Construction, Sales). Each track has a specific socioeconomic and ethnic composition and future perspectives, which seemed to be associated with patterns of interethnic relations. In general, our interviews and field observations suggest in-group preferences with respect to gender and ethnicity. In the next paragraphs, we will describe all three distinct patterns separately and relate these to the contexts in which they occur.

### 6.4.1. HIGHEST FIELDS OF STUDY IN ACADEMIC TRACKS

In the highest fields of study in academic tracks, ethnic minority students often mentioned they felt subtly excluded along socioeconomic lines, due to topics of conversation and less financial resources available to their families (e.g. having exotic holiday destinations, fancy/expensive clothing):

Fenerli: “In this [current] class group, you are part of the group, but there [referring to class group of Mathematics-Sciences in former school], I have never felt more ignored in my life. There was this group of girls in my class group that always made fun of others. They were called ‘*airwijken*’ [pretentious girls]. For example, they all had handbags from one specific brand. Like, for me, it’s not that important. I actually do not care.” (student of Turkish descent, St. Bernardus, changed from Mathematics-Sciences to Human Sciences)

While Fenerli mentioned that she felt excluded by students of Belgian descent, she mainly referred social class differences, visible through status markers like specific brands her classmates prefer. Nevertheless, these feelings of exclusion were frequently strengthened by

the distinct cultural norms that guided their lifestyles and habits, such as not consuming alcohol, the importance of religion and not going to parties. However, regardless of whether these feelings of exclusion occurred along ethnic or socioeconomic lines, ethnic minority students seemed to relate these feelings to their ethnic or immigrant background. Although indications of these feelings were numerous throughout the observations and the interviews with students of immigrant descent, students found it hard to describe these feelings, to give examples or to illustrate why they did not feel to belong to their class group. These students indicated that they had the idea that most ethnic majority students did not discriminate against them. Rather, it was more the general way of being, for example their different way of interacting and speaking that made them feel different and alien, what in turn made it hard to pinpoint what precisely gave them this feeling of not belonging:

Interviewer: "How come you do not enjoy yourself in your classroom?"

Uzma: "Maybe because we do not know each other, maybe because they have another sort of humour than I have. For example, Miranda and Marilyn [two majority background girls from her class group] they have fun and always laugh with each other but it's just not my sort of humour."

Interviewer: "And what kind of humour do they have?"

Uzma: "Humour that I do not find funny (laughs), yes, I do not know, maybe they think some things are funny but I do not. I have my sort of humour, they like to laugh with stupid things, they make other jokes than I do." (student of Moroccan descent, Latin-Modern languages)

The extract of Uzma suggests that these subtle differences, such as humour, seemed to function as markers that organize interactions in the classroom and appeared to organise contact between students in these fields of study.

In contrast, when ethnic majority students were asked about any ethnic differences, they did not notice any problems and seemed to be unaware of the subtle exclusion processes mentioned by students of immigrant descent:

Interviewer: "Do you notice any differences between students from a different ethnic background?"

Maaïke: "No, actually no, but it could be that I do not pay that much attention to that. It could be but I do not think so" (student of Belgian descent, Latin-Modern Languages, Mountain High)

As the extract of Maaïke's interview illustrates, most ethnic majority students were not really aware of their ethnicity and the subtle ways ethnicity seemed to organise classroom interactions. Ethnic majority students said they would never exclude anyone on purpose and feel that they were open to others. In line with the interviews, during ethnographic observations, almost no overt signs of discrimination or conflicts between students' ethnic



background were noted. However, ethnic minority students appeared to stand more aloof from other classmates, for example they participated less in class group conversations and jokes, shared less personal information and mainly shared school-related information. By contrast, ethnic majority students seemed to have more in common with each other, such as extracurricular activities (e.g. scouts, musical or artistic courses, sports), habits, clothing style and humour. Consequently, ethnic majority students seemed to spend (more) time with in-group members outside school or classroom.

These findings suggest that the ethnic majority students in this study were hardly aware of their dominant position in society and the excluding effect they have on students with another ethnic background. Moreover, they barely questioned their own ethnic identity, were hardly conscious about the ethnic discourse they held (see whiteness studies, for example Frankenberg 1993) and failed to recognise ethnic differences in daily conversations. Furthermore, ethnic majority students did not seem to realize that their attitudes, background, humour and knowledge were not shared by all classmates. By contrast, ethnic minority students did feel how they differed from their classmates, which made them feel not entirely included in the classroom. This confirms previous research that has shown that being in the numerical minority in a classroom appeared to stimulate students to identify more strongly with their ethnic group (Kinket & Verkuyten, 1999) and prefer their ethnic in-group (Quillian & Campbell, 2003; Kinket & Verkuyten, 1999). While being part of the dominant group in society, could lead to a lower awareness of one's ethnic group position and ethnic differences (Kinket & Verkuyten, 1997). The formation of ethnic in- and out-groups seemed to occur along socioeconomic status and ethnic lines. Bourdieu's (1971) habitus concept helps us to understand how students feel excluded, based on their 'way of being'. The habitus is 'the result of socialization and functions as a mental "matrix" that influences the process of perception, thinking and acting, constituted by and in the field' (Bourdieu, 1971, 38). Differences in habitus were evident in subtle ways, such as students of another ethnic descent who are *not* sitting next to each other and *not* talking when it is not necessary. In addition, hardly any student mentioned manifest actions that marked exclusion or peer discrimination. Rather, these 'ways of being' outlined and reflected how in-group preferences are felt and expressed in the highest appreciated fields of study.

In sum, in higher status tracks/field of study students' habituses seem to structure classroom interactions. In- and out-groups appear to be formed along socio-economic and ethnic lines. While the small group of ethnic minority students seemed to be more aware of ethnic differences and sometimes felt subtly excluded, the majority of students belonged to the

dominant group in society. This dominance was hardly questioned and these students were less aware of their specific habitus and ways they subtly excluded students of another ethnic descent. Thus, despite the abundance of contact opportunities, students of different ethnic descent seemed to live rather ‘separately’ next to each other, without any visible conflicts.

#### 6.4.2. INTERMEDIARY TRACKS/FIELDS OF STUDY

The intermediary tracks, that is, technical tracks and the less appreciated fields of study within academic tracks, had a more heterogeneous ethnic class composition which seemed to stimulate interethnic friendships and led to more frequent interethnic contact. In these class group contexts, students of immigrant descent felt more encouraged to talk about their differences in terms of culture, religion, socio-economic background and migration background:

Hazan: “The culture [of the students in the class group] is different. There is a big difference (...).”

Interviewer: “Could you give me an example?”

Hazan: “For example, students of Belgian descent are allowed to go out [to parties] but Muslims are not allowed to go out. In the class group, classmates ask me things like ‘Are you allowed to go out?’ When people ask you these questions, you notice [ethnic] differences.”

Interviewer: “And what do you think of these questions?”

Hazan: “I just answer them. They know we are not allowed to go out, according to the rules of our religion. They know it and they respect that. We just tell each other our habits, that is it.” (student of Turkish descent, Commerce, St. Bernardus)

As illustrated by Hazan, asking questions about each other’s culture and habits, without placing a judgement, students felt appreciated by their (ethnic majority and minority) classmates and less judged. Furthermore, these feelings were frequently perceived to be related to the presence of other classmates with a similar immigrant background:

Interviewer: “How come you did not like these people [from your former school, Mathematics-Sciences]?”

Jessica: “There was no variety [between students], they were people from a certain group, you know. For example, they all liked going to plays and stuff and I did not and..and here [in Mountain High], you have a lot of different people” (...)

Interviewer: “What was different? They liked to go to plays, and what else?”

Jessica: “They were all Belgian people, and I am a foreigner and I missed some foreigners because I missed differences in the classroom, a little bit of variety. Like, now [in Human sciences, Mountain High], we have all different nationalities in the classroom. It’s really fun, we all make jokes and stuff”

Interviewer: “And what did you think of being the only one?”

Jessica: “I was always like, for example, I am a Muslim and I was the only one, in the third grade. And they always asked me all these things and I had to represent ‘everything’ [of the Islam]. Do you understand? And sometimes they did not understand me and there was nobody that could give me a little ‘push in the back’.” (student of Russian descent, Human sciences, Mountain High)

Jessica’s interview illustrates the existence of social class cultures across tracks. Students of immigrant descent mainly had a lower socio-economic background which seemed to contrast with the existing social class cultures in the higher tracks and fields of study (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Furthermore, Jessica felt that she was not able to stand up for her religion in a convincing way and counter the prevailing, negative stereotypes about Muslims. Religion appeared to outline in- and out-groups in a visible and understandable way and forms an important aspect of students’ ethnic identity. This should not be surprising as public debate concerning integration in schools is increasingly focused on religion (Agirdag, Hermans & Van Houtte, 2011). As shown in Jessica’s citation and frequently mentioned by other students, ethnic minority students encounter less ethnic prejudices, feel less intimidated by the idea of being possibly judged, treated stereotypically and at risk of fulfilling these stereotypes in intermediate tracks. Being surrounded by in-group members, seemed to give students of immigrant descent the strength to approach and interact with students of Belgian descent. For instance, field notes revealed that through confrontations with students of other ethnic descent, students seemed to have more respect for students of other ethnic descent. In these class groups, interethnic friendships outside school or during breaks were observed. In addition, respondents in our sample could choose with whom (maximum two other persons) they participated in our interviews. Only in intermediary tracks, students from various ethnic descents were interviewed together. Nevertheless, although more interethnic contact could be observed, students’ ethnic identity was still important and ethnic in-group preferences remained. For example, during a school trip, students preferred to sleep in the same cabin with students of a similar ethnic background.

In sum, although students seem to feel more appreciated when there are more students from a similar descent in their class group, students’ ethnic background continued to structure interethnic relations and in- and out-groups (see als Blau, 1974; Hallinan, 1982). Students preferred their own ethnic in-group over the ethnic out-group but had an open attitude toward out-group members and they had contact with each other. The better interethnic contact found in intermediate tracks is in line with the contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In these tracks, it seemed that meeting all contact conditions facilitated having positive experiences with other ethnic groups. In the past, many scholars

have assumed that living in close proximity, or having similar roles (e.g. students in the classroom) are sufficient conditions to have an equal status. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that interethnic contact could be realized more easily in class groups, such as the intermediate tracks, where one ethnic group does not outnumber the other, indicating the importance of relative sizes of ethnic groups for the status of these groups (Jackman & Crane, 1986; Ellison & Powers, 1994; Moody, 2001; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999; Kinket & Verkuyten, 1997; 1999). Furthermore, the more balanced proportions of ethnic groups appeared to result in a higher awareness of one's own ethnic identity (especially for ethnic majority students) and more respect for someone's ethnic identity. Thus, the contact theory helps to understand why in certain conditions – namely in intermediary tracks – students seem to have established better contact with students of other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, it does not help to explain varying processes of interethnic contact in other fields of study/tracks as in the latter not all contact conditions were fulfilled. More studies found that classroom diversity could enhance more open attitudes towards other ethnic groups but only in specific (country) conditions (Janmaat, 2009; 2012). Although more intense friendships were developed with students of similar descent (Hallinan, 1982), positive experiences with other ethnic groups seemed to increase weak ties between these groups (Feld and Carter 1998).

#### 6.4.3. VOCATIONAL TRACKS

Vocational tracks enjoy the lowest appreciation in regular secondary education and most have a high share of students of immigrant descent. In these tracks, nearly all students stem from low socio-economic background families. Ethnic in- and out-groups were clearly visible during ethnographic observations, and differences were remarked by students:

Ielias: “I have nothing against Belgians because I am in Belgium. Those things [relationships between men and women] are normal here [in Belgium].”

Yasin: “We are in Belgium.”

Ielias: “My opinion about Belgians is: they like each other and directly from the first day, they sleep with each other. Why do they have to do that? They hardly know each other. Some people are married for more than 40 years and they even do not know each other. These people still have some things that they hide for each other. And you [Belgians], you would only know that person for a couple of hours, a couple of days and you would sleep with him! That's their first mistake.”

(both students have a Turkish descent, Car mechanics, Catherine College)

Starting from this interview extract, Ielias made a stereotypical distinction between ethnic majority and minority students and his quote suggested that he clearly preferred his ethnic in-group. This was in line with students' and teachers' accounts and ethnographic observations, in which in- and out-group differences were accompanied by ethnic in-group preferences, out-group stereotyping and tense relationships between ethnic groups. Jokes or racist/discriminatory remarks towards the out-group were abundant and dominated classroom interactions:

Brendon: "I'm a racist, I'm a racist. I cannot help it. I do not know why but I'm a racist. If I could choose, they would all leave immediately [to their country of origin]."

Interviewer: "Do you also say that in your classroom?"

Brendon: "Yasin [classmate of Turkish descent] told me 'in ten years, Belgium will be Turkey and everyone will be Turkish. Everyone will listen to Turkish music in their car'. He said 'you cannot stand it when we say 'Turkey in Belgium'. I told him, 'Yasin, listen to me in ten years, I will be a führer and I will kill your entire family. I will shoot you in your head.' He was quiet immediately. We had to leave the classroom directly due to 'racist remarks'. But, actually, they [Turkish immigrants] are racist as well, talking about 'taking over Belgium'. They should not do that either." (student of Belgian descent, Car mechanics, Catherine College)

As illustrated in Brendon's quote, in contrast with other tracks, remarks about ethnic differences often escalated in the classroom and resulted in a further exchange of racist remarks and insults. Additionally, this quote suggests that some students of Belgian descent appear to be anxious to lose their cultural dominance and that ethnic minority students will outnumber the current ethnic majority group. It seems that, due to the relatively high proportion of students of immigrant descent, ethnic majority students feel threatened to a greater extent, in terms of power, culture and space.

In contrast, it seemed that many ethnic minority students feel that their ethnic identity is threatened or not so much respected by their classmates and report hostile attitudes:

Memoli: "Last year, in my former school [vocational track], there were some racists."

Interviewer: "Could you give me an example?"

Memoli: "'Go back to your country!' and things like that."

Interviewer: "Who said that? Teachers or students?"

Memoli: "Other students"

Interviewer: "How did you react?"

Memoli: "I hit him, I guess." (student of Turkish descent, Car mechanics, Catherine College)

Although Memoli was born in Belgium, but did not feel welcome, this made him react physically in a negative way. In general, as illustrated by the quotes of Yasin, Ielias, Brendon and Memoli, all students seemed to prefer their ethnic in-group above the other and made frequently racist remarks or had hostile attitudes/reactions towards the other ethnic group. These threats can be seen as symbolic threats as students refer to concerns with the group differences in values, beliefs, morals and attitudes, as stated by the intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al. 2005). Students in vocational tracks seemed to feel culturally threatened by the presence of the other ethnic group, which was visible in the heightened extent of ethnic tensions and remarks in these classrooms.

Students did not only perceive symbolic threats and ethnic differences, they also referred to financial and economic threats as vocational tracks are directly oriented toward the labour market and specific future jobs. For example, some students gained working experience through internships at local companies. Therefore, it seems that students in vocational tracks are more often confronted with and concerned about their future position and perspectives on the labour market:

Interviewer: “Do you think it will be easy to find a job?”

Kiril: “Nowadays, there are many students who are enrolled in Car Mechanics. So, I do not know, many have already graduated and are probably still searching for a job. I think, when they find something, it will be hard for us to enter [into these jobs]. It’s all about being lucky” (student of Bulgarian descent, Car Mechanics, Catherine College)

Students, like Kiril, frequently referred to the labour market and job opportunities. Although vocational tracks usually prepare students for manual jobs of which there is a shortage on the labour market (such as electricians, car mechanics, and construction workers), there is no shortage for all of them (such as Sales) (Verhaeghe et al., *n.d.*). Moreover, students are only trained for one specific job. If students are not interested in performing this job, because it is a ‘dirty’ job (manual labour), due to physical complications or relatively low wages, they have fewer options compared to students from other tracks. These general insecurities, concerning future employment and financial opportunities, were often expressed in the classroom and they were sometimes explicitly related to ethnicity.

Although ethnic minority students across all tracks seemed to perceive discrimination on the labour market, most references were made in vocational tracks:

Tristan: “I know for sure that when I’m going to work, there will be racists in my working place. I’m sure of that for 100 or 150 percent. Whatever you do, it’s like that. You also find them here at school, in small shops, everywhere. So, it does not matter.” (student of Tunisian descent, Sales, St. Bernardus)

As illustrated by Tristan’s quote, students were often aware of the potential experiences of discrimination on the labour market. Teachers often noted this and tried to reduce general insecurities about future job seeking by giving students advice on how to apply for a job and how to avoid racism on the labour market. In addition, informal and classroom conversations during fieldwork indicated that ethnic majority students appeared to be concerned about economic circumstances, often related to immigration flows or based on their parents’ working experiences. Many of these students related the presence of immigrants to expected future problems on the labour market and the sustainability of the welfare system. For instance, the inflow of immigrants is often suggested by these students to lead to more people living of unemployment benefits, while they have to work in difficult working conditions and are insecure about their own future employment. For both groups, field notes indicated that labour market insecurities and fear of losing their welfare, or realistic threats (Stephan et al. 2005), played a central role in their daily lives and this was frequently related to the perceived competition and confrontation with other ethnic groups.

For ethnic majority students, the fear of being dominated by ethnic minority students can also be understood when we consider their lived experiences and stories within their immediate social environment (see also Connolly, 2000), such as the neighbourhoods in which these students live (Faas, 2008; Stevens & Görgöz, 2010). This broader social environment, in which these students live, seemed to strengthen the threats perceived in the classroom by students of another ethnic descent and contribute to the development of hostile attitudes towards other ethnic groups.

In sum, students in vocational tracks seemed to perceive more threats from other ethnic groups, resulting in heightened manifestations of racism (see also Elchardus, Kavadias & Siongers, 1999; Spruyt, 2008; Stevens, 2008a). Threats were perceived in various domains, such as culture, power relations, space and future labour market opportunities and are in line with two threats, namely symbolic and realistic threats, as described by the intergroup threat theory. This theory posits that people develop hostile attitudes towards other ethnic groups when they feel threatened by them (Stephan et al., 2005). These perceived threats seemed to

have created an environment where interactions between ethnic groups were rather tense and hostile or characterized by racist remarks and attitudes. The numerical sizes of the ethnic groups in the classroom and students' living environment could have been related to the threats perceived and hostile attitudes towards students of another ethnic descent. This is in line with previous research that already demonstrated the importance of relative sizes of ethnic groups in the classroom for racist victimization (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002) and in-group favouritism (Kinket & Verkuyten, 1999). The distinct patterns of interethnic relations in different tracks, and the theoretical frameworks that seem most appropriate to explain these patterns are set out in Table 10.

**TABLE 10: PATTERNS OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONS ACROSS TRACKS OR FIELDS OF STUDY FOR ETHNIC MINORITY AND MAJORITY STUDENTS**

Status tracks	Ethnic majority students	Ethnic minority students	Interethnic interactions	Theory
<b>High</b>	No perception ethnic differences	Feelings of subtle exclusion	<i>Separation</i>	Whiteness Bourdieu
<b>Intermediary</b>	Consciousness of own ethnic position	More respect for ethnic identity and feeling less judged	<i>Positive experiences of interethnic contact</i>	Contact theory
<b>Low</b>	Cultural/ economic threats	Ethnic identity threat	<i>Interethnic tensions/conflict</i>	Conflict theory/ intergroup threat theory

## 6.5. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to examine patterns of the interethnic relations in secondary schools in Flanders. By doing so, this study may add to the existing public debate on whether the ethnic school composition matters for the integration of students of immigrant descent in Belgian society. Schools are often seen as the ideal place for students to encounter and develop friendships with students of another ethnic descent and learn more about their ethnic background (Schofield, 1991; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999; Feld & Carter, 1998; Agirdag, 2011). Often, it is suggested that students of immigrant descent will 'integrate' better and easier when being in a classroom with a high proportion of students of Belgian descent.



However, studies that focus on the impact of ethnically diverse school compositions on the development of interethnic relations and friendships have yielded mixed results. To get more insight in the processes that contribute to the development of interethnic relations in schools in varying contexts, we focused on one of the internal organisational features of schools, namely tracking, that structure the possibilities to have contact with other ethnic groups and the ways students relate to each other. Doing so, we could distinguish three patterns of interethnic relations across tracks in secondary education. Although policy makers frequently assume that interethnic contact may be enhanced through enrolment in ethnically mixed schools, more attention should be given to processes that occur within schools and organisational features of schools. It is often assumed that being in a similar track might help to establish more (interethnic) friendships within these tracks as exposure to students of another ethnic descent and/or similarity between students increases (Moody, 2001; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999). Nevertheless, our findings indicate that being in a same track or field of study was not a sufficient condition to develop interethnic friendships (see also Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987). Depending on the threats students perceived, the awareness of ethnic identities and the status and numerical size of ethnic groups, patterns of interethnic relations varied across tracks, ranging from separation of ethnic groups, positive encounters with students of another ethnic descent to the development of ethnic tensions and hostile attitudes (see also Moody, 2001).

Through the distinction of distinct patterns of interethnic interactions, previously formulated theories could be critically evaluated. First, our findings are not in line with Blau's structural theory (1974), as students do not necessarily have more contact with out-group members when no in-group members are present. In the highest and lowest appreciated fields of study, one ethnic group outnumbered the other in the classroom. However, the ethnic groups that formed the minority in the classroom did not seem to have more or positive encounters with interethnic contact, compared to students in the intermediate tracks. Surprisingly, the opposite appeared to be true as in intermediate tracks, where sufficient members of both ethnic in- and out-group were present, students indicated to have more contact with students of other ethnic descents. Second, the higher amount of positive experiences of interethnic contact in intermediary tracks seems to suit the predictions that were formulated by the contact theory (Allport, 1954). Meeting all contact conditions appeared to facilitate interethnic contact. In fact, due to the more or less equal relative sizes of ethnic groups, students had the feeling that ethnic groups were equally valued and were more aware of the position of their ethnic group. Third, in accordance with conflict theories

(Bobo, 1983; Zubrinsky & Bobo, 1996; Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995) and the intergroup theory (Stephan et al., 2005), both students of immigrant and Belgian descent experienced varying threats in vocational tracks. Due to an overrepresentation of students with an immigrant background, this ethnic group has a numerical superiority over students of Belgian descent, reversing the ethnic proportions in society. Symbolic threats, related to students' ethnic identity and the fear of losing cultural dominance in society, were combined with experiences of realistic threats, concerning students' welfare and often related to economic and financial issues. This could be understood from the track these students were enrolled in. Vocational tracks are more explicitly oriented toward the labour market as they prepare students for a specific job. In sum, while in the intermediate tracks relations between students from different ethnic backgrounds seemed to flourish, in the most prestigious fields of study one would rather speak of separation between students of different ethnic descent. Finally, in the least appreciated fields of study in vocational education, interethnic tensions and conflict was obvious. Track characteristics, such as the numerical sizes of ethnic groups in the classroom, feeling that their ethnic identity is appreciated and experiences of symbolic and realistic threats, seemed to be important factors in the development of open and comfortable interethnic interactions.

