

*No more colouring outside the lines? Exploring young people's navigational agency in education*

This article highlights the inequality in the Flemish education system, which disproportionately affects youngsters with low socioeconomic status. This inequality is attributed to the human capital approach characterising current educational policies, putting emphasis on educational outcomes. This results in education that homogenises and limits acceptable student behaviour and in which deviations from the norm are met with exclusionary and punitive approaches, consequently pushing vulnerable youngsters with a differing cultural capital out of education. Drawing on the capability approach, this article argues the importance of navigational agency in education, investigating the space students have to enter and exit education, resolving conflicts between education and other social practices, and reforming education by voicing their opinions. By analysing 66 Flemish secondary school policies, it is concluded that young people's navigational agency is limited in the current educational landscape. Furthermore, most school policies lack inner consistency, highlighting the fact that there is no coherent pedagogical vision within, which raises questions about how thought through these policies really are.

Keywords: poverty and education; inclusive education; school policy; school discipline; capability approach

## **Introduction**

Despite economically advanced countries having well-resourced and high-quality education systems with mechanisms in place for targeting attention and resources to the most disadvantaged youngsters (Raffo et al. 2009), social inequality persists as a common feature in most countries' education systems (Blossfeld et al. 2016). Research shows that

Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) has been a frontrunner regarding educational inequality for years (OECD 2019). Youngsters with a low socio-economic status (SES) achieve lower educational outcomes, are overrepresented in vocational and special education, and are more likely to drop out of education altogether (GO! Onderwijs van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2013). This is not limited to Flanders, as several international studies show that young people's SES remains the most powerful factor influencing their performance in education (Ainsworth and Roscigno 2005).

Within current educational policies, a human capital approach can be identified. This means investing in the knowledge and skills of people to achieve economic growth and social inclusion (De la Fuente and Ciccone 2003, Dean 2003), a tendency only enforced by the fact that we are increasingly living in a knowledge-based economy (Jessop 2013). Subsequently, education is seen as an important economic strategy (Ross and Leathwood 2013), with the main duty of maximising learning outcomes to realise the full potential of our capital, as stated in the Flemish policy plan on education (2019). Though such a view has its merits, it fails to reduce the inequality in our education system. Rather it is criticised for reproducing and contributing to it.

Critics (Robeyns 2006, Walker 2012) state that this almost exclusively economic approach to education results in a merely instrumental view on education, in which education is only aimed at the future (of getting a job). Such an approach leaves no more room for 'failure', as we invest in children, expecting a return on this investment (Vlaamse Overheid 2019). This can be noticed in the remarkable rise in interest in the measurement of education over the past few decades. An increasing number of international comparative studies, with PISA leading the way, measure a set of economically useful skills (Labaree 2014). These result in league tables that are assumed to indicate who is better and are consequently used to inform educational policies to raise

their standards (Biesta 2010). This is putting an enormous pressure on schools to perform (Lloyd 2000, Biesta 2019) causing them to get caught up in a global educational rat-race, with a fear of being left behind.

Consequently, disruptive behaviour has become an increasing concern for schools, because it is suspected of markedly hindering and reducing the academic achievements of the whole class (Slee 2013, Szulevicz et al. 2016). As a result, acceptable student behaviour is narrowed down and deviations from the norm are met with exclusionary and punitive approaches (Biesta 2014, Hedegaard-Soerensen and Grumloese 2020). Minority groups are more often at the receiving end of these policies (Skiba, et al. 1997). Following Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital and social reproduction, this is due to the fact that youngsters from lower-class backgrounds have a differing cultural capital, as such the school is less adapted to these youngsters, differing in informal rules, use of language, and so on. This group is consequently more easily seen as unfit for education and labelled as 'troublemakers' (Bowditch 1993). In this way, students are often facilitated out or driven out of education, both physically and mentally, by teachers' and other personnel's incitement to leave (Vizcain 2005) or because of adverse situations within the school environment like tests, attendance, discipline policies and consequences of poor behaviour (Jordan et al. 1994), for which the blame falls entirely on the youngsters themselves. Blatantly prioritising concern with the social and economic costs of indiscipline over the needs of certain pupils (Araújo 2005).