This study is innovative in several ways. First, we studied interethnic interactions from both an ethnic majority *and* minority perspective (see also Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Ellison & Powers, 1994). Further, focusing on peer relations when studying racism and discrimination in school, instead of teacher-students interactions, gave more insight in processes of exclusion, feeling different and perceived racism (see also Connolly, 1995). Second, the use of ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews has enabled us to grasp the subtleties of interethnic relationships as illustrated in the highest appreciated fields of study in the academic tracks. Third, the importance of class group and track tendencies, besides school effects, was demonstrated (Demanet et al., 2011; Agirdag, Demanet et al., 2011; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002; Kinket & Verkuyten, 1997; 1999). This is especially interesting in a Flemish context as class groups are harder to differentiate and examine in quantitative studies as they often consist out of students enrolled in distinct fields of study (for some courses). The use of qualitative methods has allowed us to examine the class groups to which students felt they belonged and spent most of the time with.

A natural extension of this work would be to consider class group processes and their interaction with school and individual characteristics, such as students' socio-economic background (Chavous et al., 2004), and school's socio-economic and ethnic composition.

Furthermore, the sample of schools could be expanded to schools from more rural areas (Boone & Van Houtte, 2012), or with distinct socio-economic/ethnic school composition, and part-time education. In addition, future research is necessary to explore the relationship between perceived economic and cultural threats and other educational outcomes, such as school instrumentality (e.g. Andriessen et al., 2006). Finally, it would be interesting for future research to examine differences in interethnic contact (with ethnic minority and majority students) across ethnic groups (Quillian & Campbell, 2003).

Some limitations of the present study should be noted as well. A first limitation is the focus on school life during ethnographic observations. Outside school factors were only considered in the analyses when students made explicit references to it but no observations were made. Second, as our sample was focused on three multiethnic schools in one Flemish city, no schools with a predominantly ethnic majority population were included. Third, although this study focused on ethnicity, it appeared that students often referred to both socioeconomic and ethnic factors when talking about ethnic differences. Consequently, due to the entanglement between both factors, it was hard to distinguish both factors more clearly. Finally, due to the limited number of schools included in our sample, it is hard to rule out other possible important factors, such as intergroup climate in schools (Agirdag et al., 2011).

Based on our findings, some policy recommendations can be made. Students' own ethnic identification and respect for classmates' ethnic identity appeared to be a necessary condition to establish interethnic relations. This might suggest that policy makers should not advocate a 'mixed school policy' without paying attention to students' ethnic identity and the practical implementation of that policy. The actual policies aim at constricting the number of ethnic minority students in each school (and tracks), in order to 'integrate' them into Belgian mainstream societal values and culture (Agirdag, 2011). However, by doing so, policy makers seem to underestimate the need for students' sense of belonging in the classroom and the necessity for students' to feel their ethnic identity to be valued. Further, the introduction of multicultural education and actual teacher practices might enhance racial awareness and result in a higher recognition of racist practices and remarks for ethnic majority students (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002; Kinket & Verkuyten, 1999), which might be beneficial in the highest fields of study in academic tracks. Another policy recommendation might be to improve the appreciation of vocational tracks and help students to make more informed educational choices in the beginning and during their school career. Feelings of group threat might be less pronounced in vocational tracks when students make more informed educational choices and are more aware of the future job prospects before entering a specific

field of study. Finally, policy makers should focus more on track allocation, as ethnic groups are clearly unequally distributed across tracks (Moody, 2001; Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2013).



## MOMMA

Yeah, it was all a dream  
I ain't even know what platinum means  
Still bought that money, when I was 13  
Can't wait 'til the day I'm on the TV screen  
When I tell my momma sitting next to me  
I wanna be a big movie star  
No more sugar that we have to borrow  
Open up the fridge and it look like horror  
Boy, I can't wait to get them million dollars  
Make some, bake some  
If I gotta find the recipe and whip it til the cake done  
Whenever get the rockin' when MJ gone  
Whenever be on top, I be the next great one  
I reminisce being broke as a kid  
Where I down sit, I don't go wish  
I gotta make it  
Momma when I get big

FLO RIDA



## 7. FRAMES OF REFERENCE FOR COMPARISON OF EASTERN EUROPEAN, TURKISH, AND NORTH AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN BELGIUM

**Lore Van Praag, Peter Stevens, Mieke Van Houtte**

### **Abstract**

Little research, particularly in Europe, has investigated with whom ethnic minority students compare themselves in developing attitudes towards education and in making educational decisions and how their use of particular frames of reference can be explained. Based on analysis of qualitative interview and ethnographic observation data involving students from Eastern European, Turkish and North African descent in Flanders (Belgium), this study finds that the generational status of immigrants, their experienced collective problems, structural characteristics of the immigrant networks and related access to resources shape students' use of particular reference groups, which in turn seem to explain particular educational outcomes. The conclusions discuss the implications of this study for future research and social policy.



## 7.1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first waves of labour migration to Belgium after World War II, immigrant children have underachieved in school compared to their Belgian peers (Duquet et al., 2006). Scholars have studied a variety of factors to explain this underachievement (Van Praag, Stevens & Van Houtte, 2013). However, a focus on (under)achievement requires insight into the frames of references that students use in developing aspirations and making various educational decisions and actions (Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2002; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008). A long tradition of social psychological research has shown that students' achievement is influenced by the groups with whom they compare themselves (Trautwein et al., 2009; Marsh et al., 2008). However, there is to date and particularly in Europe, very little research on this topic in relationship to ethnic minorities, for whom the choice of particular reference groups is even often more complicated (e.g. Zhou, 1997; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Gibson, 1997; Oyserman, Brickman & Rhodes, 2007). Furthermore, there is generally very little research that investigates how structural factors inform ethnic minority students' choices for particular frames of reference.

In this area of research, one influential theory is Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (1987; 2008), which tries to understand ethnic minority students' frames of references by relating these frames to students' migration history and considering them in their context. Ogbu (1987; 2008) argued that ethnic minority students use distinct frames of references, dependent on their specific migration history or the relationship with dominant society, to compare their educational opportunities and benefits with. While voluntary immigrants compare their educational opportunities and benefits to those in their country of origin, involuntary minorities look at the country of residence. Together with other community forces, such as belief in the instrumental value of education, and system factors, this appeared to matter for the educational strategies and outcomes of these students. Ogbu's theory provides an attractive theory for sociologists to explore factors that contribute to ethnic differences in achievement outcomes as it considers the relationship between societal conditions and actor's daily actions (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Nevertheless, it has been widely criticized as Ogbu failed to incorporate within-group variations within the voluntary/involuntary typology, considered specific historical relations insufficiently and could not be replicated or applied to 'non-settler' European countries (e.g. Foster, 2004; Gibson, 1997; Van Zanten, 1997; Luciak, 2004).

In order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the frames of references students use to compare themselves with, the factors and processes that help to shape students' choices of particular frames of reference and how this relates to their educational behaviour and outcomes will be studied. Doing so, we incorporate previously formulated criticism to Ogbu's work by studying variation in the frames of references of three distinct ethnic minority groups, all categorized in Ogbu's voluntary immigrant group, in a relatively new immigrant country, namely Belgium. Moreover, focusing on these voluntary immigrant groups is theoretically relevant as variation exists between them in terms of their migration histories and relationships with the dominant society. More specifically, our data suggests that it is theoretically interesting to compare three minority groups in secondary education with each other, namely young people from Turkish, North African and Eastern European descent, as they each have specific historical relations with the dominant society, vary in length of stay and have distinct immigrant community characteristics. Especially the latter group is interesting to include in our analysis as this is a relatively new and understudied minority group in a European context. More generally, comparing these three different ethnic minority groups allows us to explore how structural characteristics of minority groups stimulate minority groups to compare themselves with particular reference groups and how this in turn impacts on their educational outcomes.

In sum, this study starts from and builds on Ogbu's theory and the criticism formulated against his theory by exploring how structural characteristics inform ethnic minority students' choices for particular frames of reference and their influence on educational outcomes in relationship to three different, voluntary immigrant groups in the context of Flanders. First, an overview of our research design and methods will be given. Second, students' general frames of references will be discussed and how these help students in their guidance through daily lives and school career. Finally, suggestions for future research, social policy recommendations and limitations of this study will be presented.

## 7.2. METHODS

The initial objective of the data collection for this study was to explore success determinants of students of immigrant descent in secondary school, through ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and other school personnel. Ethnographic research was conducted in three schools in a large Flemish city between 2009 and 2012: St. Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College. St. Bernardus is a large (1,159 students), Catholic, school that offers the vocational, technical and academic tracks. Mountain High is a

medium-sized (444 students), secular school that only offers the academic track. Catherine College is a medium-sized (404 students), secular school that offers the technical and vocational tracks. Theoretical sampling of schools was based on the track composition of the schools, the number of students of non-Belgian descent in each school and the track/field of study within a school. Hence, class groups were selected based on the fixed set of courses (e.g. field of study like 'Mathematics- Sciences' or 'Construction') students have to choose within these tracks. These sampling criteria are important to consider the Flemish educational system is characterized by a hierarchical tracking structure, existing out of academic, technical, artistic and vocational tracks that intend to prepare students for different futures. As only academic and technical tracks give access to higher education, track choice is important in this educational system (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Students in vocational tracks have the possibility to follow a post-secondary specialised one-year training, attached to secondary schools, that allows students to take part in school-based apprenticeships. This specialisation year gives students the opportunity to access higher education afterwards and enhance professional skills.

Clustered sampling was used as all students from these class groups were observed and later invited to participate in interviews. Students from nine class groups from the penultimate year of secondary education (comparable with Year12 in the UK or 11<sup>th</sup> Grade in the USA) and one post-secondary vocational specialization year were included. Due to grade retention and delayed entry in secondary school, the age range of this sample varied between 16 and 23 years (ideally this would be 16-17 years). In St. Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College respectively, 41.44%; 13.54% and 27.48% of the students spoke another language at home than Dutch, which serves as an indicator for the proportion of students of non-Belgian descent. In line with prevailing definitions of 'ethnic background' in Belgium, students are categorized as being of non-Belgian descent if their maternal grandmother was not born in Belgium (Duquet et al., 2006), which follows Ogbu's categorization of 'immigrants' (2008).

Out of the sample of 129 respondents, there were 33 students of Turkish descent, 18 of North African descent (Morocco (13), Algeria (3) and Tunisia (2)) and 15 of Eastern European descent. Eastern Europe is broadly defined in this study and refers mainly to the division made in the Cold War. Students from Albania (5), Armenia (2), the Serbian Republic (1), Kosovo (2), Macedonia (2), Belarus (1), Bulgaria (1) and Russia (1) were included. Most Turkish and North African parents of secondary school students of migrated after finishing school in their country of origin so that most students were (except for three students) born

and raised in Belgium. By contrast, all students of Eastern European descent immigrated during their school career to Belgium. In Table 11, descriptive statistics of the sample are presented.

**TABLE 11: HIGHEST COMPLETED EDUCATIONAL LEVEL FATHER BY ETHNIC DESCENT (BIRTHPLACE MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER)**

Ethnic descent	Highest completed educational level father			
	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>	<i>Higher studies</i>	<i>Missing</i>
West-European	9	26	16	5
Turkish	10	20	1	2
North African	7	7	2	1
Eastern European	2	7	5	2
Other	0	2	2	3
<i>Total</i>	28	62	26	13

Class groups were observed in all their school activities for two or three weeks by an ‘observer as a participant’ (Gold, 1958), after which qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 129 students and 27 teachers. The periods of observation in each class allowed the researcher to build a rapport with respondents and make detailed observations of classroom, playground and staffroom interactions. Field notes were made about student-teacher and peer interactions and friendships, extracurricular activities, classroom deviancy and study involvement, track and gender differences, teaching practices, discrimination and language policies. Interviews started from these ethnographic observations and students were asked about their achievements in school, definition of educational success, support from family, peers and teachers, future aspirations, teachers, sense of school belonging, educational trajectories, and migration background. A short questionnaire was also administered with questions about students’ socio-economic and migration background, religion, family composition.

Data was collected using an exploratory approach, following a cyclical process of data collection, processing and analysis, as is customary with a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach, using the constant comparison method of analyses. As is customary in grounded theory, initial analyses of data are guided by the use of particular codes, which can range from general to very specific codes that may relate to particular theoretical concepts described in the literature. In the analyses, codes, such as ‘migration history’, ‘reference/comparison groups’, and ‘immigrant community’ emerged rapidly from the data as meaningful codes. Due to similarities with Ogbu’s theory, more extensive analyses were

carried out that focused on the frames of references and comparison groups students use with respect to education. The anonymity of the respondents is preserved by replacing their real names with pseudonyms chosen by them.

### 7.3. GENERAL FRAMES OF REFERENCES AND DAILY COMPARISON GROUPS

Due to the exploratory nature of the present study, we interpret students' general frames of references as the ways in which students refer to specific groups when talking about the educational opportunities they have. However, it seemed that this overall evaluation of educational opportunities did not necessarily guided students when making daily educational choices, such as track choice or the amount of time spent on homework. Consequently, we made a distinction between 'general frames of references', referring to educational opportunities, and 'daily comparison groups' that helped students to shape their educational behaviour and make educational decisions. General frames of references appeared to refer to more ideal typical and general motivations, while daily comparison groups were used when referring to students' personal lives and specific situations. Both will be discussed separately in the following paragraphs.

#### 7.3.1. GENERAL FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Immigrants' migration history and generational status seemed to be reflected in the general frames of references students refer to when discussing the educational opportunities they have. Turkish and North African immigrants arrived in Belgium after the Second World War as guest workers, together with Southern European immigrants, for better economic opportunities to meet the shortage on the labour market in specific sectors. Although these immigrants were expected to return to their country of origin, they settled permanently (Verhaeghe et al., 2012). Consequently, the second generation of immigrants coming from these regions is currently enrolled in school, which was also reflected in our sample as all students (except for three) were born and raised in Belgium. Therefore, it is not surprising that they did not refer to their country of origin when evaluating their general educational opportunities, but rather to other immigrant network members or their parents:

Powergirl (Turkish descent): "I wouldn't want to become like my mother. For example, I know how hard it's for her to stand the whole day and clean offices. (...) Actually, I just want to continue and be enrolled in an academic track and pursue higher education. I would like to become an office clerk and not, for example, a cleaning lady (...). At my desk, getting a higher salary, having less physical problems like most Turks."

This extract shows that Powergirl reflected about her future job by referring to her mother's working conditions and other immigrant network members. On different occasions throughout the interview she expressed a desire not to work in similar employment conditions as her mother. Additionally, having spent most of their lives in Belgium and with their family and friends also settled in Belgium, Powergirl, and most of the second generation Moroccan and Turkish students in our sample (40 out of 51) felt different than their peers who were born and raised in their country of origin (e.g. lower language proficiency of their mother tongue). These findings contrast with Ogbu's (1987; 2008) predictions, as he argued that voluntary immigrants and their descendants would refer to their country of origin. However, this desire 'to do better' than their parents and/or other members of their immigrant group served as a general motivation to do well in school.

By contrast, students from Eastern European countries had only recently migrated and referred mainly to their country of origin when evaluating the educational opportunities they have. Starting in 1990 a new wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republic entered Belgium, accompanied by a wave of undocumented immigrants (Sierens, 2006). Most immigrants arrived in 1990 due to economic, political, social and cultural push factors in their country of origin. (Paspalanova, 2006). Despite the differences in physical appearance, religion and cultural habits between students of Eastern European descent included in our sample, they shared very similar migration motivations and conditions, which make it theoretically relevant to discuss these immigrants together as one group. Generally all students coming from Eastern European regions motivated their migration during their school career to have better educational and future employment opportunities. Although they had lived most of their lives in the receiving country (Belgium), twelve (out of fifteen) students compared their opportunities with those of their friends and family in the country of origin and the hypothesized future opportunities they would have had if they had not migrated:

Unikkadon (Albanian descent): "Yes, really, I often think of it. Like my friends that are now there, they have nothing. They dropped out of school, work as a farmers or do industrial work and manual labour. I don't want that. I want to study, have a good job and think about my future."

This quote illustrates that students, like Unikkadon, evaluate the possibilities they have in the immigrant country (Belgium) by referring to the rather low educational opportunities their peers and family members have in their country of origin, and this comparison functioned as a source of motivation to do well in school (see Kao & Tienda, 1998).

In sum, the data shows that ‘voluntary’ ethnic minority groups can differ in terms of the reference groups they use to compare their own educational situation and opportunities. While second generation students of voluntary migrant groups from Turkey and North Africa compared themselves primarily with the situation of their parents and other immigrant network members in the immigrant country (see Hermans, 2004), first generation students of voluntary immigrant groups from Eastern European countries compared themselves primarily with peers from the country of origin. However, while they compare themselves with different groups, the outcome of these comparisons seems to be very similar as it results in the development of positive attitudes to education and aspirations for relative social mobility. These findings underscore criticisms levelled at Ogbu’s theory for neglecting variance between voluntary minority groups in terms of their structural characteristics that inform their educational aspirations (e.g. Foster, 2004; Gibson, 1997; Luciak, 2004; Hermans, 2004).

Furthermore, analyses indicated that for making particular decisions in relationship to their immediate educational careers, such as following a certain high status track or attending higher education, students could not always rely on these general frames of references. For instance, people in the country of origin do not necessarily have to make similar choices (e.g. tracks/fields of study). Therefore, students searched for comparison groups they could use in everyday-situations to make educational decisions and to guide their educational behaviour. Thus, in the following sections, we will examine how these positive attitudes towards education are translated into actual achievement and the role of daily comparison groups in this process. Finding such daily comparison groups and the ways they could help students to improve their educational outcomes appeared to depend on structural characteristics, such as immigrant settlement patterns, which varied for the three discussed immigrant groups. The role of these structural characteristics in shaping students’ frames of reference emphasises the need for a more sociological approach in understanding the development and use of (ethnic minority) students’ frames of reference.

### 7.3.2. DAILY COMPARISON ‘GROUPS’

Our analyses suggest that students of immigrant descent seemed to search for specific groups with whom they found themselves comparable with in everyday life. Students coming originally from different countries appeared to face distinct difficulties in the receiving country. Facing these problems guided their search for comparable peers. Further, this search for comparable peers appeared to relate to students’ educational outcomes. In this study, we

will first focus on the factors that guide students when looking for daily comparison groups and second, how these might relate to educational outcomes.

### *Finding daily comparable groups*

Our analyses point to two key factors that explain ethnic minority students' choices for particular daily reference groups. First, immigrant-specific problems, such as their experiences with discrimination or their adaptation to the immigrant country, appeared to strengthen the idea that students of immigrant descent could not compare themselves with students of Belgian descent as they struggled with additional problems (and as the latter group was perceived to some extent as the source of the problem). The majority of the students interviewed appeared to indicate problems related to their immigrant or ethnic background that made them focus more on comparable peers in their immigrant networks. While students of Turkish and Northern African descent appeared to encounter problems related to experiences of discrimination, those of Eastern European descent referred more to adaptation problems related to their recent migration. Variation in the extent to which these groups experienced discrimination appeared to depend on the relationship they have developed with the dominant society. Students of Turkish and Northern African descent already lived for an extensive period in Belgium while those of Eastern European descent were relatively new.

In line with a rich tradition of research in the UK on minority students' experiences of racism (Stevens, 2007b; Gillborn & Gipps, 1996), the longer stay of students of Turkish and Northern African descent in Belgium seemed to have resulted in the establishment of an ambiguous relationship with the dominant society, characterized by attachment, but also by conflict, experiences of discrimination, hostile attitudes and remarks (see also Hermans, 2004; Ogbu, 2008). For instance, despite the fact that most were born in Belgium, they still are and felt perceived as 'immigrants':

Giorgio (Turkish descent): "This boy came to me and said 'you dirty Turk, what are you doing here? Go back to your country.'"

Like many others, Giorgio did not experience migration himself but was still considered as an 'immigrant', '*allochton*' (of non-Belgian descent) or outsider more generally, and these terms were frequently used in an explicit derogatory way. In addition to experiences from racism from peers, this study shows that two thirds of the students who had encountered experiences of discrimination referred to teacher discrimination during their school career. Half of the



students mentioned derogatory generalizations, discriminatory remarks or attitudes from classmates or racist remarks in public spaces. Furthermore, irrespective of personal experiences, half of the students seemed to expect labour market discrimination. For instance, many mentioned that people with ‘a foreign name’ or in specific jobs (e.g. in manual labour jobs), would be more vulnerable for such experiences. Although twelve students did not experience some form of discrimination themselves, none of these students doubted the existence of discrimination as they based themselves on shared experiences within their immigrant networks. Such experiences and perceptions made students feel like falling between ‘*two worlds*’, never being fully part of the dominant group in a specific territory:

Hande (Turkish descent): “It’s more like, here [in Belgium] we are ‘the dirty Turks’ and in Turkey, we are ‘the dirty Belgians’. You don’t have a place. I always say to my mother: ‘Mother, we don’t have a place in this world’.”

As Hande mentions, many respondents of Turkish or Northern African descent did not seem to feel a strong sense of belonging to either their country of origin, or the immigrant country. Consequently, this made students refer more to and compare themselves with people of their immigrant community who experienced similar experiences or feelings.

By contrast, students of Eastern Europe appeared to encounter relatively fewer experiences of discrimination. Only six out of 15 students mentioned to have experienced some form of discrimination. These experiences were mostly related to prejudices concerning their religious affiliation (e.g. ‘all Muslims are terrorists’) or when not considering their adaptation problems related to their recent migration (e.g. language proficiency). Nevertheless, experiences of racism and out-group positioning were either less negative and/or considered as such by these students and more interpreted as directed to the individual rather than their ‘in-group’. For instance, Ronan (Kyrgyzian descent) and Walter (Albanian descent) remarked that teachers were only aware of their immigrant background after a couple of months when they referred explicitly to their country of origin. Due to the ‘late’ discovery of their immigrant background, teachers did not change their behaviour. The lower likelihood of experiencing discrimination is in line with previous research and can be related to the individual migration of these immigrants, the lower visibility in society, the perceived in-group/out-group similarity and the heterogeneity of this ‘group’ (e.g. Piontkowski et al., 2000). However, these students mentioned more frequently to suffer more from adaptation problems, such as language proficiency and knowledge about the Flemish educational system:

Yasmina (Russian descent): “I had a diploma from my country of origin from the third year [of secondary school]. After studying Dutch for six months, I had sufficient language proficiency to be enrolled in the fourth year. Teachers advised me to redo my third year because I didn’t understand any French and English [obligatory courses]. (...) I didn’t understand a lot of these courses, so I learned everything by heart, but failed my year and neighbours advised me to change school.”

Many first generation immigrants, like Yasmina, encountered adaptation problems that often hindered them from learning in school, and consequently, complicate the course of their school career considerably (see Kao & Tienda, 1995). These migration-specific problems made them feel different than students of Belgian descent and search for comparable peers in their disperse immigrant networks. Nevertheless, as these adaptation problems were perceived as ‘transitional’ problems that they could overcome over time, some students of Eastern European descent – particularly those who did not perceive too many adaptation problems – appeared to be more likely to compare their educational behaviour with students of Belgian descent.

In sum, young people of immigrant descent seemed to identify more with other students of immigrant descent rather than native Belgians due to their experiences of being frequently positioned as ‘different’ or as out-group members by the majority group, their experiences of ethnic discrimination or adaptation problems (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Piontkowski et al., 2000). While these processes explain why certain voluntary immigrant groups are less likely to choose native Belgians as a reference group, the process of finding comparable peers for their daily lives seems to depend more on the immigrant network characteristics which will be set out in the next paragraph.

### *Immigrant network characteristics*

Although most students of immigrant descent found themselves theoretically more comparable with specific immigrant groups, not all students were able to find daily comparison groups due to distinct availability and density of immigrant networks. Further, depending on the existing resources and shared information within these networks, these daily comparison groups seemed to help students to a varying extent and in distinct ways.

In Ghent, the city in which this study took place, Turkish immigrants formed a tight community through processes of family reunification and asylum, leading to a chain migration system. This resulted in the formation of a transplanted community, originating from Emirdag in the province of Afyon in Turkey. Consequently, the Turkish students in our sample could rely on an extended, geographically highly concentrated Turkish community,

characterised by a considerable amount of social control and local ethnic economy (Verhaeghe, Van der Bracht & Van de Putte, 2012). The availability of a relatively large and close Turkish community facilitated the opportunity to identify with and rely on this community when making concrete comparisons, as illustrated by Memoli:

Interviewer: "How come you want to become a baker?"

Memoli (Turkish descent): "It's in my family, actually, it's in 'our kind'. When you go in this city to a bakery, ninety percent of all bakers are from our city in Turkey."

This extract indicates that Memoli's ideas were mainly shaped within this extensive immigrant community. As the majority of the bakers in Ghent are of Belgian descent, Memoli's living environment was mainly concentrated within his Turkish community, resulting in a biased view of the ethnic proportions of the city in which he lives which seemed to influence the development of future goals, such as opening a bakery. The networks of the other immigrant groups were less dense and homogeneous, resulting in distinct daily comparison groups for immigrant children.

Due to the greater variety in regions of origin and educational levels of immigrants, Northern Africans are a more heterogeneous group and have formed less pronounced transplanted communities. Moroccans, the largest group, mainly come from the rural areas of Souss and Anti-Atlas or from cities, and speak different languages. Moroccan immigrants have extended but heterogeneous networks in Belgium, and their immigrant community is smaller in the selected city (Verhaeghe, Van der Bracht & Van de Putte 2012). Immigrant communities of other Northern African countries appeared to be even more heterogeneous. This heterogeneity was reflected in the references students made to the daily comparison groups, as one referred to extended family members, others mentioned people they met during religious activities or neighbours. For instance, Marjan retrieved more information from her friends she met during a religious course within her community:

Interviewer: "Do you know many people that can provide you information about higher education?"

Marjan (Algerian descent): "I have some acquaintances that have finished their bachelor and are starting their master. They could help me when preparing their exams and stuff."

I: "How do you know them?"

M: "I was enrolled in a course at the Mosque to learn to read and write Arab. I was the youngest of the group. I had the time of my life and we kept contact."

During the interview, Marjan made clear that having friends that pursued higher education made her more familiar with the idea of being enrolled in higher education. In this interview,

it appeared that these friends stimulated her over the course of her school career to continue to do an effort for school, and helped her overcoming problems of discrimination. Her network existed out of a wider variety of students of different Northern African countries, which also appeared to be the case for many students coming from these regions in our sample.

Finally, most of the students of Eastern European descent referred to their country of origin when evaluating educational opportunities. However, this did not help them in concrete situations and everyday school life. These students did not mention to be part of an extended immigrant network and as result did not experience strong social control or support from within their immigrant group. Settlement patterns reflect their individual immigration, political situation and ethnic conflicts in their countries of origin (Paspalanova, 2006). Consequently, the daily comparison groups of the majority of students of Eastern European descent differed from those of Turkish and Northern African descent. Nine (out of 15) of them mentioned the lack of actual comparison groups that helped them to deal with daily school life:

Walter (Albanian descent): “Yes, I compare myself with my friends outside school because I cannot compare myself with the rest, certainly not with those from Albania. I don’t know anyone there, so I cannot compare myself with anyone, it’s a disaster. At school, I cannot compare myself with the situation at home of the other [immigrant] students because I have another situation.”

In this quote, Walter suggests that he had to do more effort and search for a specific daily comparison group as he could not find this in his immediate school environment. Further, Walter’s quote suggests the importance of variation within the voluntary immigrant group, which was also a critique on Ogbu’s (2008) theory (e.g. Foster, 2004; Gibson, 1997; Luciak, 2004). Due to their recent migration and dispersed immigrant community, some students did not encounter a daily comparison group that would help them when making educational choices. Others relied on people within their immediate environment, such as the classroom or extracurricular activity, suggesting considerable variety within this group in finding daily comparison groups. Consequently, these students had to search elsewhere to get more information about the educational system and help them when making choices. A couple of these students mentioned the support of specific ‘informants’ or representatives of Belgian society, such as teachers, colleagues of their parents or neighbours. These informants could help students mainly with respect to making educational choices, however, students could not use these informants when evaluating their educational behaviour.

To conclude, students of Turkish descent could rely on an extensive, homogeneous, dense immigrant community with an overall low achievement level, which gave easily access to comparable peers. By contrast, Northern African immigrant communities were extended but more heterogeneous in terms of region of origin, language and educational background, which was reflected in their daily comparison groups. Finally, due to the individual migration and conflicts in the regions of origin, variation in language and educational background, people coming from Eastern European regions had less access to comparable network members and had to do more effort to find people that could help them during their school career. This variety in structural characteristics of immigrant networks in Ghent seemed to give different access to educational resources, support and information and the development of specific standards of achievement. This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

#### *Daily comparison groups and educational behaviour and choices*

Finding daily comparison groups seemed to matter for students' educational outcomes, as they support and guide students throughout their educational career mainly in two ways: (1) by setting standards of achievement and (2) providing support and educational resources.

First, considering the achievement levels, the collective (discriminatory) employment experiences of network members and educational behaviour of peers within these networks appeared to nuance students' definitions of success and gave rise to the development of distinct standards of achievement and occupational aspirations. Many immigrant community members work in poor and difficult working conditions or experience labour market discrimination (see quote Powergirl). Consequently, they are frequently used as a reference of what someone should *not* want to do but do not necessarily lead students to better future objectives. For instance, Powergirl did not want to end up in the same working conditions as her mother, which made her dream of anything else, without giving particular attention to specifying her future goals.

Second, these daily comparison groups seemed to matter for information sharing, guidance and support as students would often turn to people facing similar problems when dealing with specific problems. Consequently, the existing knowledge about the educational system, level of education and standards within these comparison groups could explain part of the variability in educational behaviour and choices of students of immigrant descent. For students with more educational resources in their family and/or immigrant networks, it was easier to translate achievement motivation into actual educational achievement. These resources could exist out of actual support when making homework, track choices,

knowledge about the Flemish educational system and/or parental control. For instance, when talking about changing to less demanding tracks, such as technical or vocational tracks, many students referred to their friends or family members who were also enrolled in such tracks and who had to do a smaller amount of homework. Other students, like Marjan (see quote), mentioned to be inspired by the educational experiences of their network members, which seemed to help them to achieve more than their parents. Additionally, when members of these daily comparison groups are less familiar with, have less knowledge about the educational system or do not have a similar educational background, it is harder to find someone who can help to achieve in school and make educational choices in line with personal capacities and aspirations:

Tarik (Moroccan descent): “I didn’t know. I didn’t get any information. My parents didn’t know anything, they just enrolled me in the Electrics course [vocational track].”

Tarik was immediately enrolled in the vocational track, leaving him few opportunities to change to academic/technical tracks afterwards. As he and his family had very limited knowledge about the Flemish educational system, this restricted his future occupational career possibilities considerably. Similar experiences of failing to make informed choices in the beginning of the secondary education were frequently found by students who could rely less on their networks. The importance of such daily comparison groups appeared to matter mainly for the available cultural capital that could be shared and access to different sorts of information. For example, students who compared one selves with peers who had a similar knowledge about the educational system, made comparable decisions which resulted in a cyclic process of educational choice making. Consequently, these findings add to previous research suggesting that immigrant networks possess varying degrees of ethnic capital, including both social and cultural capital (from their country of origin) (e.g. Zhou & Bankston, 1994; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Archer & Francis, 2006) and would benefit from having access to networks that give access to relevant information (see also Granovetter, 1973), or set (high) standards of success.

To conclude, daily comparison groups seemed to matter for students’ educational outcomes in two ways: by setting educational standards and giving access to resourceful and information-rich networks. Depending on the available comparison groups, mainly within immigrant networks, and characteristics of these immigrant networks, these daily comparison groups might affect the educational outcomes of students differently.

#### 7.4. DISCUSSION

This study builds on a large body of social psychological research on the importance of students' frames of reference in making educational choices by focusing on how ethnic minority students' use of particular reference groups relates to structural characteristics of their social environment and how this in turn informs their educational achievement. In addition, this study starts from a long line of (mainly US based) research on Ogbu's cultural ecological theory and criticism of this theory by examining ethnic minority students' frames of reference in three different voluntary immigrant groups in the context of Flanders. In so doing, this study considers variability between voluntary immigrant groups in terms of their migration history, their relationship with the dominant society and immigrant community characteristics. This is important as the situation of immigrant groups in the receiving country is not determined by their initial migration motivation, as argued by Ogbu (2008), but seems to depend more on immigrant networks, generational status, perceptions and experiences of collective problems (van Zanten, 1997; Gibson, 1997; Hermans, 2004). Finally, by focusing on the educational experiences of Eastern European, Turkish and North African groups, this study compares two groups that are extensively studied in Europe (Turkish and North African immigrants) with each other and with a group (Eastern European immigrants) that is relatively understudied in a European context. In sum, this study was innovative as it explored the varying ways students' frames of references could matter for students' educational outcomes and how this seemed to vary across different immigrant groups.

Our analysis of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with students in three Flemish secondary schools in Belgium shows that a distinction could be made between general frames of reference and daily comparison groups. Analogue to Mickelson's (1990) distinction between abstract and concrete school attitudes, the actual living situation one finds him/herself in and related opportunities, appeared to matter for students' educational behaviour. Furthermore, our findings are in line with the conceptual framework of Rosen (1956), in which achievement orientations are studied separately from the conditions to realize achievement. Although scholars have debated the value of abstract school attitudes for educational outcomes (e.g. Downey, Ainsworth & Qian, 2009; Mickelson, 1990; 2001; Tyson, 2002; Carter; 2005; Harris, 2006; Herman, 2009), our data suggests that students used their general frames of references when evaluating educational opportunities, which appeared to relate to study motivation. While recently arrived students of Eastern European descent refer to the poorer educational opportunities in the country of origin and their parents'

migration motivations, students of Turkish and North African descent framed their opportunities into the conditions in the immigrant country. Despite the distinct country students referred to, all students seemed to be motivated to achieve in school due to this overall comparison with the living conditions of people within their frame of reference.

When translating such general achievement motivation into educational behaviour, students referred to daily comparison groups that helped them to make decisions in everyday situations, such as making homework, and educational choices, such as track choice. The importance of daily comparison groups seemed especially important in educational systems, like the Flemish one, that rely more on individual agency when making educational choices (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). However, when making such choices and decisions, students seemed to refer to specific comparable peers, mostly within their immigrant community, as they have to face similar migration-specific problems, such as adaptation problems or problems related to ethnic discrimination. Comparing with their Belgian counterparts was often not perceived as an option as these students do not have to face similar problems.

Nevertheless, while the connectedness with one's immigrant group could enhance educational outcomes, its relationship with achievement is not guaranteed (Oyserman, Brickman & Rhodes, 2007). Actual educational behaviour appeared to depend on the prevailing standards of achievement and the available support and educational resources within immigrant networks. To fully grasp the impact of reference groups on educational outcomes, attention should be given to how capital and knowledge is shared and used within these networks and comparison groups. The content and strength of the ties in these networks, as argued by Granovetter (1973), seemed to determine the extent to which ethnic networks may add to educational achievement, study motivation and aspirations. For example, our results indicate that being part of a resource-full network, which was the case for students of North African descent with higher-educated family members ('strong ties'), helped to create a demanding comparison group that guides studying practices. While the dense, homogeneous Turkish networks seemed to help to strengthen students' ethnic identity and sense of belonging, there are less 'bridging' ties, giving access to other networks that diffuse information. Finally, students of Eastern European descent lack an extended immigrant network that could help them to cope with adaptation problems, compare their educational strategies and base their educational aspirations on. Although they sometimes benefitted from the knowledge and information shared through 'weak ties', such as neighbours or teachers. These findings further demonstrate the importance of ethnic (social and cultural) capital as most students of immigrant descent seemed to refer mainly to



immigrant networks or the lack of it (e.g. Zhou & Bankston, 1994; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Archer & Francis, 2006) and how daily comparison groups affect educational outcomes differently.

Some limitations of this study should be presented. First, the theoretical sampling was based on school criteria and this had some consequences for the sample. Schools that were included had a considerable proportion of students of non-Belgian descent. However, the selection of students was entirely based on their school enrolment and not on individual characteristics. Second, achievement results could not be included due to the lack of a centralized evaluation system in Belgium. This made it impossible to compare outcomes between tracks and schools and test the impact of these comparison groups.

Based on these findings, policy makers could actively work on the dispersion of knowledge about the educational system and future opportunities, raise standards of achievement for all students, strengthen ethnic communities (e.g. role models) and establish more weak ties outside the immigrant community. For instance, organizing extracurricular activities and homework guidance for students of immigrant descent in their neighbourhood might be helpful. This way, information could be shared and students would find more easily peers with whom they could compare themselves and help them when facing challenges from society, such as adaptation problems or issues related to discrimination. Another policy implication of this paper concerns the impact of discrimination and perceived 'blocked opportunities' (e.g. Kao & Tienda, 1995; 1998; Mickelson, 1990) on students' comparison groups and by extension, educational careers. This suggests the need for social policies that provide students coping strategies to deal with discrimination (Brondolo et al., 2009), or actively (and structurally) challenge discrimination on the labour market, schools and media.

Finally, future research could build on this study by comparing the attitudes of parents and students (Hermans, 2004), include additional school and societal factors, (such as school management, media) and interaction with other issues related to identity and culture (Ogbu, 2008). Furthermore, interactions with individual characteristics, such as gender, have to be considered as oppositional attitudes (Mickelson, 2008) vary across gender. Finally, it seems theoretically interesting to test how these general frames of references and daily comparison groups differ from students of Belgian descent (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998





## **THE SKY'S THE LIMIT**

Sky is the limit and you know that you keep on

Just keep on pressin' on

Sky is the limit and you know that you can have

what you want, be what you want, have what you want, be what you want

**NOTORIOUS B.I.G.**



## 8. 'IS THE SKY REALLY THE LIMIT?': EXPLORING THE ATTITUDE-ACHIEVEMENT PARADOX IN THE BELGIAN CONTEXT

**Lore Van Praag, Fanny D'hondt, Peter Stevens, Mieke Van Houtte**

### **Abstract**

While immigrant students in Belgium have expressed high educational aspirations, this was not reflected in their achievement results if we compare them with ethnic majority students. As outlined by Mickelson (1990), we will try to explain this attitude-achievement paradox and understand why these high aspirations are not translated into actual achievement results. - Ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with students from ten class groups in three Flemish schools (northern part of Belgium) were used to explore the nature of this paradox. Our findings indicate that all students generally believe in the importance of education to get ahead in Belgian society. Analyses reveal that – although students of immigrant descent want to achieve in society – they perceive more barriers to become successful, such as labour market discrimination, and figured out distinct coping strategies to avoid such barriers.

## 8.1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the Second World War, immigrants came to Belgium to have better educational and employment opportunities in order to achieve social upward mobility. Consequently, these upward mobility aspirations appeared to be reflected in immigrants' optimistic attitudes towards education and high educational aspirations (see also Ogbu, 1983; 2008; Grant & Sleeter, 1988; Kao & Tienda, 1995; 1998; Kao, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2001). Nevertheless, empirical findings indicate that, in spite of their positive attitudes towards schooling, many immigrants and their descendants perform lower in school compared to ethnic majority students, which is also the case in Flanders (northern part of Belgium) (Van Praag, Stevens & Van Houtte, 2013). One influential study in this line of research concerns an article written by Mickelson (1990). In this article, she tried to explain a similar attitude-achievement paradox among black adolescents in the United States by exploring black students' attitudes towards education more in-depth. Based on quantitative analyses of data from black adolescents, she found that beliefs about education are multi-layered and distinguished general from concrete attitudes towards education. Black adolescents held high general positive attitudes towards education, such as the perception that education is the key success factor in the future and poverty could come to an end through education. However, there seems to be little variation in these general beliefs in education, as these attitudes are broadly defined ideologically and culturally based on beliefs present in the dominant society. Furthermore, they refer to the ideal relation between education and opportunity and do not seem to apply to all opportunities and constraints perceived by students. Therefore, Mickelson demonstrated the existence of a second belief system, which is situational specific and based on the material realities people experience. Her analyses reveal that students developed concrete attitudes towards education, based on the perceived rewards from educational credentials that reflect the ways in which class, race and gender differences have shaped opportunity structures.

While Mickelson's theory (1990) was reaffirmed in some later studies (e.g. Mickelson, 2001; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2006; Herman, 2009) not all scholars could replicate her findings (e.g. Downey, 2008; Downey, Ainsworth & Qian, 2009). Some scholars found evidence for specific parts of Mickelson's theory. For instance, previous research found that ethnic minority students were more sceptical about their future opportunities and rewards for educational credentials (e.g. Ogbu, 1983; 2008; Phalet, et al., 2004; Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco, & Hughes, 2010). These sceptical attitudes were found to be related to a variety of

educational outcomes (e.g. Andriessen et al., 2006) and/or coping strategies to deal with these perceived constraints and opportunities (e.g. Ogbu, 1983; 2008; Flores-González, 1999; Thompson & Gregory, 2011; O'Hara et al., 2012). Other scholars searched for alternative explanations that could explain Mickelson's findings, such as the legitimacy of blacks' optimism about education, the limited exposure to school-related skills or the fear of confirming black intelligence inferiority (Downey, 2008). Finally, failing to replicate Mickelson's findings could be due to the context specific character of concrete attitudes. In sum, while Mickelson's study inspired many scholars, there is less clarity about the development of distinct sets of belief systems with respect to the value of education. Furthermore, if different belief systems exist, little explorative research has been done to identify which factors contribute to the development of these attitudes.

In the present study, we build further on sociological research on the attitude-achievement paradox by first exploring the existence of distinct sets of school attitudes by students of Turkish, Northern African and Belgian descent in Flanders. Furthermore, we will examine factors that might contribute to the development of concrete attitudes with respect to education building further on previous research suggesting that ethnic minority and majority students experience and perceive particular constraints and opportunities in the immigrant society (Hermans, 2004). This makes their situation comparable to the situation described for blacks in the United States. By considering the national context, the situational specific character of concrete school attitudes and how these are developed in reaction to society and relate to perceptions of future opportunities and constraints, can be studied. However, before presenting our results, we offer a brief overview of the research methods underlying the analyses.

## 8.2. RESEARCH METHODS

Ethnographic research was conducted in three schools in a large Flemish city: St Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College. St Bernardus is a medium-sized (444 students), Catholic, co-educational and multilateral school that offers the vocational, technical and academic tracks. Mountain High is a large (1159 students), secular co-educational and categorical school that only offers the academic track. Catherine College is a medium-sized (404 students), secular co-educational and categorical school that offers the technical and vocational tracks. In St Bernardus, Mountain High and Catherine College respectively, 41.44%; 13.54% and 27.48% of the students spoke another language at home than Dutch, which serves as an indicator for the proportion of students of non-Belgian descent.