### **Shifting the way we look at education**

It has been said that inequalities in education today form the basis for inequalities in education tomorrow (Desmedt and Nicaise 2008). The United Nations (2020) propose that 'when people are able to get quality education, they can break from the cycle of poverty'. Rightfully so or not, education is still seen as the main solution to questions of

social justice (Labaree 2011, Biesta 2019). As we have illustrated above, the current human capital approach falls short in answering these questions, as it generates several disadvantages for students with lower SES, while at the same time promoting the myth of meritocracy (Leathwood 2005). Therefore, the capability approach is employed as an alternative conceptual framework for looking at education and giving possible answers in dealing with educational inequalities.

The capability approach is described by Otto and Ziegler (2010) as a fundamental alternative to neoliberalism, that challenges social inequality and allows theorising the pursuit of social justice and equality. It argues that social justice is not a matter of equalising citizens' bundles of resources nor equalising their levels of subjective wellbeing, but rather a matter of guaranteeing every citizen a set of basic capabilities, such as education. Not only to achieve economic growth (cf. human capital approach), but with the final target of enhancing human wellbeing and reducing social exclusion and inequalities. In order to make a fair and profound analysis of our education system, it is the capability for education of all youngsters that should be analysed. This is described as the freedom young people experience to get education they value (Walker 2005, Otto and Ziegler 2006). Inspired by Claassen's (2018) dual theory of agency, we argue that the capability for education can only be achieved if every student enjoys navigational agency, referring to the space students have to freely navigate social practices through opportunities for exit and voice.

This plea for navigational agency in education is diametrically opposed to current evolutions in education. The right to education of those who cannot or will not meet certain standards, regulations, or patterns of behaviour, is presently put under serious pressure (Vandekinderen et al. 2017). Within such a context, we expect that young people's navigational agency is more and more reduced. Against this background, this

article investigates: ‘In which way is navigational agency present in current school policies in Flanders?’ Seeing as national policy on the practical realisation of education is sparse in Flanders and schools are free to organise education as they see fit, conditional upon having a school policy detailing their operational principles, school policies are the instrument of choice to gain insight into school operations and their underlying visions. Accommodating Claassen’s concept of navigational agency (2018) to the practice of education, it specifically examines 1. The possibilities youngsters have to enter and exit education. With regard to enter, the article explores whether youngsters can freely enter any school of their choice or whether limitations are imposed by school regulations. Regarding exit, this article examines which reactions schools put forward regarding youngsters (temporarily) escaping education by deviating from the prescribed path, e.g. by unmotivated behaviour, violating school rules, and truancy. 2. The opportunities youngsters have to resolve conflicts between school and their other social practices. This is investigated by looking at how schools approach students in their policies, whether they are only seen as students or whether their broader identities, such as their religion, style preferences, political preferences, and so on, can co-exist. 3. The opportunities youngsters have to reform education are studied by looking at the freedom schools allow students to voice their opinions concerning the functioning of the school. The fourth element of Claassen’s concept of navigational agency, namely the opportunities youngsters have to create new practices, is not included in our analysis, seeing as such practices are not addressed in school policies.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research context***

In Flanders, 14.03% of children grow up in poverty (Kind & Gezin 2019), but there are major differences between cities and the rest of Flanders. In the two biggest cities in Flanders, namely Ghent and Antwerp, the percentage of children growing up in poverty ascends to 30.5% and 37.2% (Kind & Gezin 2019), making their school policies interesting research cases. Regarding disciplinary actions, the Flemish Government (2014) has defined that these can be taken when the actions of a student violate the precepts of the school in such a way that they constitute a danger or serious impediment to normal education or training or the physical or psychological integrity and safety of one or more members of the school. The disciplinary measures defined by the Flemish Government are temporary and permanent exclusion. In the event of a breach of the rules of conduct, which is not, however, of a disciplinary nature, the Flemish Government (2014) stipulates that other measures may be taken that deny the pupil certain provisions or impose certain obligations. These guidelines on the Flemish level are thus very undefined, leaving schools to further interpret and shape these in their own policies. Each school is, however, obliged to draw up a school policy (Vlaamse Overheid 2020), in which the rights and obligations of each student are outlined. Upon enrolment in a school, the parents or adult pupils are required to sign this school policy and receive a copy to take with them. These agreed-upon documents thus contain the most extensive documentation on specific school strategies and practices and are consequently the instrument of choice to study navigational agency in education.