Fieldwork was carried out between 2009 and 2012 and interviews were conducted with students, teachers and other school personnel. Initial explorations were made by observing students' daily lives and as starting point for the interviews. Theoretical sampling was based on the track composition of the schools, the number of students of non-Belgian descent in each school and the track/field of study within a school. Students from nine class groups from the penultimate year of secondary education (comparable with Year twelve in the UK or eleventh Grade in the USA) and one post-secondary vocational one-year specialization year were included. This specialisation course is attached to a secondary school (St Bernardus), allows students to take part in school-based apprenticeships and gives them the opportunity to access higher education afterwards and enhance professional skills. Due to grade retention and delayed entry in secondary school, the age range of this sample varied between sixteen and twenty-three years (ideally this would be between sixteen and seventeen years). Each class group was observed for two or three weeks (approximately 80 hours for each group). In line with the definition of 'ethnic background' of social policy makers in Belgium (Opdenakker & Hermans, 2006), students are categorized as being of non-Belgian descent if their maternal grandmother was not born in Belgium. Out of the sample of 129 respondents, there were thirty-three students of Turkish descent and eighteen of North African descent and fifty-two students of Belgian descent. In our sample, most of students of Turkish and North African descent were born and raised in Belgium (except for three Turkish students) and can be considered 'second generation immigrants'.

Class groups were observed in all their school activities by an 'observer as a participant' (Gold, 1958), after which semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the students and some of the teachers of each class group. The periods of observation in each class allowed the researcher to build rapport with respondents and make detailed observations of classroom, playground and staffroom interactions. During interviews, students were asked about their achievements in school, support from family, peers and teachers; future aspirations, teachers, sense of belonging in school, educational trajectories and migration background. A short questionnaire was administered with questions about their socio-economic background, religion, family composition and ethnic heritage. Data was collected using an exploratory approach, following a cyclical process of collection and analysis, as is customary with a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to qualitative data analysis. Results correspond to themes that emerged during the course of this study and have therefore been 'grounded' in our data. Data analyses started from the carefully collected data, existing out of (electronic) field notes and transcriptions of full-tape recorded interviews. The

computer software (Nvivo) was used to facilitate comprehensiveness, application of principles of grounded theory, the constant comparative technique, and method triangulation. Data analyses were in line with the general coding processes as formulated by grounded theory, starting from open coding and writing memos to selective and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The anonymity of the respondents is preserved by replacing their real names with pseudonyms chosen by them. All citations are translated from Dutch. In the following sections, we will describe students' beliefs in the instrumental value of education in general and whether these translated in similar, concrete educational expectations and choices. Finally, we will try to understand processes and factors that explain this attitude-achievement paradox in the Flemish context.

### 8.3. GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION

Jean-Jacques: 'Do you know Biggie [Smalls, Notorious B.I.G, musician], Madam? That's a famous American rapper. He said once: 'No dream is too big, the sky is the limit'. If you belief in something, you can achieve whatever you want. I think that should be everyone's motto.' (Turkish descent, academic track)

As illustrated in the quote of Jean-Jacques, many students had high aspirations and believed in the possibility to '*achieve whatever you want*'. Resulting from our data, both students of Belgian and immigrant descent wanted to achieve success in society which was often described in general terms as having a 'good' job with a 'good' salary and a 'high' job satisfaction. Both students of Belgian and immigrant descent seemed to have similar optimistic attitudes towards school. Nevertheless, many students of immigrant descent framed the importance they attach to education into the idea that their parents had migrated to achieve a better future and educational opportunities (see also Ogbu, 1983; 2008; Kao & Tienda, 1995), or in their national ideology or religion. Students stated things like '*Islam is learning*' and '*obtaining a diploma is normally a typical Turkish thing*'. Additionally, these ideas were in line with the importance their parents attach to education. For example, according to Claudia, her mother often said '*if you go to school, do your best, then you will have a 'good' life and ensure that your children will have a 'good' life too*'. (Albanian descent, academic track). As illustrated by Claudia's quote, many students of immigrant descent stated that their parents stimulated them to achieve in school by stressing the importance of education for future life opportunities, often by giving examples of possible jobs they could perform when seeing someone on the street or on television. Similar

optimistic abstract attitudes of students of immigrant descent were also found in a quantitative study in the Flemish context (D'hondt et al., *n.d.*).

Despite this general belief in the instrumentality of education, previous research has shown that not all students translated these optimistic attitudes into high achievement results (see overview Flanders Van Praag et al., 2013). This was also reflected in our data. Given the importance of track choices in the Flemish educational system, track choices and the associated societal appreciation of these tracks, can be seen as an outcome of educational success. It seems that even though students of immigrant descent opted for less esteemed tracks (i.e. technical/vocational tracks), they strongly attached importance to the value of education. In addition, there appears to be an unequal distribution of ethnic groups across tracks. For instance, while half of the students of Turkish and Northern African descent in our sample was enrolled in vocational tracks, compared to technical and academic tracks, this was only the case for one third of the students of Belgian descent. Consequently, this research indicates the existence of an attitude-achievement paradox in Flanders. Therefore, in the following section, we will explore whether this apparent attitude-achievement paradox can be (partly) explained by the existence of a double set of attitudes towards education, as was found in the study of Mickelson (1990). Further analyses of students' attitudes towards education might reveal a second set of more concrete school attitudes that refer more to students' personal situation, perceived constraints and opportunities.

#### 8.4. CONCRETE ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION

Our analyses indicate that students seemed to have ambivalent interpretations of attitudes towards education, certainly when they refer to their personal situation, perceived constraints and opportunities, which is in line with Mickelson (1990). All students subscribe the general optimistic ideas about the role of schooling in society to achieve success. However, these general attitudes could not always be applied to students' personal lives or were interpreted differently. This appeared to be the case for students of Turkish and Northern African descent. In line with Mickelson (1990), these students seemed to have developed situational specific attitudes towards education, to which we will refer to as 'concrete attitudes'. Thus, in the next paragraphs, we will a) compare students' interpretations of general attitudes, and b) test how these attitudes were developed in reaction to expectations/perceptions of constraints and opportunities.

#### 8.4.1. INTERPRETATIONS OF ‘SUCCESS’

In her study Mickelson (1990) explained the existence of a second, more situational specific set of attitudes by referring to limited opportunities and perceived constraints. Less attention has been paid to what students actually refer to when stating that ‘schooling is important to get ahead in society’. However, students of different ethnic descent may interpret ‘getting ahead’ or ‘the role of schooling’ differently than other students. In the United States, Downey (2008) already suggested that black adolescents have less access to school-related skills, habits and styles, due to social and physical isolation, which may explain the lower ability to translate optimistic school attitudes into high achievement results. Building further on Downey’s suggestion, our analyses indicate that similar social and physical isolation could also have led to particular definitions of ‘success’ and ‘getting ahead’ in society. These definitions seemed to reflect existing resources, opportunities and labour market conditions within students’ immigrant networks (see also Mickelson, 1990; Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Phalet et al., 2004; Ogbu, 2008). As most students of Turkish and Northern African descent lived in neighbourhoods where the majority has a low socio-economic or migration background (Verhaeghe et al., 2012), they were more often confronted with difficult working conditions and jobs with a low status. This was reflected in these students’ aspirations as most of them wanted to achieve better than their comparison groups, mainly stressing what they did *not* want to become (see Matthew, 2011). Thus instead of specifying their future goals and professions, students mentioned specific job conditions they wanted to avoid, including physically hard labour, low wages, insecure labour market position, racism or low levels of independency. As a result, students of immigrant descent expressed more often blurry and vague descriptions of their future professional/educational aspirations. For instance, many students of immigrant descent like Feriha wanted to perform ‘office work’ or merely described features of the job they wanted to perform without referring to an actual job content or relating this to a specific profession:

Feriha: ‘I would like to work in a place where you have to be dressed, where you have to be pretty. Somewhere where nobody can enter easily, like a private place, or an office, that would be nice.’  
(Macedonian descent, academic track)

Feriha’s job description applies to a variety of jobs, ranging from general practitioner, an administrative work force, translator to sociologist, but this was often not (yet) specified. Others wanted to ‘have a good job’ to support their future family. Furthermore, they indicated that they wanted to earn ‘sufficient’ money, again without giving more specific job

descriptions. Similar general, vague definitions of future aspirations and goals were also found for blacks and Hispanics in the United States (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Consequently, students' positive attitudes towards education could refer to both high and lower status jobs and did not really help students when making educational choices, such as track choice or pursuing higher education. In sum, most students of Turkish and Northern African descent seemed to have developed definitions of success in line with the labour market conditions and jobs they are familiar with, often resulting in rather vague and open interpretations of success and future goals.

By contrast, it seemed that for students of Belgian descent, parental working experiences seemed to *guide* or *inspire* them when making educational choices:

Arnoud: 'I wanted to be someone who could say: 'I'm getting my hands dirty when I work', instead of getting dirty by rolling in the mud.'

Researcher: 'How come you knew this already since you were little?'

Arnoud: 'Because of my father, I always liked to 'work', to work really hard. He always said that we should work hard (...). I always wanted to help my father when he was doing something.' (Belgian descent, vocational track)

These frames of references guided students in making specific educational choices and appeared to be stimulated by their parents. When suggesting future goals, parents of Belgian descent seemed to prepare their children for similar jobs (see also Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). For instance, Shana (Belgian descent, Sales) mentioned that her father works as a longshoreman and wanted his daughter to become one too, frequently taking her to his workplace. Other students were mainly inspired by their parents' jobs and friends. For example, Rhea (Belgian descent, Human Science) wanted to study psychology and was already familiar with it because of her friends, who were already enrolled in psychology at university, and her father, a psychiatrist, and his friends.

Taken together, ethnic differences were found with respect to the interpretations of 'achieving success through education'. Frames of references of students of immigrant descent appeared to determine what they did not want to become, resulting in a variety of possible and ambiguously formulated future professions and goals. By contrast, students of Belgian descent seemed to be more guided by their frames of references in considering and defining specific future goals. These findings are innovative as scholars often neglected students' interpretations of 'success' and 'getting ahead' more precisely. For instance, Mickelson (1990) and Matthew (2011) presented their respondents broadly defined questions so students

could interpret terms like ‘success’, ‘having a good job’, ‘good education’ or ‘better life than parents’ freely within their specific frame of reference. Instead of doubting the reliability of ethnic minority students’ answers (see Downey, 2008; Matthew, 2011), quantitative survey questions with respect to ‘success’ should be more sensitive to the relative and contextual meaning of this concept. Nevertheless, the finding that students of Turkish and Northern African descent expressed more open and vaguely described definitions of success is interesting as this seemed to be associated with the development of personal future goals and, consequently, direction when making educational choices.

The development of specific future goals when making initial educational choices, such as track choice, was especially important in the Flemish educational system. Students (and their parents) have considerable freedom and power in track choice decisions (Van Houtte, 2004; Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Consequently, students need to have sufficient knowledge about the Flemish educational system and know which future goals they want to pursue. For instance, many students of immigrant descent in vocational tracks mentioned to regret their initial educating choices as they did not know exactly what kind of education and related future employment opportunities were characteristic of such tracks. Other students found it hard to choose an appropriate track to realize their future goals. These stories contrasted with the accounts of students of Belgian descent, who appeared to be more aware of the consequences of their educational choices.

Once enrolled in a specific track, both students of Belgian and immigrant descent were prepared – during courses – for specific jobs and seemed to adapt their future goals to this. For example, students in academic and technical tracks mentioned the variety of (higher education) opportunities they could choose from after graduating, while those in vocational tracks appeared to be more or less confined by the track they had chosen and more oriented towards jobs that are in line with these track:

Punjami: ‘I think it’s important that I am enrolled in a track for some purpose and I want to perform a job that suits this track. For starting a car wash you need your certificate of business management [which he will obtain in Sales]. I want to be able to say ‘I didn’t study seven years for nothing’.’

Starting from this quote, it seemed that Punjami searching for specific future jobs or plans in line with the track he was enrolled in. This seemed to motivate him to proceed and finish secondary education. Having specific future goals school and instrumental value of education appeared to be related to each other (see also Portes & MacLeod, 1996; McInerney, 2004; Phalet et al., 2004).

In sum, students of Turkish and Northern African descent seemed to define ‘success’ in contrast with their parental working conditions. Doing so, they appeared to have developed more vaguely and open future goals compared to students of Belgian descent. Having broadly defined future goals appeared to complicate the decision-making process of educational choices, often strengthened by a lack of knowledge of the Flemish educational system, and finally educational outcomes. Given the large variety of future professions students wanted to perform, a broad variety of future possibilities were available. Furthermore, when developing more specific future goals over the course of secondary education, students seemed to adapt their aspirations and attitudes towards education to the perceived constraints and opportunities, related to their immigrant background, which will be discussed in the following section.

#### 8.4.2. PERCEIVED CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The respondents in this sample were selected based on the grade they were enrolled in secondary education, namely fifth year, which is the penultimate year of secondary education which allowed us to ask retrospective questions about students’ school career and changes over time. Over the course of students’ school careers, experiences and perceptions of discrimination appeared to play a role in various ways. It seemed that such experiences and perceptions affected students’ track choices, school misconduct and study involvement mainly in first years of their secondary school career for a particular period of time. This seems to contrast with previous research that often assumed that discrimination would result in a total loss of motivation to put effort in school or the development of anti-school attitudes (e.g. Ogbu, 1983; 2008). Nevertheless, these experiences and expectations of discrimination were often mentioned by students as they had a considerable impact on their school career. Many students have changed track/field of study, so they would have to put less effort in school, changed school, to avoid a particular person that discriminated against this student, or did not want to put any effort in school which often caused them to repeat their year. Students’ reactions towards experiences/perceptions of discrimination within this period of time seemed to depend on support and guidance of parents, peers and significant others. Thus, although experiences and perceptions of discrimination have affected the school career of many students of immigrant considerably, it seemed that this did not leave all these students disappointed for their entire school career but rather shaped the course of their school career. In the last years of secondary education, and thus for the respondents in this sample, experiences and perceptions of discrimination appeared to guide students in the

development of their future aspirations and goals (see also McInerney, 2004). These results seem to indicate the differential impact of discrimination for students' school career and outcomes over time. In the present study, most attention will be given to the ways students were coping with discrimination at the time of the research. Nevertheless, both are important to consider as findings indicate that students of immigrant descent in fifth year of secondary education had adjusted their aspirations and goals to their previously made choices, such as tracks they were enrolled in, and searched for strategies to cope with discrimination when developing their future goals and aspirations, as illustrated in Rayan's quote:

Rayan: 'It's clear that it [finding a job] will be easier when your name is Van den Abeele than when your name is El Morabet. It's just like that.'

Researcher: 'Do you sometimes anticipate on that?'

Rayan: 'You can't really take it into account. When I will search a job, I will... I don't know, not all jobs are equal. For example, people who transport money, I have never seen a Moroccan, or an Arab working there. I always paid attention to that but I have never seen it. Some people generalize the behaviour of some stupid persons [with an immigrant background] and that's not a good thing.'

In line with previous research in Flanders (e.g. Hermans, 2004; Glorieux, Laurijssen & Van Dorsselaer, 2009) and many other ethnic minority students in our sample, Rayan expected to be discriminated against on the labour market. Moreover, our results indicate that many respondents perceived that some jobs are more often confronted with discrimination than others. The majority of students of Turkish and Northern African descent perceived or had experienced some forms of discrimination, such as being called names for wearing a headscarf, people preferring to not sit next to them in public transportation or teacher discrimination.

These experiences or perceptions of discrimination appeared to have influenced students when making educational choices and developing future goals. Varieties in the strategies to face discrimination were ample, and demonstrated that students actually took such perceptions into account when setting out future goals or during their school career. The data suggests the usefulness of Mellor's (2004) inductively constructed classification of coping styles in response to racism, with most of the students in our sample using defensive coping styles that enables them to protect the self, instead of controlled or counter-attacking coping styles, that are respectively aimed at exercising self-control or confronting racism. Several defensive coping strategies to deal with (perceived) discrimination were found in our sample. First, many students of immigrant descent explicitly mentioned to avoid particular jobs in which they thought they would be confronted with some form of discrimination.



Therefore, students opted for jobs in which students perceive to be less confronted with discrimination. For example, Fenerli (Turkish descent, academic track) indicated that she expects to avoid discriminatory experiences when you are an entrepreneur because of a selection effect: only immigrant-friendly people will visit you and you do not depend on racist employers. When searching for these jobs, students considered their personal interests (e.g. mathematics or hairdressing) and the possibilities associated with the track they are enrolled in (e.g. higher education or not, learned skills).

Second, having a diploma of secondary or higher education was sometimes seen as a strategy to cope with discrimination. While some students merely referred to the objective protective function of a diploma on the labour market, others saw getting a diploma as a way to prove racists to be wrong and demonstrate their worthiness. For instance, Hande stated to *'study for 'them' because 'they' treat you in a discriminatory way'* (Turkish descent, academic track). Like many others, she wanted to become a role model for her immigrant community, improving overall achievement levels, and counteracting prevailing negative stereotypes about the immigrant group. Although attempting to achieve is categorized by Mellor (2004) as a defensive coping style, it could also be seen as a counter-attacking style in which they could confront people with racism. School achievement was perceived by some of these students as a way to seek revenge on racists or 'prove them wrong'. While Mellor (2004) perceived 'seeking revenge' in a physical way, it could be interpreted in more pacifist and/or academic terms as well. In sum, students used several ways to deal with different forms of discrimination, namely avoiding discrimination by wanting to perform specific jobs, attempting to achieve and prove worthiness which eventually seemed to affect their educational outcomes.

The choice for specific coping strategies should be studied within its context (Mellor, 2004; Brondolo et al., 2009). In response to (anticipated) racism, some students seemed to rely on their local ethnic community for support. For example, Bilal (Moroccan descent, Car Mechanics, lives in another city with extensive Moroccan immigrant networks) relied on his immigrant networks as he suggested that you can work as a car mechanic even though you do not have an officially declared job. He argued that when something is broke from a friend's car, he will fix it and set a price himself (see also Ogbu's (1983) 'street economy'). Other students referred more to starting an independent business, such as a Turkish bakery, restaurant or grocery store, focusing on clients from their own ethnic community. Additionally, students often referred to the overall lower share of ethnic minorities in high status jobs, higher education and/or academic tracks. This overall lower average achievement

level of co-community members seemed to stimulate students to achieve in school, have high aspirations and/or to become a role model for their immigrant community. Thus, the idea to start an independent business/profession that could flourish in a local ethnic economy, becoming a role model or to counter the prevailing negative stereotypes (see also Ogbu, 2008) seemed to be of greater relevance for students embedded in extensive local immigrant networks. Students' choices for more defensive coping styles can be understood from the nature of the perceived discrimination. Avoidance might be perceived as one of the only ways to deal with such perceptions as it seems difficult to change such inequalities or to confront or react against actors who perpetuate such mechanisms of exclusion.

In sum, our findings illustrate the variability in ways to deal with perceptions and experiences of discrimination over time. Furthermore, our results suggest the importance of context characteristics, such as local immigrant networks, and considering the nature of discrimination when choosing a specific coping style (see also Mellor, 2004). Additionally, our findings indicate that the ways students try to deal with discrimination matter for their final educational outcomes and behaviour (see also Ogbu, 1983; 2008; Eccles, Wong & Peck 2006). While facing or perceiving discrimination seemed to lead to a loss of study motivation, change of track and/or more school misconduct in the first years of secondary education, in the last years, this seemed to result in a broad range of 'alternative' pathways to educational and professional success, compared to members of dominant society. Finally, the possibility to address alternative labour market segments and search for specific future professions that are expected to encounter less problems of discrimination, fit together with the relatively lower standards and more broad definitions of 'success' of students of immigrant descent, when seen from a dominant perspective.

## 8.5. CONCLUSION

In Belgium, immigrants and their children obtain lower levels of achievement in secondary education and are overrepresented in the less esteemed tracks, compared to students of Belgian descent (Van Praag, Stevens & Van Houtte 2013). These achievement results contrast with the upward social mobility aspirations and optimistic general attitudes towards education many of these students have. In the present study, we tried to examine the processes that underly the development of distinct belief systems with respect to education for students of immigrant descent. Mickelson (1989, 1990) suggested the existence of a second belief system which is situational specific and based on the material realities people experience. However, there is less clarity about the ways in which students have adapted their

strategies to cope with such perceived constraints and opportunities and how this related to educational outcomes. In line with Mickelson's study (1989, 1990, 2001), our results suggest that school attitudes appeared to be multilayered and students seemed to have developed general and concrete attitudes towards education. Most students of immigrant descent indicated that education is important to get ahead and achieve success in society, which is in line with previous findings (e.g. Ogbu, 1983; 2008; Grant & Sleeter 1988; Kao & Tienda 1995; 1998; Kao, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2006; Herman, 2009). Nevertheless, although all students expressed general optimistic beliefs in the value of education, the concrete interpretation of such attitudes seemed to differ for students of immigrant and Belgian descent (Mickelson 1989; 1990; 2001; Rowley, 2000; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2006; Herman, 2009) in distinct ways and for several reasons.

First, most students of immigrant descent had a distinct frame of reference, compared to their peers of Belgian descent, which seemed to have an important influence on how they defined 'success' in school and society, and helped them when setting out educational strategies (see also Ogbu 1983; 2008; Kao, 2000). Referring to labour market experiences of parents and immigrant network members, many of the ethnic minority students in our sample wanted to avoid specific difficult working conditions or low status jobs. Although this resulted in more varied and relatively lower standards of achievement, compared to dominant society, this was not necessarily perceived as such. While students of immigrant descent wanted to avoid their parents' working conditions, students of Belgian descent mentioned more frequently to be guided by the work experiences of their friends and family, helping them to develop specific future goals, which is in line with the study of Valencia and Johnson (2006) in which differences between students of immigrant descent could be found in the expression of academic goals and the knowledge of specific steps to realize their goals. Concluding, the distinct interpretation of educational success could explain in part the previously found attitude-achievement paradox for students of immigrant descent.

Second, (shared) perceptions and experiences of discrimination on the labour market seemed to have influenced the development of future goals and/or demotivated students to put effort in school. Although initially when perceiving future labour market discrimination, students of immigrant descent seemed to result in a lack of study motivation, change of tracks or school misconduct, later, students of immigrant tried to limit their vulnerability for experiences of discrimination by opting for specific jobs, relying on the availability of jobs in the local ethnic economy or being an example for immigrant peers and considering the tracks they are enrolled in. This way, they wanted to ensure their possibilities to achieve success.

This seemed to implicate a change in educational behaviour (e.g. making homework, presence at school) or influenced students when making educational choices (e.g. track choice, pursuing higher education). The findings suggest the usefulness of Mellor's (2004) typology of minorities' coping strategies in response to racism, and show that the minority students in our sample responded to (anticipated) racism primarily by adopting defensive coping styles, which are aimed at protecting the self. This could be explained by minorities' perceived inability to change the occurrence of particular kinds of discrimination. For instance, it might be difficult to confront actors or organisations that install or maintain labour market discrimination. Even more, as it concerns perceptions of discrimination, there are no real actors involved that can be reacted against. This might also explain why a recent collection of studies that focuses on ethnic and racial minorities' choices of particular discourses in response to racism, find that ethnic minorities tend to opt mainly for defensive discourses (Lamont & Mizrachi, 2012).

In sum, distinct interpretations of success and perceptions and experiences of discrimination appeared to nuance students' general optimistic attitudes towards education. More specific, the concrete interpretation of future goals and the ways education could enhance success seemed to depend more on the avoidance of their parents' working conditions, tracks enrolled in and students' perceptions of labour market opportunities and constraints. This complex of factors seemed to be associated with students' educational choices and behaviour, partly explaining ethnic differences in educational outcomes. These differences were even strengthened due to the rigid structure of the Flemish educational system and future opportunities associated with them. Educational choices, such as track enrolled in, continued to play a role in the development of students' educational and occupational aspirations as students set out future goals more or less within the possibilities of the tracks they are enrolled in. Finally, these findings indicate that although students of immigrant descent expressed general optimistic attitudes towards education, these attitudes were not always translated into actual achievement results.

Based on these results, some suggestions for future research can be made. First, our findings indicate that students use distinct coping strategies to avoid or react against discrimination and this seemed to change over time. This calls for more research on how young, ethnic minority students respond to perceived discrimination in education, employment and society, the consequences of adopting particular strategies and the factors and processes informing students' strategies in response to perceived discrimination (see Mellor, 2004; Valencia & Johnson, 2006; Brondolo et al., 2009). Moreover, these perceptions

of barriers to success could differ for personal characteristics such as gender (Wood, Kurtz-Costes & Copping 2011). Second, little attention was paid to the contribution of family characteristics (e.g. parenting practices, support, ideologies, the support of family members, socio-economic status, parental working experiences and conditions) to the development of coping strategies, for example through racial socialisation (Sanders, 1997). Third, the development of future goals and perceptions of discrimination over time (Grant & Sleeter, 1988; O'Hara et al., 2012) or the importance of early educational expectations (Kao & Tienda, 1998) for educational strategies and/or future socio-economic attainment in later life should receive more attention. Additionally, future research should focus on the nature and articulation of students' perceptions of future opportunities (McInerney, 2004; Andriessen et al., 2006). Additionally, more research is needed to further clarify whether future plans shaped by prevalent working conditions in immigrant networks, were based on actual experiences within these networks or part of stereotypical group images (Kao, 2000).

Some limitations of this study should be noted as well. First, it was hard to relate students' optimistic concrete attitudes to actual achievement results in terms of grades due to the lack of standardized tests in the Flemish educational system and variation in evaluation across schools (Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011). Second, only retrospective ideas about students' study involvement were considered. Therefore, no attention could be paid to developments in attitudes towards education over time – apart from those perceived and mentioned by students themselves –, the importance of future goals over the course of the school career and changes in the educational expectations and aspirations. Previous research has indicated that educational expectations tend to be less stable over time for male ethnic minority students (blacks and Hispanics) in the United States (Behnke et al., 2004) and has shown the importance of the early development of concrete educational aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Third, studying students' educational and occupational future goals to understand their school attitudes appeared to be relevant for students who foresaw a future on the labour market. Nevertheless, some girls of Turkish descent of our sample mentioned that, for their personal lives, education seemed useless as they were expected to take care of their future family. This often seemed to have a negative impact on their concrete school attitudes. Family-related factors appeared to be support the instrumental value of education in various ways: to support or care for their future family, to establish a good relationship with their future husband/wife or to be independent, resulting in distinct school attitudes. These family factors seemed to determine whether students were motivated to study to improve success in future family life or when it discouraged them and resulted in a loss of school instrumentality

(see also Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Phalet et al., 2004). However, more research is necessary to fully understand how family-related factors interact with the course of students' educational careers and how this affects educational outcomes (e.g. Crul, 2000).

Some policy recommendations can be made based on the results of this study. In line with previous research, future-oriented motivations were found to matter for the achievement of students of immigrant descent (De Volder & Lens, 1982; Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco & Hughes, 2010). Schools and their personnel should give considerable attention to students' professional orientations throughout the school career, and not only in last years of secondary education (e.g. Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004; O'Hara et al., 2012). This might be important as, in Flanders, track choices are made in the beginning of secondary school and these tracks prepare students for a specific future and are difficult to change later on. Work-based learning may help to enhance students' study motivation as it confronts students with their future plans (Kenny et al., 2010), adjusting their idealistic aspirations, giving them direction in school and work pursuits, enhancing educational attainment. Parents could use similar approaches as well, helping their children to set out more specific concrete future goals (Wood, Kurtz-Costes & Copping, 2011). Furthermore, explicit attention could be given at school about how students could deal with discrimination. It seems that students are creative in finding ways of dealing with perceived future labour market discrimination. Less information is shared between students about the success rates of these coping strategies and actual opportunity structures. Therefore, teachers could help students by giving more accurate information about future opportunities, developing and specifying future goals and teaching more explicitly about the social structure, constraints and opportunities and the position of the students within this structure (Grant & Sleeter, 1988). Finally, companies could stress their anti-discriminatory character and communicate explicitly which objective selection criteria they use to possible future employees.



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## PART III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION





## 9. DISCUSSION

### 9.1. SUCCESS AT SCHOOL?

While most studies have examined factors that could explain the lower levels of educational achievement of ethnic minority students in secondary education, the main aim of this dissertation was to focus on the determinants of success. Nevertheless, success could not be studied totally separately from failure. Moreover, due to the relativity of the concept ‘success’, there are various ways to define success and to evaluate the educational outcomes of ethnic minority students. Furthermore, the importance of the educational outcomes of ethnic groups should be understood within the prevailing meritocratic ethos and the Belgian welfare system. In this welfare system, the costs of (higher) education for families are reduced to a (relative) minimum. This might nourish the idea that everyone has similar opportunities to advance in society and obtain educational credentials. This may as well endorse the idea that people can be sorted into positions, based on individual merit and/or talent, regardless individual background characteristics (Mehan et al., 1994; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Ballantine & Spade, 2012). Hence, as many people perceive educational credentials as an outcome of individual merit and/or talent, existing social and ethnic inequalities seem justified.

The idea that everyone can be sorted into positions based on individual characteristics appears to form the basis of tracking systems. Tracking systems are designed to group students according to their abilities and interests (Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Metz, 1978; Hallinan, 1994; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Sierens et al., 2006). This way, students are selected to fulfil specific professional outcomes (Van Houtte, 2004). Following this tracking philosophy, all students in all tracks can be seen as successful under the condition that these tracks are in line with students’ personal interests, abilities and future goals. Therefore, following this idea, achievement and underachievement should be interpreted in terms of students’ personal capacities and goals, and the ‘success’ of students’ track choice should be individually evaluated. For instance, students can be seen as successful when they succeed all courses of the track that suits them best. Hence, given the relative nature of success and the impact of particular features of educational systems (e.g. tracking system), educational success should be understood in its particular educational context.

In Flanders, the combination of several features of the educational system, such as the organisation of tracks, the possibilities and costs to enter higher education and the lack of

standardized tests at the end of each year (Stevens, 2007a; Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011), has led to an increased importance of tracks as an indicator of success. Therefore, students in academic tracks are more frequently regarded as successful compared to students in vocational tracks. Such variation in societal appreciation can also be found between fields of study (within tracks). For example, within the academic track, being enrolled in Latin-Mathematics enjoys a higher appreciation than being enrolled in Human Sciences. This differential status associated with each track and field of study is acknowledged by all respondents in this study and this appears to influence students' personal evaluation of success. For example, many students who are enrolled in vocational tracks perceive themselves as less successful, compared to peers in academic tracks. However, besides the track students are enrolled in, students seem to have additional criteria to evaluate their personal success in education. Students evaluate their personal success in terms of their efforts and progress, school results, interests, abilities and future goals. While this appears to relate to students' personal ideas of success, these criteria are also part of teachers' evaluation criteria at the end of each school year. Therefore, they are partly determined by the particular features of the educational system.

Due to the lack of standardized tests, teachers enjoy considerable power when evaluating students. In their evaluation criteria, teachers mention to incorporate the behaviour of students in the classroom, the effort they do to get good grades, the progress they make over the course of each year, and the educational trajectory they have followed. For example, when teachers perceive a student to have insufficient abilities or a lack of desire to pursue an academic track, the student will be more frequently given a B certificate at the end of each school year when failing some of his or her courses. Receiving a B certificate signifies that students can pass but have to change to a less demanding field of study or otherwise repeat their year. Other students that have made progress over the course of the school year might be given more easily an A certificate. Thus, after a first evaluation of students' educational success in terms of the tracks they are enrolled in, students appear to define success partially in terms of the evaluation criteria used at school to evaluate students within these tracks.

In sum, although the relative nature of the concept 'success' has left considerable space for a variety of definitions of this concept, the particular features of the educational system appear to guide the prevalent discourses of success. Based on the accounts of students and teachers in this study, track enrolment can be seen as one of the most important indicators of success in the Flemish educational system. Hence, this study mainly dealt with track choices and how this was associated with issues such as ethnic identity, interethnic

relations, learning and teaching, students' frames of references and the development of future goals, and how individuals react towards features of the tracking system.

## 9.2. TRACKING SYSTEM

The importance of the specific features of the Flemish tracking system for students' definitions of success was already suggested by the findings of this study. However, more can be said about the ways in which the structure of the tracking system seems to contribute to students' educational outcomes and definitions of success. Due to the cascade-like tracking structure, the less appreciated tracks become more heterogeneous over the course of secondary education in terms of the educational trajectories students have followed. This makes teaching and learning more difficult and seems to affect students' study motivation as well. Being enrolled in the less esteemed tracks is found to be associated with a variety of negative outcomes, such as higher rates of grade retention, higher drop-out rates, feelings of futility (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; De Fraine et al., 2002; Van Landeghem et al., 2002; Van Houtte, 2004; 2005; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010b). These patterns of track enrolment seem to contribute to existing ethnic inequalities in education as ethnic groups are unequally distributed across tracks. In Flanders, there are more ethnic minority students enrolled in the less esteemed tracks, compared to ethnic majority students (Opdenakker & Hermans, 2006). The reasons for this unequal distribution of students across tracks should be sought in differences in educational choice making processes within and between ethnic groups.

Ethnic minority and majority students seem to vary on two main points with respect to the process of making educational choices. The first point of difference concerns students' experiences in school. School experiences, such as teacher discrimination or feeling (un)comfortable with their peers in the classroom, often leads to a change of field of study or school or a loss of study motivation. The latter could also result in repeating a year or changing field of study or track. The second point of difference relates to the students' frames of references and perceived future possibilities. This way, processes and experiences that occur outside schools are brought in the classroom and even further strengthened by classroom processes and practices within schools. This seems to affect students when making educational choices or developing their future goals. In general, educational choice making processes of all students appear to be guided by their parents' occupations (see also Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2012). However, students of Belgian descent appear to follow their parents' footsteps and were guided by the professions of their parents. Conversely, students

of immigrant descent seem to be inspired by their parents' migration and settlement experiences and want to avoid their parental working conditions, or contrast their situation with people in their country of origin. Consequently, students of immigrant descent are led by rather vague notions of being 'successful' or broadly defined future goals. In addition, ethnic minority students seem to fear labour market discrimination and change their future goals to anticipate to future discrimination. Because of these ambiguous or vaguely defined future goals and perceived labour market discrimination, ethnic minority students experience more problems or lack of guidance when making educational choices.

Both the structure of the educational system as educational choice making processes seem to influence each other. This appears to result in a continuing spiral of diverging choice making processes between ethnic minority and majority students. Given the cascade-like structure of the educational system, students always have to consider their previously made choices when adapting or refining their educational choices (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; 2012; Pinxten et al., 2012; Deprez, Van Damme & Pinxten, 2012). For example, when students start secondary education in the occupational (B) stream, it is difficult to change to an academic track later. Consequently, when refining their educational choices, these students could only refine or change their fields of study (e.g. changing from Sales to Construction) in the technical/vocational tracks. Thus, the choices made in the beginning of a students' secondary school career continue to play a role over the course of their school career. This particular tracking practice appears to strengthen other factors that are related to educational choice making processes. For instance, ethnic minority students may change track or field of study when they feel they do not belong in this classroom. As hardly any student changes to higher appreciated tracks or fields of study over the course of the school career, there will be even less ethnic minority students present in the higher fields of study or tracks in the last years of secondary education. On its turn, this may complicate the feelings of belonging of other ethnic minority students who are still enrolled in these higher appreciated tracks as well as they remain 'the only ones'.

Concluding, the importance of the structure of the educational system and educational choice making processes seem to apply to all students. However, when studying the determinants of success of ethnic minority students, one should explore the different challenges and disadvantages students face when making educational choices in the beginning and over the course of secondary education. Distinct educational choice making processes appear to lead to higher proportion of ethnic minority students enrolled in vocational and technical tracks. The hierarchical structure of the Flemish educational system

and the early selection of students into tracks seem to reinforce existing social/ethnic inequalities. Furthermore, these findings suggest the importance of recognising the importance structures may play for students' educational outcomes. This is important as educational success and failure are often attributed to individual merit, neglecting structures of the educational system. Nevertheless, ethnic minority students seem to play an active role in their outcomes by responding to the structures of the educational system and labour market opportunities and sometimes even search for 'alternative' ways to achieve success.

### 9.3. THE VALUE OF EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS OF IMMIGRANT DESCENT

This study is inspired by and builds further on insights from Mickelson's (1990, 2001) theory that tries to explain the attitude-achievement paradox of blacks in the United States. The use of qualitative research methods seem to help to nuance Mickelson's theory that is based on quantitative analyses. Although many students have interpreted success differently, it seems that students of immigrant descent embrace and acknowledge the importance of the goals and means set by dominant society. This might be not that surprising, given the fact that most students of immigrant descent are raised in Belgium and their parents migrated to Belgium to achieve social upward mobility. Nevertheless, these positive attitudes towards school are not always translated into students' achievement results. The results of this study add to this theory as they help to interpret students' concrete attitudes towards education. In doing so, this study expands Mickelson's theory and applies it to a Flemish context by suggesting that ethnic minority students develop concrete attitudes towards education that can be seen as the result of the entanglement between students' previously made track choices, perceived future opportunities on the labour market, personal future goals and interpretations of success. This is also in line with previous research that finds that students of immigrant descent highly value education as a way to achieve success in Belgian society (Ogbu, 1987; 2008; Mickelson, 1989; 1990; 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2006; Herman, 2009).

Several factors may contribute to the development of such distinct concrete attitudes towards education. For instance, students of immigrant descent may have developed other concrete attitudes due to the fear of being discriminated against on the labour market or the development of alternative future goals. Consequently, educational credentials may have lost (some of) their value for ethnic minority students' future lives. Vocational tracks may receive fewer societal appreciation, nevertheless, this does not mean that students enrolled in these

tracks do not value education. In addition, while some students of immigrant descent want to get educational credentials, others search for alternative pathways to achieve future success, such as becoming self-employed, without achieving the highest educational credentials (Sanders & Nee, 1996). For instance, the latter may be enrolled in Sales (vocational track) and want to learn more about starting a business and get a diploma of Business management. The possibilities to opt for alternative routes to achieve success in future life seem to depend on the existing human capital within ethnic networks, ethnic economies and the perceived treatment by the dominant society. Some students of immigrant descent seem to be inspired by their network members and want to start as an entrepreneur. These students think they will succeed with their plans as they can rely on many other network members. Others, who have less extensive immigrant networks, will be less prone to start a business and may be more likely to get educational credentials. Thus, the importance of specific educational credentials for students' future lives should be interpreted in terms of students' individual future goals and immigrant networks.

Lastly, it should be noted that over the course of students' school career, the instrumental value of education for students' future lives is repeatedly questioned and reconsidered. This appears to be part of a cyclic process in which students reformulate their future goals in terms of their previously made track choices and perceived future opportunities. Along with the development of students' future goals and school attitudes (see also Harris, 2006; Tyson, 2002), education might play a distinct role and may change over time (see also McInerney, 2004; Phan, 2009; Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004; Okagaki, 2001; Portes & MacLeod, 1996).

In sum, the development of future goals and the role education plays in the realisation of these future goals seem to be important for students' educational career, mainly in terms of making educational choices. Ethnic minority and majority students strive to achieve success in future life, to be able to provide their family, to get a 'good' job and 'good' salary. In doing so, education is also perceived as an important way to achieve such success, but not the only one. These results contribute to the academic literature as they suggest that scholars should reconsider the idea that the instrumental value of education is automatically related to students' anti-school attitudes, the development of anti-school cultures and ethnic identities. This idea is also suggested by previous scholars (Akom, 2003; Harris, 2006; Tyson et al., 2003; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Downey, 2008; Downey et al., 2009). In the next section, the importance of students' ethnic identities for their educational career will be discussed in the next paragraph.

#### 9.4. ETHNIC IDENTITY

Findings of the presented studies shed an interesting light on current academic debates about a possible entanglement between ethnic and academic identities or peer group cultures. Previous research has suggested that the ethnic identities of ethnic minority students are related to their academic ones (Ogbu, 1990; 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Archer, 2008). For instance, according to Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, ethnic minority groups develop a collective, oppositional identity that corresponds with their treatment by dominant society. Building further on this idea, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) published the study "Black students' school success: coping with the burden of 'acting white'" in which schooling African American students appeared to reject the value of schooling. For these students, education is seen as an institute that embodies the dominant society. In addition, these authors argue that racial minority students have to reject institutions of the dominant society, such as education, so they would not lose the membership of their ethnic community. This leads to the idea that when ethnic minority students achieve in school, their ethnic community membership is questioned and interpreted as 'acting white'. These theories have been very influential and are frequently tested by other scholars. For instance, many scholars have studied the idea that having a raceless identity facilitates academic success. However, these numerous studies have yielded mixed results (e.g. supporting: Farkas and colleagues (2002); Farkas (2008), further specifying: Cousins (2008), or rejecting this hypothesis: Bergin & Cooks (2008), Cook & Ludwig (1998), Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey (1998), Tyson, Darity & Castellino (2005), Harris (2006)).

Findings of this study contribute to this debate by showing that students' ethnic identities are not necessarily related to negative academic identities. Some ethnic minority students in this study even perceive 'achieving in school' as part of their culture or religion. Other ethnic minority students hardly suggested the existence of such a relation. Therefore, it could be suggested that students can combine strongly developed ethnic identities with high educational aspirations or achieving in school. Additionally, results of this study seem to indicate that students' membership of their immigrant networks does not depend on their academic achievement. Although there appears to be a more pronounced anti-school culture in the less esteemed tracks, this culture does not seem to be related to the subjective membership of an ethnic community. Nevertheless, while oppositional attitudes towards education did not seem to be related in a clear way to students' ethnic identities, results of



this study contribute to the literature as they suggest that ethnic identities seem to be associated with students' educational outcomes through classroom processes and students' sense of belonging to the class group.

One important aspect of students' ethnic identity is that it may refer to a 'sense of belonging' to a particular ethnic group in a specific context (Carter, 2005; 2008a; 2008b; Schneider, 2001; Schneider et al., 2012). Previous research already indicated that students' sense of belonging is related to their educational outcomes (Roeser, Midley & Urdan, 1996; Osterman, 2000; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001; Jimerson, Campos & Greif, 2003; Hallinan, 2008). This study indicates that these ethnic identities, and associated sense of belonging to the class group and interethnic relations, seem to be related to students' educational outcomes because of their impact on educational choice making processes. When facing difficulties with the curriculum or losing interest in the courses offered over the course of students' school career, peer support and having a sense of belonging to the class group may help students to continue to be enrolled in the same track or field of study. If not, students appear to be inclined to change to less esteemed tracks or fields of study, or change school. Students' feelings of belonging to the class group appear to be more often mentioned as a reason for changing tracks or fields of study by students of immigrant descent, compared to students of Belgian descent.

In sum, although ethnic identities are not directly related to particular (anti-)school cultures or identities, they seem to matter for students' sense of belonging in the classroom and the development of interethnic relations. The role ethnic identities play in the development of interethnic relations should be understood within its appropriate school and societal context.

## 9.5. INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

Although there may be several background characteristics that could give students a sense of belonging to the class group, ethnic minority students frequently refer to their ethnic background when discussing their sense of belonging to the class group. More specific, this sense of belonging seems to be related to the presence of 'similar others' (i.e. other students of immigrant descent) and the reaction of the ethnic majority group towards students of immigrant descent. Furthermore, students' sense of belonging appears to have an influence on the development of interethnic relations in the classroom, which is in line with Blau's structural theory (1974). According to this theory, people prefer to have contact with in-group members. Blau argues that in-group members are more likely to have similar value

orientations. These values are mainly shared through social interactions. Nevertheless, based on students' accounts, it remains difficult to figure out which factors may form the basis for such in-group preferences. However, that data suggest the importance of students' ethnic in-group preferences in the classroom in shaping classroom interactions. The ethnographic approach of this study may help to go beyond students' social desirable answers and seems to reveal interesting insights in the actual interethnic relations that occur in the classroom and reasons for these in-group preferences. Students' in-group preferences are more visible and outspoken in some contexts (i.e. tracks) than in others. While in the highest fields of tracks, merely implicit ways of being (see *habitus* Bourdieu, 1973) appear to distinguish between in- and out-groups, these in-group preferences are more clearly outspoken in the less esteemed tracks. For example, in the highest fields of study, habits, ways of talking or not acknowledging ethnic differences, seem to matter for ethnic minority students' sense of belonging to the class group. Conversely, in the less esteemed tracks, students express more often ethnocentric attitudes and ethnic prejudices. In these less esteemed tracks, influences from outside school seem to enter the classroom to a larger extent and appear to have an impact on the development of interethnic relations. For instance, in vocational tracks, students appear to feel more insecure about their future labour market prospects (see also Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008) and the numerical dominance of ethnic minority groups in their living environment. These insecurities and related influences from outside the school appear to be related to context characteristics of the class group with respect to the development of interethnic relations in the classroom and feelings of belonging. Therefore, class group or track characteristics, such as perceived threats and the numerical size of ethnic groups, have to be considered to fully understand the development of interethnic relations in the classroom (see also Carspecken & Cordeiro, 1991; Kinket & Verkuyten 1999; Johnson et al., 2001; Verkuyten & Thijs 2002; Agirdag et al., 2011; Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010; Foner, 2011).

Although in- and out-group differences are often related to or interpreted in terms of ethnicity, they may relate to other student characteristics, such as students' socio-economic background. For instance, a student of immigrant descent referred to the fact that she, as the only ethnic minority student in the classroom, feels different in the class group because she does not go on expensive trips during the holidays. This interpretation of socio-economic differences in terms of ethnicity is not surprising as in some classrooms, especially in academic tracks, the socio-economic and ethnic background of students are related to each other. Students of Belgian descent have a higher socio-economic background compared to

students of immigrant descent. Hence, it seems that ethnicity plays a crucial role for students' relations with each other. However, ethnicity is not the only or most determining factor for the formation of in-groups. Other characteristics, such as gender and socio-economic background, seem to play a structuring role in the classroom as well, but are less visible and/or less problematised.

The importance of ethnicity for the development of interethnic relations and students' sense of belonging should be understood within its broader societal context. The non-Belgian descent of students appears to matter as ethnic minority students often feel 'different' compared to students of Belgian descent. Feeling 'different' or the 'other' is frequently related to ethnicity as it is embedded in the common denomination of students of immigrant descent as 'allochton'. When making such distinction, the group of 'others' is contrasted with a rather undefined amalgam of students, 'the autochtons'. Many 'autochtons' are not fully aware of the dominant position they occupy in society (e.g. Elchardus, 2009). These feelings of otherness appear to be strengthened by the fact that 'allochton' students perceive and experience distinct challenges (e.g. labour market or teacher discrimination, double standards in society, improvement of Dutch language proficiency). Therefore, feeling 'different' or 'the other' is reflected in all aspects of life, such as looking for concrete comparison groups and when developing friendships. Furthermore, these ethnic in-group preferences and ethnic prejudices can be seen as a way to process feelings of insecurity, in particular cultural (De Groof & Elchardus, 2009; Elchardus, 2009) or socio-economic contexts (Stephan et al., 2005).

To conclude, ethnicity remained to play an important role for the formation of friendships or contact with classmates in the studied class groups. Furthermore, it seems that the context characteristics of the classroom and the living environment of the students influence the development of interethnic contact at school. In the next chapter, more attention will be paid to the importance of students' immigrant networks and the living environment for their educational outcomes.

## 9.6. IMMIGRANT NETWORKS

Although more ethnic minority groups are included in the sample, mainly three, broadly defined immigrant groups are discussed in the presented papers: Turkish, Northern African and Eastern European immigrant groups. Contrasting students' references to immigrant networks with the data from immigrant structures in the city studied (see also Verhaeghe et al., 2012), seems to give more insight in the ways ethnic minority students could rely on their

immigrant networks to achieve educational success. Results indicated that immigrant networks vary considerably in the ways they can contribute to the educational success of their members. Immigrant networks seem to matter for students' educational outcomes as they help to get access to significant others that could help students to get information about Belgian society and the educational system, support during students' school career and appear to be associated with the extent students have to face or experience discrimination.

First, variation was found between ethnic groups in the extent that their immigrant networks provide support and share information and experiences about the educational system and the labour market. This is in line with previous research that has already focused on the existing human or social capital within ethnic networks (e.g. Zhou & Bankston, 1994; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Bankston & Zhou, 1998; 2002; Modood, 2004; Archer & Francis, 2006; Phalet & Heath, 2011). Nevertheless, when doing so, many scholars have mostly focused on 'successful' communities or 'model minorities', such as Asians in the United States (Bankston & Zhou, 1998; Portes, 1987). These scholars explore factors within these networks that could attribute to the success of children within these networks and have perceived 'ethnicity' as a resource, instead of a disadvantage. By contrast, in this study, attention has been given to the role immigrant networks, that are less successful as a group than the dominant society, may play a role for achieving success in school. One precondition for immigrant networks to be able to share information and provide support is that immigrants should have contact with each other. Some immigrant groups, such as the Turkish and Northern African ones, appear to have more contact with each other, compared to immigrants coming from Eastern Europe. Furthermore, besides having contact with other immigrants, one should examine the sort of information and support these network members are able to give (see Granovetter, 1973). For example, students of Turkish and Northern African descent are part of large, dense immigrant networks and have more opportunities to share knowledge and provide support to other network members, than students of Eastern European descent. However, Turkish and Northern African descent are part of homogeneous networks that can only share similar information about the educational system and the labour market. By contrast, immigration from Eastern Europe is more an individual project, which leads to more individual families coming from these regions without being connected with each other (Paspalanova, 1996; Verhaeghe et al., 2012). Due to the lack of contact with similar immigrants, there seems to be more variation within this group with respect to the support and knowledge about the educational system. These families rely more often on the weak ties they have established in and outside their immigrant networks (Granovetter, 1973).

In addition, variation within these groups is considerably larger as some immigrants have relatively higher educational levels, obtained in their country of origin ('ethnic capital', Shah et al., 2010), compared to the Turkish and Northern African group. This may help to support their children with their homework or courses. Lastly, it seems that the access to information and support from immigrant network members is often situated in the peer group. Students of immigrant descent mention to search for peers with whom they can compare their educational outcomes and choices. This seems to help them when making educational choices and to evaluate their success in education. The availability of comparable peers and the level of educational outcomes of these peers seem to matter for students' educational outcomes.

Second, immigrant networks may affect students' educational outcomes through their familiarity with the dominant society and specific migration history (e.g. Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Kao, 2000; Ogbu, 1990; 2008). Immigrant groups that have stayed for a more extensive period of time in the immigrant country, such as the people originating from Turkey or Northern Africa, appear to have developed a distinct dialectic relationship with the dominant society. This seems to lead to a higher familiarity between these ethnic groups. Additionally, students of Turkish or Northern African descent mention to be more easily identified as 'allochton' (e.g. religious identifiers, physical traits), compared to students of Eastern European descent. Finally, residential characteristics of immigrant networks seem to further contribute to the perceptions and attitudes of ethnic minority groups. For instance, it is easier to identify with large immigrant groups, such as the Turkish one, that live in the same neighbourhood than with small immigrant groups that do not have contact with each other. Furthermore, members of the dominant ethnic majority group have more (stereotypical) knowledge about these groups. This helps ethnic majority members to consider particular cultural and/or religious habits and rules of these groups (e.g. providing halal food at a school trip). Lastly, due to the longer stay, there seems to be more political concerns about the 'acculturation' of these particular ethnic minority groups. While initially, policy makers and the ethnic majority thought that immigrants would automatically adapt or 'integrate' into the dominant society, for instance with respect to their children's educational outcomes, these predictions were not realised. This complex relationship with the dominant society seems to result in the fact that students of Turkish and Northern African descent report more experiences of discrimination in- and outside school (see also Piontkowski et al., 2000; Hermans, 2004). This may increase the polarization between ethnic groups (Hermans, 2004; Phalet & Heath, 2011; Foner, 2011). Being part of a dense immigrant network helps to share and to be aware of negative experiences and parental working conditions. Furthermore,

sharing these experiences may shape students' perceptions about the dominant society and labour market opportunities. These perceptions may be crucial for the development of students' future professional aspirations (see also Kao, 2000), doing an effort for school and searching for alternative pathways to achieve professional success. These results appear to contrast with the experiences of students of Eastern European descent, who appear to be less prone for experiences of discrimination, and have fewer opportunities to share such experiences. Additionally, due to their relatively recent immigration, parents from students coming from Eastern European regions have fewer experiences on the labour market, or ascribed their harder working conditions (e.g. temporary jobs or being a cleaning lady) to their recent migration.

In sum, the actual impact of immigrant networks on students' educational outcomes seems to depend on the structure, available resources and shared information within immigrant networks that help to provide support and share school-related information to be able to navigate successfully through the Flemish educational system (e.g. track choices). In addition, the generational status of immigrant groups and the relationship of the minority group with the dominant society appear to matter for ethnic minorities' educational outcomes as it affects students' experiences in school and perceptions about their future opportunities.

## 9.7. FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on some limitations of this study and research on ethnicity success of ethnic and racial minorities, suggestions can be made for future research. First, the ethnographic approach of this study makes it possible to explore factors in- and outside school, students' perceptions and peer or student-teacher relationships altogether. However, this complex of settings and influences is mainly studied from one setting, namely the school, and involves distinct actors within this setting. Factors that take place outside school are only considered through students' accounts. For example, family support is only included in this study when students mention this. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to visit additional, theoretically important settings, such as the family or immigrant networks and organizations, as it seems likely that these settings interact and that the combined effect of these settings could yield additional stimuli for success (see also: Van Praag et al., 2011). For example, exploring students' homes could help to gain more insight in the relative importance of parental support, information or support retrieved from weak ties and daily concrete comparison groups. Additionally, it would be interesting for future research to focus more on the development and effect of coping strategies to deal with discrimination in distinct settings. For instance, more attention

could be given to positive racial socialization for overcoming different forms of racism, such as institutional racism and teacher discrimination, becoming a role model for society and/or achieving success in school (Sanders, 1997; Brown & Tylka, 2011). In sum, it would be interesting to examine students in various settings to understand how these settings might interact in stimulating success in education.

Second, as previously suggested, and strengthened by the results of this dissertation, more attention should be given to the structures and processes within schools and how they might enhance the educational success of students of immigrant descent (e.g. Demanet et al., 2011; Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011). Schools can be seen as a series of hierarchically ordered, interdependent levels of organization, ranging from the level of the classroom to the cultural systems in which schools are embedded (Eccles & Roeser, 2010). Nevertheless, hardly any study that focuses on the educational success of ethnic minority students covers this range of levels (Van Praag et al., 2011). In this study, including tracks as a unit of analysis appears to lead to innovative results with respect to the development of interethnic relations. Additionally, as features of educational systems do not always lead to the expected results, the impact of features of educational systems (e.g. tracking system) on students' outcomes can only be fully understood when attention is given to the associated practices within these systems (e.g. tracking practices). International comparative research that considers both structural features and practices within these systems could be rewarding. Thus, it might be interesting to explore how varying educational systems function and how practices within these systems could affect the educational outcomes of ethnic minority students.

Third, the schools in the sample of this study are selected through theoretical sampling, resulting in an extensive number of respondents participating in this research. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to expand this sample in future research and explore a wider variety of schools in rural areas, other cities with another immigrant population, immigrant networks or with distinct ethnic and/or socio-economic compositions of the student body. Only schools are included with a relatively high proportion of students of immigrant descent in one particular city. However, some students of immigrant descent mention to feel excluded in other schools they previously were enrolled in, just because they were 'the only one'. While these students have changed schools, precisely because they wanted to feel comfortable at school, they referred to the presence of other students of immigrant descent who continued their school career in their previous schools. Therefore, it would be interesting to focus on this particular group of students of immigrant descent who are enrolled in schools with a majority of students of Belgian descent. This could help to gain

more insights in the processes that relate to students' sense of belonging in school and school selection processes. The latter may affect the particular ethnic and socio-economic population of schools and its impact on students' educational outcomes and sense of belonging at school. Focusing on school selection processes could be especially rewarding in the Flemish school context that, in contrast with many other educational systems (e.g. UK), is characterized by free school choice. Subsequently, expanding the sample could help to understand the importance of students' ethnic identities in schools. The importance of ethnic identities and associated stereotypes may vary according to the context. For instance, ethnic minority students may be more prone to ethnic stereotype threats in some schools, depending on the ethnic school composition. Ethnic stereotype threats refer to the fear of confirming, at the individual level, a negative stereotype about one's ethnic group (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Furthermore, additional information can be gathered about the way the ethnic identities of ethnic majority students might shape interethnic relations in these schools.

Fourth, the use of ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews has led to interesting insights in the pathways to educational success for ethnic minority youth. However, this data could be complemented by data from focus groups as a final stage in the process of data gathering and method triangulation. This way, students can interact with each other and consider the responses of their classmates. For example, confronting ethnic minority and majority students' perspectives with each other in focus groups could give more insights in the actual awareness of ethnic differences in the classroom, the development of interethnic relations and ethnic prejudices. Additionally, the use of focus groups might help students to feel more comfortable in an interview setting and stimulate them to talk about sensitive issues. Over the course of the data collection, it appeared that boys are more likely to respond during interviews when they are accompanied by their peers. This might be due to the fact that students had not thought about particular issues before, such as teacher discrimination or their definition of success in school. Furthermore, the use of focus groups after a period of data collection and analysis, could help to improve validity, accuracy and credibility of the findings as it may serve as a member check (Mortelmans, 2007).

Fifth, in this dissertation, little attention has been paid to how the impact of students' socio-economic background and ethnicity differ from each other, interplay and/or coincide. Nevertheless, it could be interesting to explore the role of students' socio-economic status in the treatment by the dominant society, feelings of exclusion, development of ethnic social capital (e.g. Zhou & Bankston, 1994; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Bankston & Zhou, 1998; 2002; Modood, 2004; Archer & Francis, 2006; Phalet & Heath, 2011) and variation between



or within ethnic minority groups with respect to their educational outcomes. For instance, examining the variation in parenting practices according to the socio-economic background of the family (e.g. Kohn & Schooler, 1969) and the availability and use of various forms of capital (Crozier & Reay, 2011) might help to explain the variation in educational achievement within ethnic minority groups.

Sixth, when exploring the school careers of ethnic minority students, references are made to ‘the’ dominant society. Referring to this ‘dominant society’ might give the impression that this is one unified entity. However, some groups in this society may be more dominant than others. For instance, in the United States, it appears that this dominant society is mainly based on normative standards set by middle-class Protestant whites of British ancestry (Alba & Nee, 2003). Future research on the construction of the mainstream society and ways in which it could work excluding for ethnic majority students could be interesting. In doing so, more insight can be gained in the (subtle or explicit) processes of exclusion and inclusion at school. Furthermore, future research could further explore how the construction of dominant identities relates to public (acculturation) discourses about such identities and change according to the context, and how this so-called mainstream society responds to the arrival of immigrants (see also Alba & Nee, 2003; Carter, 2005). For instance, it could be interesting to examine how the identities of ethnic minorities relate to national and sub-national (e.g. regional and local) identities (of the immigrant country) and how these identity discourses interplay and react with each other, especially in relationship to sense of belonging at school (Schneider, 2001). Previous research of Agirdag and colleagues (2010) already suggested the importance of the school context for the national and sub-national identifications of ethnic minority and majority students. However, it would be interesting to explore how all of these ethnic identities, referring to different sometimes overlapping geographic areas, relate, exclude or fortify each other and change over time. This might be especially interesting in a Belgian context, where current political discourses focus increasingly on distinct local or regional ethnic identities (see also Ehrkamp, 2006; Schneider et al, 2012). These political discourses seemed to combine particular ethnic identities with a specific acculturation approach. For instance, in the city studied, local policy makers have recently tried to increase immigrants’ sense of belonging to the place they live by replacing the term ‘allochton’ by referring to both people’s country of origin and their immediate living environment, namely the city in which they live (e.g. ‘Turkse Gentenaar’, translated: ‘Turkish inhabitant of Ghent’). Simultaneously, students are part of larger geographical regions, such as Flanders, with other political discourses and acculturation approaches that

stress these regional identities. Thus, future research may provide interesting insights in the ways policy makers, at different government levels, and political discourses have an impact on the sense of belonging of their inhabitants and the relationship between these ethnic identities. Nevertheless, exploring the development of ethnic identities of all inhabitants within its wider context would add to this area of research. Subsequently, attention could be given to how these distinct acculturation approaches, situated at different governments, affect students' sense of belonging in school and influence interethnic relations at school and school selection processes. Lastly, future research could benefit from exploring the interaction between students' ethnic identities with other relevant characteristics, such as gender, social class or sexual orientation, and the wider cultural, socio-economic, discursive context (Schneider, 2001; Ehrkamp, 2006; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

Finally, giving more attention to 'time' in future research seems theoretically important, as many processes occur over long periods of time and questions emerge about what is cause and what is consequence. Sometimes, continuation over time is a necessary condition in order to achieve success, such as pursuing with the educational choices made before or the development of school attitudes (e.g. Tyson, 2002; Tyson et al., 2005; Harris, 2006). Consequently, expanding the scope of this field of research, studies about the transition from secondary school to other destinations, from primary to secondary school, or success in higher education might help in understanding the complex pathways to success (Van Praag et al., 2011). Additionally, as shown before, educational choices are influenced by different factors, depending on the moment of their school career. For example, Pinxten and colleagues (2012) find that in the first years of secondary education, students appear to be more influenced by prior achievement, while occupational interests seem to play a greater role in later years of secondary education. Furthermore, time could also play an important role with respect to experiences of discrimination. Only students in the fifth year of secondary education are included in the sample. These students often refer to previous encounters with racism and how they reacted. Based on students' accounts, it seems that discrimination in school appeared to have a different impact in the first years of secondary education (these are crucial years when making educational choices), compared to the fifth year of secondary education, for students' study motivation. Subsequently, students seem to be increasingly concerned with the development of their future goals over the years of secondary education. Taken together, it seems that discriminatory teacher treatment appears to have a distinct effect on students' study involvement, educational choice processes and future aspirations.

In sum, future research could explore the interaction of different settings (e.g. home and school) and the varying processes according to the context characteristics. Expanding the sample to include other theoretically important in and out-of school contexts and other contexts (e.g. schools with a small proportion of ethnic minority students, labour market or immigrant networks) in which the school and students are embedded in may be interesting. Additionally, giving more attention to the complex nature of collective group identity formation processes and aspects of time would further help to validate our and other research in this area and help to get a better understanding of the discussed findings.

## 9.8. SOCIAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this dissertation, some social policy recommendations can be made. First, policy makers could stimulate teachers' awareness of the ways in which inequalities may be reproduced (Carter, 2005). Many teachers and ethnic majority students do not seem to be aware of the excluding impact of their ethnic and socio-economic background. As previously suggested (e.g. Giroux, 1997; Schneider, 2001; 2002; Leonardo, 2002; 2004), one should not only consider the ethnic identities of ethnic minorities, but also those of the ethnic majority. Consequently, by developing a critical race consciousness (Carter, 2008a) or discussing ethnic and cultural differences in school, students can become more aware of their background and feelings of others. This could help to establish better relationships between students and teachers, and ethnic groups in general. For instance, teachers could stimulate classroom discussions and question all students' background and ethnic and social differences in society, instead of only focusing on one ethnic group.

Second, the results of this study have indicated that well organized immigrant networks could play an interesting role in the achievement of their networks members. Hence, social policy makers and practitioners should actively encourage the development of and interactions with community networks in developing resources and sharing information which could enhance educational success. Social policy makers could involve the immigrant communities actively, ask their opinion and consider them for the development and implementation of social policies. In addition, they could set up some programs or tutoring systems for newly arrived immigrant groups to organise themselves.

Third, in the last decade, educational policy makers in Flanders have given financial incentives to schools to motivate them to have a more diverse socio-economic and/or ethnic school body (e.g. Vandenbroucke, 2002; Padmos & Van den Berge, 2009; Poesen-Vandeputte & Nicaise, 2012). By means of such policy programs, educational policy makers

tried to stimulate interethnic relations in school, to create social equality and to develop higher educational and professional aspirations for students of immigrant descent. However, these policy makers mainly focused on the ethnic and socio-economic school composition while less attention has been paid to processes that occur within schools (see also Feld & Carter, 1998). Blinded by (insufficiently tested) and superficial assumptions of the contact theory (Allport, 1954) or failing to fulfil all necessary preconditions, these policy initiatives seemed to neglect the importance for students to have an equal status or to feel that they belong in the classroom. Additionally, policy makers have insufficiently recognised the importance of in-group preferences (Blau, 1974). Consequently, these policy initiatives do not always result in the intended objectives. This might have long-standing effects on society, in terms of equalities and the relationship between ethnic groups. Therefore, it seems that policy makers should move away from the assumption that being taught in a classroom where ideally only a minority of the students has a migration background would enhance automatically the educational achievement of these students. A possible way to consider the importance of (all) students' sense of belonging in schools with a high proportion of students of Belgian descent, is to appoint peer tutors (i.e. students from other grades or tracks) who may help students to give them the feeling that they are actually not the only one. A last suggestion would be to hire more teachers of immigrant descent (Stevens & Görgöz, 2010). However, as school boards in this sample already indicated that it was hard to find such teachers, they seemed to opt for the recruitment of other school personnel of immigrant descent that could serve as a role model and understand students when facing difficulties with respect to their ethnic background.

Fourth, results of this study indicate the importance of the development of future goals during educational choice making processes. Although there are various ways in which policy makers could help students to make better informed educational choices and develop specific future goals, some examples will be provided here. One strategy can be to further develop community primary and secondary schools ('brede scholen'/'brede wijk') to broaden students' learn- and living environment (see Joos & Ernalsteen, 2010; Joos et al., 2010; Ernalsteen & Joos, 2011). These community schools are schools that work together with local organizations, the family and other service providers that are traditionally located outside the school. This way, students can get more easily in contact with professions and the labour market, irrespective of their personal living environment and social networks, and prepare for their future. Furthermore, the cooperation between schools and local organisations could help to give more accurate information about the opportunities on the labour market and the

choices one should make to realise these future goals. A second strategy would be the instalment of a more comprehensive educational system in the first years of secondary education (see Erikson & Johnson, 1996; Boone, 2013). In these systems, students have the opportunity to explore different subjects without making decisions that endure the rest of their school career. This system would give students a broader formation and help them to get in contact with subjects they are not (yet) familiar with. For example, students who are interested in Latin could follow more practical courses as well, such as construction. Thus, social policy makers could reform schools in such way that would help students to expand their living environment and to develop their future goals.

Fifth, tracking systems may lead to various unintended consequences for students and teachers. One unintended consequence of the grouping of students into tracks is the differential societal appreciation of tracks (Hallinan, 1994; Erikson & Johnson, 1996; Van Houtte, 2004; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Comprehensive educational systems may give students the opportunity to get to know other courses and increase the respect for the less appreciated vocational and technical subjects. For instance, in Flanders, being enrolled in vocational courses may help students to get more insight in the particular difficulties of each track and gain more respect for other tracks. Another way to improve the status of tracks that enjoy a lower societal appreciation is to limit the risks of unemployment for the less esteemed tracks. Students in vocational tracks are more vulnerable on the labour market (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008) and dependent on physical conditions (e.g. pain in the back when working in construction, problems of sight during welding), compared to other students of other tracks. Consequently, students' future opportunities would be more secure when they follow two or three specialist courses, instead of only one (e.g. combining a major in Sales with a minor in Construction, Nutrition or Elderly Care). Apprenticeships and future employers could help students to further elaborate their skills and knowledge. A third way to improve the societal appreciation of tracks is to change structural factors in school that institutionalise and strengthen the societal appreciation of tracks. Evaluation procedures at the end of each school year, such as the B certificates given at the end of each year, often reinforce existing tracking tendencies and contribute to the lower appreciation of tracks. For example, in Flanders, B certificates are used in a negative way and merely give an indication about the subjects students are not good at. Thus, changing the evaluation procedures of students may result in a less clear hierarchy between tracks. To conclude, educational policy makers may help to reduce the unequal appreciation of tracks by installing a more comprehensive tracking system, by limiting the unemployment risks of students after

graduation and by changing features of the tracking system that seem to contribute to a lower societal appreciation of tracks.

Finally, educationalists and future employers should work together to give more information to students about how they can successfully protect themselves against and respond to discrimination (in the labour market). This is important as ethnic minority students seem to anticipate limited future opportunities on the labour market. Students seem to use various coping strategies to deal with discrimination (see Mellor, 2004) which sometimes influences the educational choices they make. Providing ethnic minority students more accurate information about discrimination during courses at school and teaching them coping strategies to deal with such experiences might have an impact on students' final educational outcomes.

In sum, findings of this research seem to result in a variety of recommendations for social policy makers. Special attention is given to the ways schools could increase the awareness of all students' ethnic identities and family backgrounds. In addition, strengthening immigrants' networks to share information, provide support and role models would help to enhance the educational success of students of immigrant descent. Furthermore, given the importance of the structure of the educational system for students' educational outcomes and the establishment of (interethnic) relations within schools, it could be suggested that changing some features of the Flemish educational system would improve the educational outcomes of all students considerably.



## 10. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the specific organisation of tracks and fields of study in the Flemish educational system play a central role in students' and teachers' definitions of success in secondary education in Flanders. Moreover, students' track choices seem to be crucial for their educational career and future chances on the labour market. Therefore, this study explores immigrant-specific factors that are associated with these track choices and that could contribute to the exploration of ethnic differences in educational outcomes. The use of qualitative research methods appears to help to get a better understanding of the social construction of 'success' in various contexts. Combining ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews has led to innovative insights in the interplay between structural features of the educational system and students' responses to such structures. Focusing on this interplay appears to be especially fruitful as students and teachers' seem to adapt their definitions of success to the existing structures of the educational system. These qualitative research methods have led to a better understanding of the nature and consequences of actual tracking practices, the relativity of success, the processes that perpetuate existing social and ethnic inequalities and respondents' interpretations of their future goals and school attitudes. More specifically, applying such an explorative approach helps to identify some unintended consequences of the tracking systems that contribute to prevailing ethnic and social inequalities, which are often not discussed in debates concerning the structures of tracking systems. Moreover, some of these consequences, such as the grouping of students in homogeneous tracks in terms of abilities and knowledge, even seem to contradict with initial tracking objectives. For instance, while tracking systems are installed to enhance professional specialisation in vocational tracks, the cascade-like structure of the educational system seems to hinder such specialisation considerably. Another side-effect of the grouping of students into tracks in Flanders is the unequal distribution of students of different ethnic/social groups across tracks. Many tracks and fields of study are characterised by a particular ethnic or socio-economic composition. Context characteristics, such as the ethnic and socio-economic composition of a track and future perspectives of these tracks, appear to matter for the development of interethnic relations. On their turn, the existing social climate and interethnic tensions in the classroom seem to be associated with students' sense of belonging to this class group. Feelings of belonging have to be considered as they seem to influence students when making educational choices. For instance, some students change faster to another field of study when experiencing difficulties with some subjects when they feel uncomfortable in the



class group. However, additional factors, such as students' frames of references and their ability to find comparable peers within their immediate environment, contribute to these educational choice making processes as well. Furthermore, students appear to have specified or adapted their educational choices to the future goals they developed, in the beginning and over the course of their school career. While many of these processes may be similar for students of Belgian and immigrant descent, it seems that students of immigrant descent more frequently perceive future limitations and troubles, which informed their future goals. This might be due to immigrant-specific factors, such as treatment by the dominant society or the lack of information about the educational system or supportive networks.

In sum, the concept success is relative in nature and should be studied in its context. In this explorative study, attention has been given to factors that may contribute to differences in educational choice making processes between ethnic groups in the Flemish educational system. This is important in the Flemish context as it seems that track choices play a crucial role when defining or evaluating students' educational success. More specific, the question whether ethnic minorities are successful in the Flemish secondary education seems to focus on whether students are right on track.





## 11. SUMMARY IN DUTCH

### 11.1. INTRODUCTIE

Onderwijs kan gezien worden als een manier om mensen op te leiden om bepaalde beroepen uit te oefenen. Hiernaast heeft onderwijs ook een socialiserende functie heeft voor kinderen. Door naar school te gaan, kunnen kinderen de gangbare normen en waarden van de samenleving aanleren en een gevoel van burgerschap ontwikkelen (Durkheim, 1973; Parsons, 1959). De socialiserende functie van het onderwijs wordt vaak benadrukt als het gaat over immigranten en hun nakomelingen, of anders gezegd ‘allochtonen’. Men beschouwt de waarden en normen van deze allochtone groep vaak als anders. Hierdoor denkt men vaker dat onderwijs een belangrijke functie kan vervullen in het aanleren van de waarden en normen van de dominante samenleving aan deze leerlingen. Sinds de komst van immigranten in België, na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, zag men dat de leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond het relatief gezien, slechter deden op school dan leerlingen van Belgische afkomst. Deze leerlingen moeten over het algemeen vaker hun jaar opnieuw doen en zijn oververtegenwoordigd in de minder gewaardeerde onderwijsvormen en studierichtingen (zie Duquet et al., 2006; Van Praag et al., 2013; Opdenakker & Hermans, 2006). Bijgevolg focussen vele onderzoekers zich op de factoren die deze lagere prestaties van etnische minderheden in het onderwijs kunnen verklaren. Toch is het ook interessant om te gaan kijken naar de factoren die zouden bijdragen tot het succes van etnische minderheden in het Vlaamse onderwijs. Hierdoor zou men een beter inzicht kunnen verwerven in de variatie in schoolprestaties van etnische minderheden (Phalet et al., 2007; Modood & Berthoud, 1997; Modood, 2004; Lindo, 1996; Lew, 2006a; Jackson et al., 2012). Factoren en processen die leiden tot succes of tot lagere prestaties op school kunnen elkaar beïnvloeden maar zijn niet noodzakelijk dezelfde. Wel zijn de uiteindelijke schoolprestaties van leerlingen het resultaat van het evenwicht tussen deze factoren (Crul, 2000; Vigil, 2007).

In deze studie werd er voornamelijk aandacht besteed aan factoren die mogelijks bijdragen tot het succes van etnische minderheden in het Vlaamse onderwijs. Tegelijkertijd maakt deze focus het mogelijk om bestaande etnische stereotypes over het falen van leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond te ontcrachten. Men bespreekt de lagere prestaties van migrantenkinderen namelijk vaak op groepsniveau. Hierdoor wordt het idee gewekt dat succes onlosmakelijk verband houdt met het behoren tot de dominante etnische groep in de samenleving (zie ook: Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Hier zou men uit kunnen afleiden dat

bepaalde etnische minderheidsgroepen geen succes kunnen hebben in het onderwijs (Archer, 2008; Archer & Francis, 2007). Onderwijsprestaties worden vaak gezien als het resultaat van hard werken en het verwezenlijken van persoonlijke capaciteiten (Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; Ballantine & Spade, 2012; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Als men dus geen succes heeft in het onderwijs, dan schrijft men dit vaak toe aan een gebrek aan motivatie en capaciteiten waardoor bestaande onderwijs- en sociale ongelijkheden gerechtvaardigd lijken. Toch zijn er nog andere factoren die een rol kunnen spelen in de uiteindelijke onderwijsprestaties van leerlingen, zoals de structuur van het onderwijssysteem (Crul et al., 2012), etnische en culturele barrières (Groenez et al., 2003) of institutionele discriminatie (Phalet et al., 2007). Daarnaast is het ook belangrijk om aandacht te besteden aan de definities van onderwijssucces die men hanteert. Succes is een relatief begrip, dat in zijn context bestudeerd moet worden, en afhankelijk is van de vergelijkingsgroepen die men gebruikt of het niveau waarop men succes bestudeert.

In deze studie werden aan de hand van kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden, zoals etnografische observaties en semigestructureerde interviews, de verschillende factoren of processen die kunnen leiden tot onderwijssucces voor leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond geëxploreerd en onderzocht. Hierbij werd er gebruik gemaakt van een grounded theory methodologie (Glaser & Strauss, 1976). Grounded theory is een kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethode waarbij men vertrekt van data om een theorie te ontwikkelen. Door perioden van dataverzameling af te wisselen met data-analyse kan men de ontwikkelde theorieën verder toetsen en aanpassen aan de nieuwe verzamelde data tot het moment dat nieuwe data geen nieuwe aanpassingen aan de theorie meer vergen. Het gebruik van kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden kan interessant zijn omdat deze een meer inductieve ontwikkeling van theoretische verklaringen toelaten. Hierdoor kan men, in vergelijking met kwantitatieve onderzoeksmethoden, meer aandacht besteden aan het belang van bepaalde contexten door middel van inductieve en cyclische processen van data-analyse en steekproeftrekking. Vervolgens waren deze methoden nuttig om de variatie in de interpretaties van het concept 'succes' door verschillende actoren, te bestuderen in hun context. Afhankelijk van de omgeving waarin leerlingen zich bevinden, kunnen deze een verschillende definitie of interpretatie van succes hanteren. Leerlingen kunnen bijvoorbeeld hun onderwijsprestaties voor een toets of op het einde van het jaar vergelijken met die van hun klasgenoten. Tegelijkertijd kunnen ze ook hun gehele schoolcarrière en het uiteindelijk hoogst behaalde onderwijsniveau vergelijken met die van hun broers en/of zussen. Daarenboven kan men ook de institutionele context waarin leerlingen zich bevinden niet

negeren. Landen en regio's kunnen verschillen in de manieren waarop ze hun leerlingen evalueren (vb. aan de hand van gestandaardiseerde toetsen) en groeperen in verschillende onderwijsvormen (vb. het moment van opdeling in onderwijsvormen in de schoolcarrière, de mogelijkheden om van richting te wisselen). In landen, zoals de Verenigde Staten van Amerika, zijn gestandaardiseerde test scores erg belangrijk voor de toegang van leerlingen tot universiteiten (Rohler, 2012), terwijl in andere landen, zoals in België, de onderwijsvormen waarin leerlingen zitten een grotere rol spelen voor hun toekomst (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008). Het gebruik van kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden hielp om rekening te houden met het belang van de onderwijsvormen in het Vlaamse onderwijssysteem, de studiekeuzes van leerlingen en de macht van leerkrachten in het evaluatieproces. Deze methoden maakten het ook mogelijk om leerlingen in hun klas te bestuderen. Dit is erg interessant aangezien het in het Vlaamse secundaire onderwijs zeer moeilijk is om met kwantitatieve onderzoeksmethoden te achterhalen in welke klas de leerlingen zitten. Dit is erg moeilijk aangezien scholen omwille van organisatorische redenen leerlingen uit verschillende studierichtingen soms samen les laat volgen voor bepaalde vakken. Zo kunnen de leerlingen die Latijn-Moderne Talen volgen bijvoorbeeld samen het vak Natuurwetenschappen volgen met de leerlingen die Humane wetenschappen volgen. Het afbakenen van klassen kan erg interessant zijn omdat dit inzicht verschaft in de referentiegroepen van een leerling, of de groepen leerlingen waarmee iemand de meeste tijd doorbrengt.

Samenvattend kan gesteld worden dat in deze studie de processen en factoren die kunnen bijdragen tot het onderwijssucces van leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond worden onderzocht in een Vlaamse context. Er werd geopteerd voor het gebruik van kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden aangezien er zo beter rekening gehouden kan worden met het relatieve karakter van het concept 'succes', de groepen waarin leerlingen dagelijks les volgen en het verkennende karakter van de onderzoeksvraag.

## 11.2. ONDERZOEKSOPZET

Vertrekkend vanuit een grounded theory benadering (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) werden scholen en leerlingen geselecteerd op basis van een theoretische steekproeftrekking. Scholen werden geselecteerd op grond van hun etnische schoolsamenstelling, de onderwijsvormen die ze aanbieden en hun geografische ligging. Hierdoor kon er ook aandacht besteed worden aan de impact van het onderwijssysteem op de onderwijsprestaties van etnische minderheden. De onderwijsvormen zijn belangrijk aangezien ze de toegang tot het hoger onderwijs verder

bepalen en mee de basis vormen voor de evaluatie van leerlingen (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). In totaal werden er drie scholen opgenomen in deze steekproef. De eerste school, St. Bernardus, biedt zowel academische, technische als beroepsrichtingen aan (444 leerlingen). In de tweede school, Mountain High, zijn 1159 leerlingen ingeschreven en worden enkel academische richtingen aangeboden. Als laatste, zijn er 404 leerlingen ingeschreven in Catherine College, een school waar men zich enkel kan inschrijven voor technische of beroepsrichtingen.

De onderzoeker voerde participerende observaties (Gold, 1958) uit in drie à vier klassen in elke school voor een periode van ongeveer twee à drie weken. Daarna nodigde ze alle leerlingen van deze klassen uit om deel te nemen aan een interview over ‘Succes op school’. Tijdens deze interviews werden de definities van succes van deze leerlingen bevraagd. Daarnaast handelden deze interviews ook over de steun die leerlingen kregen van hun ouders, vrienden, klasgenoten, de interetnische relaties die ze hadden ontwikkelen in de klas, hun attitudes ten opzichte van andere etnische groepen en het belang van geloof voor hun onderwijsprestaties. In totaal werden 129 leerlingen, 27 leerkrachten en twee graadcoördinatoren bevraagd gedurende één à twee lesuren (ongeveer tussen de 35 en 100 minuten per interview). In deze steekproef zaten 33 leerlingen van Turkse afkomst, 18 van Noord-Afrikaanse afkomst, en 15 van Oost-Europese afkomst. Na intensieve periodes van veldwerk en het afnemen van interviews werden de data geanalyseerd met behulp van Nvivo. Door de afwisseling van perioden van dataverzameling en data-analyses kende dit onderzoek eerder een cyclisch verloop. Dit liet de onderzoekster toe om aan de hand van eerste data-analyses terug te gaan naar scholen en zien of deze eerste analyses ook van toepassing waren in een andere context. De data werd op een exploratieve manier geanalyseerd en later werden de resultaten van deze data-analyses vergelen met internationale studies.

Concluderend kan men stellen dat het gebruik van een grounded theory methodologie toeliet om meer inzicht te verwerven in de processen die plaatsvinden op school, en aandacht te geven aan verschillende interpretaties van succes en de omgeving die deze interpretaties mee vormgeven.

### 11.3. ONDERZOEKSRESULTATEN

Resultaten van dit onderzoek tonen aan dat de specifieke structuur van het Vlaamse onderwijssysteem zijn sporen heeft nagelaten op de manier waarop men succes definieert en evalueert. De evaluatieprocedures in het Vlaamse onderwijs spelen een aanzienlijke rol in het

ontwikkelen van definities van succes en de houding die men heeft ten opzichte van onderwijs. Uit dit onderzoek blijkt dat ook dat het opdelen van leerlingen in onderwijsvormen en studierichtingen niet enkel een invloed lijkt te hebben op de gebruikte definities van succes maar dat de specifieke manier waarop dit gedaan wordt in Vlaanderen ook nog andere neveneffecten met zich meebrengt. Zo bleek dat er enkele onvoorziene gevolgen zijn die vaak vergeten worden bij het bespreken van de structuur van het Vlaamse onderwijssysteem. De huidige structuur van het onderwijssysteem lijkt voornamelijk nadelig te zijn voor de leerlingen in de minder gewaardeerde onderwijsvormen. Dit onderwijssysteem, ook wel eens ‘het waternetstelsel’ genoemd, lijkt ervoor te zorgen dat de leerlingen in de meer gewaardeerde richtingen steeds gericht en gespecialiseerder les kunnen volgen. Dit staat in contrast met de minder gewaardeerde richtingen, waar er naar het einde van het secundaire onderwijs steeds meer leerlingen met een verschillende onderwijsachtergrond en kennis les volgen. Dit bemoeilijkt het les geven en les volgen aanzienlijk, aangezien leerkrachten vaak onvoldoende kunnen inschatten welke specifieke onderwijstrajecten hun leerlingen reeds hebben afgelegd. De komst van nieuwe leerlingen naar het einde van het secundair onderwijs zorgt ervoor dat leerkrachten steeds enkele basisvaardigheden en kennis moeten herhalen zodat alle leerlingen mee zijn met de les. Tegelijkertijd hebben leerlingen hierdoor vaker het gevoel dat de leerstof niet aansluit bij hun noden, wat hun studiemotivatie aanzienlijk kan doen verminderen. Dit uit zich soms door het stellen van deviant gedrag in de klas en het storen van medeleerlingen die deze leerstof nog niet gezien hebben. Dit geheel van factoren lijkt ervoor te zorgen dat leerlingen de richting en onderwijsvorm waarin ze zitten minder waarderen.

Vervolgens leidt de ongelijke spreiding van leerlingen met een verschillende etnische en socio-economische achtergrond over de verschillende onderwijsvormen tot een erg specifieke etnische en socio-economische compositie per onderwijsvorm. Deze specifieke etnische en sociale compositie lijkt ook samen te hangen met de ontwikkeling van interetnische vriendschappen en relaties en het gevoel erbij te horen in de klas. Het is voor leerlingen vaak erg belangrijk om erbij te horen. Als dit niet het geval is, zijn leerlingen die problemen ervaren met het curriculum vaak meer geneigd om te veranderen van school en/of studierichting. Resultaten tonen aan dat de etnische compositie van een klas hier een rol in kan spelen. In de meest gewaardeerde studierichtingen in het ASO geven leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond meer aan dat ze zich minder thuis voelen in de klas omdat ze ‘de enige’ (allochtoon) zijn. In de tussenrichtingen, zoals Industriële of Humane Wetenschappen, hebben leerlingen de neiging om met medeleerlingen van dezelfde afkomst om te gaan. Toch



zorgt de aanwezigheid van ‘gelijken’ er vaak voor dat deze leerlingen ook betere en meer positieve relaties ontwikkelden met leerlingen van andere etnische groepen. Als laatste is er duidelijk een meer gespannen relatie tussen leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond en deze met een Belgische achtergrond in de beroepsklassen. In deze klassen is er een grotere proportie leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond aanwezig, in verhouding tot het aandeel leerlingen van Belgische afkomst. Vervolgens is er meer concurrentie tussen deze leerlingen aangezien ze vaker onzeker zijn over hun toekomstmogelijkheden en positie op de arbeidsmarkt. In deze klassen hebben vele leerlingen eerder negatieve en etnocentrische houdingen ten opzichte van andere etnische groepen en is er meer conflict tussen deze groepen zichtbaar. Het gevoel om erbij te horen in de klas is dus belangrijk voor de uiteindelijke schoolcarrière van leerlingen. Aangezien etniciteit vaak een grote rol speelt in het leven van leerlingen (vb. naschoolse activiteiten) en ook vaak samenhangt met een bepaalde socio-economische afkomst, zijn vele leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond eerder geneigd om zich thuis te voelen bij andere leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond. Het belang van erbij te horen kan ook beter verstaan worden vanuit de bredere sociale context waarin deze leerlingen leven. Ook al zijn vele leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond in België geboren, toch worden ze vaak gezien als ‘anders’, en wordt ernaar verwezen als ‘allochtoon’.

Het belang van etnische identiteit werd eerder al in verband gebracht met de onderwijsprestaties van etnische minderheidsleerlingen, verder bouwend op de studies van Ogbu (1983; 1987; 1990; 2008) en Fordham en Ogbu (1986). De resultaten van dit onderzoek geven aan dat de academische identiteit niet noodzakelijk verband houdt met leerlingen hun etnische identiteit. De academische identiteit van leerlingen lijkt ook niet gerelateerd aan het behoren tot een bepaalde etnische groep. Toch lijkt de etnische identiteit van leerlingen wel een rol te spelen op school. Deze identiteit lijkt soms belangrijk bij het maken van vrienden op school of het zich thuis voelen in de klas. Dit gevoel om erbij te horen in de klas bleek soms een invloed te hebben op leerlingen hun studiekeuze en schoolkeuze. Bijvoorbeeld, sommige leerlingen vertelden dat ze zich niet zo goed voelden in de klas. Hierdoor hadden ze ook minder zin om hun best te doen om goede schoolresultaten te behalen of om extra hun best te doen bij moeilijkheden met de leerstof, wat soms leidde tot het veranderen van studierichting.

Aangezien studiekeuzes een cruciale rol spelen in de uiteindelijke onderwijsprestaties van leerlingen, leek het interessant om de factoren die bijdragen tot deze studiekeuzeprocessen verder te bestuderen. Uit de resultaten blijkt dat leerlingen met een

migratieachtergrond op twee punten verschillen van leerlingen van Belgische afkomst met betrekking tot het maken van studiekeuzes. Ten eerste worden deze leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond vaker geconfronteerd met negatieve ervaringen op school, zoals discriminatie, wat soms tot een verlies van studiemotivatie of blijven zitten heeft geleid. Een tweede verschilpunt met leerlingen met een Belgische afkomst is de manier waarop leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond studiekeuzes laten leiden door hun referentiekaders en toekomstverwachtingen. Terwijl leerlingen van Belgische afkomst zich vaker laten leiden door de beroepen waarmee ze vertrouwd zijn in hun referentiekaders, willen leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond deze beroepen net vermijden. Dit compliceert het uitzoeken van wat deze leerlingen later willen doen later aanzienlijk. Dus leerlingen met een Belgische en migratieachtergrond worden geconfronteerd met andere uitdagingen en hebben andere referentiekaders, wat hun studiekeuzes op een andere manier beïnvloedt.

Leerlingen zoeken vaak leeftijdsgenoten op die te maken hebben met gelijkaardige problemen of in eenzelfde situatie zitten, zoals andere leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond, waarmee ze hun onderwijsprestaties en studiekeuzes kunnen vergelijken. Deze vergelijkingsgroepen lijken leerlingen ook te helpen bij het ontwikkelen van hun toekomstplannen. Deze toekomstperspectieven lijken vaker te verschillen van die van leerlingen met een Belgische afkomst. Uit de interviews blijkt dat leerlingen hun toekomstverwachtingen vaak afstellen op de ervaringen van mensen uit hun omgeving. Dit lijkt voornamelijk zo voor leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond aangezien zij vaker verwachten dat ze geconfronteerd zullen worden met discriminatie op de arbeidsmarkt en vaak stellen dat ze in andere arbeidsomstandigheden willen werken als hun ouders en andere mensen uit hun migrantengemeenschap. Dit zorgt er voor dat leerlingen vaker bepaalde strategieën uitwerken om dergelijke ervaringen in de toekomst te vermijden, wat soms ook een invloed lijkt te hebben op de studiekeuzes die ze maken. Deze referentiekaders en vergelijkingsgroepen leken ook verband te houden met de toekomstplannen die leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond hadden uitgewerkt.

Leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond lijken de waarde van onderwijs hoog in te schatten, al vindt men dit niet altijd terug in hun uiteindelijke schoolresultaten. Mickelson (1990) probeerde deze ‘attitude-achievement paradox’ reeds te verklaren door een onderscheid te maken tussen abstracte en concrete attitudes ten opzichte van onderwijs. De positieve abstracte houding van leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond ten opzichte van onderwijs vindt men niet steeds terug in hun concrete houdingen. Deze concrete attitudes worden gevormd door de leefomstandigheden van deze leerlingen en de percepties over hun

toekomstmogelijkheden op de arbeidsmarkt. Vele leerlingen geven aan dat ze toekomstige arbeidsmarktdiscriminatie proberen te vermijden door beroepen te kiezen (vb. zelfstandige, dokter) die het risico op dergelijke discriminatie beperken. Terwijl voor sommige leerlingen de instrumentele waarde van onderwijs voor hun persoonlijke leven hierdoor vermindert, denken andere leerlingen dat het behalen van bepaalde diploma's hen kan beschermen tegen discriminatie. De instrumentele waarde van onderwijs wordt gedurende de schoolcarrière van leerlingen steeds in vraag gesteld en aangepast aan de hand van ervaringen op school, veranderingen in hun toekomstperspectieven en behaalde studieresultaten. De bevinding dat leerlingen de instrumentele waarde van het onderwijs interpreteren in termen van hun persoonlijke doelen niet noodzakelijk verwerpen is op zich al een interessante bevinding. Vele onderzoekers baseren zich op Ogbu (1987; 1990; 2008) zijn cultureel-ecologisch model dat stelt dat bepaalde etnische minderheidsgroepen die een conflictueuze relatie hebben ontwikkeld met de dominante samenleving (zie ook Hermans, 2004) een oppositionele houding hebben ontwikkeld ten opzichte van het onderwijs, en dit blijkt dus veelal niet het geval te zijn.

In hoofdzaak worden drie breed gedefinieerde etnische groepen besproken in deze studie: leerlingen van Turkse, Noord-Afrikaanse en Oost-Europese afkomst. Deze groepen verschillen van elkaar in hun specifieke migratiegeschiedenis en de ontwikkeling van hun immigrantennetwerken. Deze netwerken kunnen op verschillende manieren bijdragen tot de schoolse prestaties van hun kinderen. Er zijn migrantengroepen die al langer in België verblijven en beter uitgebouwde netwerken hebben, zoals de Turkse en Noord-Afrikaanse migranten. Deze migrantengroepen hebben meer mogelijkheden om kennis over de Belgische samenleving en haar rolmodellen te ontwikkelen, het Vlaamse onderwijssysteem te delen en bieden kinderen ook de mogelijkheid om zich met elkaar te vergelijken. Dit potentieel kan echter niet steeds volledig benut worden omdat deze netwerken vaak homogeen zijn met betrekking tot het onderwijsniveau van de ouders. Daarnaast worden deze leerlingen ook vaker geconfronteerd met discriminatie wat ook een impact kan hebben op het schoolleven van deze leerlingen en het ontwikkelen van hun toekomstdoelen. Recente migrantengroepen, zoals migranten die afkomstig zijn uit het oosten van Europa, zijn meer divers en worden minder geconfronteerd met racisme als groep (ten dele omdat ze uiterlijk meer lijken op autochtone Vlamingen). Bijgevolg is er meer variatie in de steun en kennis die deze families hebben om hun kinderen te ondersteunen in het onderwijs. Dit laatste toont het belang van 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) aan. Deze 'weak ties' zijn relaties die mensen ontwikkelen met kennissen die vaak over andere maar nuttige informatie beschikken (vb. over het

onderwijssysteem), ongeacht hun persoonlijke achtergrond en kennis. Concluderend kan men stellen dat migrantennetwerken op verschillende manieren een bijdrage kunnen leveren aan de schoolse prestaties van hun kinderen.

#### 11.4. DISCUSSIE EN CONCLUSIE

Aan de hand van deze studie wordt geprobeerd om meer inzicht te verwerven in de factoren die samenhangen met het onderwijssucces van etnische minderheden in het Vlaamse secundaire onderwijs. Daarbij staat eerst en vooral de definitie van succes centraal en de manier waarop leerlingen en leerkrachten succes evalueren. De groepering van leerlingen in verschillende onderwijsvormen, en de maatschappelijke status van deze onderwijsvormen, lijkt de manier waarop alle leerlingen naar succes aankijken te beïnvloeden. Leerlingen die academische richtingen (ASO) volgen, krijgen vaak meer maatschappelijk aanzien dan leerlingen die technische of beroepsrichtingen volgen. Door deze impact van de specifieke onderwijsstructuur op de definitie van succes is er bijgevolg veel aandacht gegaan naar de processen die het studiekeuzeproces hebben beïnvloed, om zo meer inzicht te verwerven in de uiteindelijke onderwijsuitkomsten van leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond. Deze studiekeuzes van leerlingen zijn vooral cruciaal voor het verdere verloop van hun schoolcarrière en hun toekomstmogelijkheden op de arbeidsmarkt.

Het gebruik van kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden bleek erg gepast te zijn aangezien er hierdoor rekening gehouden kon worden met de manier waarop leerlingen ‘succes op school’ definiëren in verschillende contexten. De combinatie van etnografische observaties en semigestructureerde interviews heeft geleid tot vernieuwende resultaten en inzichten in de manier waarop structurele kenmerken van het onderwijssysteem leerlingen kunnen beïnvloeden en de manier waarop de leerlingen hiermee om gaan. Daarnaast hielpen deze methoden om rekening te houden met de relatieve aard van het centrale concept van deze studie, namelijk ‘succes’ en om de schoolse processen die bijdragen tot de bestaande etnische en sociale ongelijkheden in het onderwijs en de samenleving, en de schoolse attitudes van leerlingen en hun toekomstperspectieven te bestuderen. Het zou echter interessant zijn om, naast de schoolcontext, ook etnografische observaties uit te voeren in andere settings, zoals de familie of de vriendengroep, waardoor men een beter inzicht kan verwerven in het relatieve belang van deze settings en hoe deze elkaar kunnen beïnvloeden. Een andere suggestie zou zijn om te gaan kijken naar scholen met een kleinere proportie leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond. Hierdoor zou men meer inzicht kunnen verwerven in de samenhang

en interacties tussen socio-economische achtergrondkenmerken en de migratieachtergrond van leerlingen. Een aanvulling op dit onderzoek en suggestie voor toekomstig onderzoek is het gebruik van andere onderzoeksmethoden, zoals focusgroepen, waarbij leerlingen geconfronteerd kunnen worden met de reacties en meningen en interpretaties van anderen over eenzelfde situatie. Een bijkomende suggestie betreft het verder onderzoeken van de interpretaties en definities van de ‘dominante samenleving’ van leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond en van de manier waarop deze definities een invloed kunnen hebben op zowel hun relatie met mensen van Belgische afkomst als de ontwikkeling van hun etnische identiteit. Ten slotte, lijkt het theoretisch relevant om het concept ‘tijd’ beter op te nemen in toekomstig onderzoek. Tijd lijkt erg belangrijk aangezien vele processen en factoren slechts bijdragen tot het onderwijssucces van etnische minderheden als ze over een langere periode voorkomen, bijvoorbeeld het ingeschreven blijven in een bepaalde studierichting. Tijd speelt een rol aangezien de studiekeuzes van leerlingen een blijvende impact hebben op het verdere verloop van hun schoolcarrière

Op basis van deze onderzoeksresultaten kunnen ook enkele beleidsaanbevelingen geformuleerd worden. Ten eerste lijkt het erop dat goed georganiseerde migrantennetwerken een grote rol zouden kunnen spelen in het stellen van voorbeeldfiguren, het verspreiden van informatie en kennis over het onderwijssysteem en het steunen van leerlingen doorheen hun schoolcarrière. Leerlingen zouden bijvoorbeeld baat hebben bij het aanstellen van een tutor die hen begeleidt bij belangrijke transitimomenten in hun schoolloopbaan, zoals de overgang van de lagere school naar het secundaire onderwijs, en die leerlingen helpt om weerstand te bieden tegen allerlei moeilijkheden verbonden aan hun migratieachtergrond (vb. discriminatie, taalachterstand, kennis van het onderwijssysteem). Ten tweede hebben beleidsmakers in Vlaanderen de laatste jaren interetnisch contact proberen te stimuleren door scholen financiële middelen te geven die ze kunnen inzetten voor extra ondersteuning. Toch blijkt uit deze studie dat interetnisch contact niet vanzelf verloopt en dat men aandacht moet hebben voor de processen die dergelijk contact kunnen vergemakkelijken en stimuleren, zoals het hebben van een gelijke status tussen leerlingen (Allport, 1954). Hiernaast zouden beleidsmakers peer tutors, leerkrachten (Stevens & Görgöz, 2010) of ander schoolpersoneel van eenzelfde migratieachtergrond kunnen aanstellen. Hierdoor zouden leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond zich beter thuis voelen op school. Ten derde zou het onderwijsbeleid meer aandacht moeten schenken aan de ontwikkeling van toekomstperspectieven en doelstellingen van leerlingen in het begin van hun schoolcarrière door bijvoorbeeld ‘brede scholen’ of ‘brede wijken verder uit te breiden (zie Joos & Ernalsteen, 2010; Joos et al.,

2010; Ernalsteen & Joos, 2011) of door comprehensief onderwijs te organiseren (zie Erikson & Johnson, 1996; Boone, 2013). Deze mogelijkheden zouden leerlingen beter in staat moeten stellen om zelf te ontdekken wat ze graag doen en wat hun toekomstmogelijkheden zijn. Door meer aandacht te geven aan het ontwikkelen van leerlingen toekomstdoelen op school, zullen leerlingen minder afhankelijk zijn van hun familie en beter geïnformeerde studiekeuzes maken. Ten vierde leiden sommige structuren van het onderwijssysteem niet steeds tot de verwachte gevolgen. Eén van die onvoorziene gevolgen is het feit dat vele leerlingen in beroepsrichtingen niet steeds eenzelfde onderwijsachtergrond hebben, waardoor het lesgeven en les krijgen vaak bemoeilijkt wordt. Dit zou men kunnen verhelpen door leerlingen beter te informeren over de verschillende mogelijkheden in het onderwijs en hen hier eerder mee laten kennismaken. Dit zou ervoor kunnen zorgen dat leerlingen sneller in de studierichtingen of onderwijsvormen belanden die bij hen passen. De tendens om te starten in bepaalde studierichtingen en daarna te veranderen tijdens de schoolcarrière naar andere studierichtingen kan men gedeeltelijk wijten aan de maatschappelijke status die verbonden is aan de verschillende onderwijsvormen en studierichtingen. Beleidsmakers zouden de maatschappelijke status van de minder gewaardeerde studierichtingen eventueel kunnen verhogen door het risico op werkloosheid te verminderen na het behalen van een getuigschrift of diploma van deze richtingen. Leerlingen die beroepsrichtingen volgen zijn kwetsbaarder op de arbeidsmarkt (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008) en zijn vaak afhankelijk van hun fysieke conditie voor het uitvoeren van hun job (vb. werken in de bouw). Hierdoor zou het eventueel interessant zijn om leerlingen in beroepsrichtingen te laten specialiseren in twee vakken (vb. major en een minorvak) waardoor hun risico op werkloosheid beperkt kan worden. Een andere mogelijkheid om de status van onderwijsvormen en studierichtingen te verbeteren kan het doorvoeren van structurele veranderingen in het onderwijssysteem zijn, zoals het aanpassen van evaluatiemethoden (vb. B-attesten) of leerlingen op een later moment in hun schoolcarrière een studiekeuze laten maken.

Concluderend uit dit onderzoek kan gesteld worden dat succes in het Vlaamse onderwijssysteem aanzienlijk beïnvloed wordt door de onderwijsvormen waarin men vervat zit. De studiekeuzes en de processen die deze studiekeuzes verder bepalen, spelen een belangrijke rol in de verdere schoolloopbaan en uiteindelijke resultaten van leerlingen. Deze studiekeuzeprocessen lijken op verschillende manieren te verlopen voor leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond en leerlingen van Belgische afkomst. Leerlingen met een migratieachtergrond lijken beïnvloed te zijn door de interetnische contacten op school,

hebben andere toekomstperspectieven, andere referentiekaders en andere vergelijkingsgroepen.







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## 13. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE

(Real) name:.....

Pseudonym

1:.....

Pseudonym

2:.....

Gender: boy/girl

Date of birth: ...../...../.....

You are currently enrolled in fifth year of secondary education. What are the **LAST FIELDS OF STUDY** you were enrolled in, since first year of secondary education? (Also mention the years you had to repeat)

School year	Year + Field of study	Which school?	Which certificate did you have? (A-B-C)	% at the end of the year
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				
20.....-20.....				

Did you go to **KINDERGARTEN**?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What is your **RELIGION**?

- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Protestant
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Not religious



Fill in the **NATIONALITY** of the following persons:

	<b>Nationality</b>
<b>You</b>	
<b>Your mother</b>	
<b>Your father</b>	
<b>Your grandmother: the mother of your mother</b>	
<b>Your grandfather: the father of your mother</b>	
<b>Your grandmother: the mother of your father</b>	
<b>Your grandfather: the father of your father</b>	

In which **COUNTRY** are the following persons **BORN**?

	<b>Country of birth</b>	<b>Urban/rural</b>
<b>You</b>		Urban/rural
<b>Your mother</b>		Urban/rural
<b>Your father</b>		Urban/rural
<b>Your grandmother: the mother of your mother</b>		Urban/rural
<b>Your grandfather: the father of your mother</b>		Urban/rural
<b>Your grandmother: the mother of your father</b>		Urban/rural
<b>Your grandfather: the father of your father</b>		Urban/rural

### **Your father**

Until which age did your father go to school? .....

Educational level?.....

Does your father has a job at this moment? .....

What is/was the profession of your father?.....  
 .....  
 .

### **Your mother**

Until which age did your mother go to school? .....

Educational  
level?.....

Does your mother has a job at this  
moment?.....

What is/was the profession of your mother?.....  
.....

### **Contact**

Do you want to know more about the results of this research (not obligated, please give your  
email address:

.....



## APPENDIX 2: LETTER TO STUDENTS



FACULTEIT POLITIEKE EN SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN

date

Dear parent(s),

Last year, I started, under the supervision of Prof. Peter Stevens, my research at Ghent University (Department of Sociology). My research will focus on the ways students of distinct ethnic and social descent interact with each other and their success in school. To do so, I will carry out some observations in your school during an extensive period of time. After this period of observations of teachers and students, I will invite teachers and students to participate in an interview and to fill in a questionnaire. I will try to position myself as a neutral observer in the classroom in such way; the classroom activities will not be disturbed nor influenced. I will sit at the end of the classroom and take notes.

I never use real names for my research and all information will be handled carefully and will be only considered by the researchers themselves. Of course, you are not obligated to participate in this research and you can always withdraw during the research. This research is designed to ask as little as possible from the teachers and students and will be organised in such way the normal activities at school will not be disturbed. I hope you give me the permission that your son/daughter can participate in this research. Please, if you do NOT want your child to participate in this research, please fill in the strip below.

If there are any questions or remarks concerning this research, don't hesitate to contact me at my email address: Lore.VanPraag@Ugent.be .

Kind regards,

Lore van Praag  
PhD fellow Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen (FWO)  
Sociology Department  
Ghent University  
Korte meer 5  
9000 Gent

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I, undersigned, ....., parent of  
....., student of.....will  
NOT give permission to participate in this research to Lore Van Praag of Ghent University.

Date

Signature parent

### **APPENDIX 3: LETTER TO TEACHERS**



FACULTEIT POLITIEKE EN SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN

date

Dear teacher of [Class group],

At [time start fieldwork] I, Lore Van Praag, will start my research, together with my supervisor Prof. Peter Stevens, from Ghent University at your school [name]. My research will focus on the ways students of distinct ethnic and social descent interact with each other and their success in school. To do so, I will carry out some observations in your school during an extensive period of time. After this period of observations of teachers and students, I will invite teachers and students to participate in an interview and to fill in a questionnaire. I will try to position myself as a neutral observer in the classroom in such way; the classroom activities will not be disturbed nor influenced. I will sit at the end of the classroom and take notes. I would like to start [at that time] to follow [class group].

I never use real names for my research and all information will be handled carefully and will be only considered by the researchers themselves. Off course, you are not obligated to participate in this research and you can always withdraw during the research. This research is designed to ask as little as possible from the teachers and students and will be organised in such way the normal activities at school will not be disturbed. I hope you give me the permission to follow your courses. Please, let me know if you do NOT want to participate in this research.

If there are any questions or remarks concerning this research, don't hesitate to contact me at my email address: Lore.VanPraag@Ugent.be .

Kind regards,

Lore van Praag  
PhD fellow Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen (FWO)  
Sociology Department  
Ghent University  
Korte meer 5  
9000 Gent

## **APPENDIX 4: TOPIC LIST**

### ***Introduction***

- What does ‘educational success’ mean to you?
  - [In some interviews, this question was asked as follows, while in other interviews, students had to sort these statements from ‘most’ to ‘least successful’]
  - I have some statements of fictive students. We will discuss them together, and you should give me your opinion about whether you think this student is successful in education or not.
- A. Erykah: “I’m trying really hard to get high grades in school: I study for all tests, exams and I always make my homework. I have sufficient grades to pass to next year.”
- B. Anouk: “School doesn’t mean that much to me. I make my homework but I don’t really study a lot. I don’t need that because at the end, I always pass. Last year, I changed track so I didn’t had to put much effort in school.”
- C. Jef: “I am the clown of the classroom. I like to laugh with the teachers and people of my classroom but I do study at home, because I want to become a writer.”
- D. Kalina: “I think my friends are more important than going to school and paying attention in the class. My grades are not so good but I don’t really care.”
- E. Marie: “I am currently enrolled in my last year of ‘Care’. I really like it and I am really good at it. I hope they will hire me at my internship.”
- F. Felipe: “I do really hard my best to pay attention in the classroom but I fail to do it at home. I am trying but there is always ‘something’ that hinders me from putting effort in school.”
- G. Martje: “I really want to pay attention in the classroom but teachers start with a lot of difficult words. I really don’t understand them. I do study at home but only the things the teachers have explained to me carefully.”
- H. Tarkan: “I only put some effort in my main subjects of the field of study I am enrolled in. I chose Economics-Modern Languages. I only get good grades for subjects like languages or economics, what am I going to do with geography?”
- I. Phillis: “I get good grades in school. I have to because my parents think school is really important and always control me. They control whether I make my homework, learn my lessons. I wouldn’t like to let them down.”

- J. Maaïke: “I am enrolled in Human Sciences but my teachers think I should better opt for another track because my grades are not so good. I really don’t want to follow a technical or professional track.”

*Transition questions*

- Do you think you are successful in school? In which way?
- Do you think significant others see you as successful in education? Parents (mother? father?), sister(s), brother(s), friends, teachers, others?
- Do they support you? In which way?
- How would you describe a successful teacher? How would you describe a less successful teacher?
- In the classroom: Who do you perceive to be successful? Is this easy? When are you successful in your classroom?
- School climate?

*Central questions*

- Track differences?
- Gender differences?
- Ethnic differences?
- Experiences of discrimination in the classroom, outside the classroom
- Importance of religion for educational career and choices
- Future aspirations: labour market and/or higher education? School instrumentality

*Final questions*

- Different behaviour because of researcher in the classroom of students and teachers?
- Short summary researcher main tendencies during interview
- Any other comments/remarks? Most important topics for the student