### ***Data collection***

All 74 secondary schools in Antwerp and Ghent were included in our sample. Most of the school policies were accessed through the websites of the schools (n=64). These policies were publicly available as downloadable pdf files, under the heading 'school policy'. The school administrators of the remaining schools, that did not have their school policy openly available, were contacted to obtain their school policy via e-mail. In this way two school policies could be added to our study, resulting in a final sample of 66 secondary schools in Ghent and Antwerp. This final dataset includes schools for general education, technical education, vocational education, and schools that offer a combination of two or all three pathways. Furthermore, the sample includes every educational network in Flanders, namely city education, provincial education, community education, and free education.

Most school policies entail more than 50 pages, with the longest policy consisting of 106 pages. All school policies contain guidelines on handling prominent issues in education, such as truancy, as they are required to. Most schools, however, include additional regulations trying to monitor several other areas and issues in their school. This often turns into an abundance of additional detailed rules, distributed over several pages, apropos of which entrances to use, which playground activities are allowed, when to use the toilet, where to stand when it rains, how to use the seating-furniture, how to act when it snows, and so forth.

### ***Data analysis***

All school policies were numbered and entirely uploaded into NVivo data analysis software. The school policies were consequently coded and analysed through an iterative process, combining both content and thematic analyses (Bowen 2009). Content analysis is the process of organising information into categories related to the central question of the

research (Bowen 2009). During this first-pass document review (Corbin and Strauss 2008) meaningful and relevant passages of text were identified and grouped into three categories, in analogy with the concept of navigational agency (Claassen 2018): 1. The possibilities youngsters have to enter and exit education; 2. The opportunities youngsters have to resolve conflicts between school and other social practices and 3. The opportunities youngsters have to reform education and voice their opinions. After this, a thematic analysis was used. Through a careful, more focused re-reading and review of the data (Bowen 2009) various themes pertinent to the research question were differentiated within each category. These categories and subthemes are mirrored in the display of the results.

## **Results**

### ***1. Enter & Exit***

#### *An illusion of choice*

Seeing as education is compulsory until the age of eighteen, enter is the default position. Flanders, furthermore, does not put any restrictions on entering schools, as parents and youngsters are technically free to choose any school according to their preference. By analysing school regulations, however, it becomes apparent that certain barriers are installed on the level of schools, filtering out certain crowds. The most obvious example being the costs schools charge for the required material, activities, and other services and products, with certain schools appealing to a more elite audience this way. However, many schools install more subtle barriers, for example, by imposing a certain student identity (cf. infra).



*A punishment that fits the 'crime'*

The sanction plans of schools differ greatly. On the one hand, some schools have a very open and vague sanction plan. They merely state the possible actions that could be taken but leave it up to teachers' discretion to assign a sanction they see fit, as 'each individual problem requires a tailor-made solution' (N°62, p. 25). On the other hand, certain schools develop elaborate phased sanctioning plans, giving a clear overview of which penalty is given for which offence. They argue that this kind of plan 'simplifies sanctioning, making it clear for both students and teachers, generating a consistent approach, perceived as fair by everyone' (N°56, p. 28). The actual sanctions schools mention are largely the same among all schools, with most making the separation between order measures and disciplinary measures. Order measures are the first step in schools' sanction plans, they can be taken at any breach of rules and imposed by any member of school personnel. The most mentioned ones being a verbal warning, writing lines, temporary removal from class, a note, a supervision plan, and detention. Some schools issuing more distinctive sanctions, such as the obligation to switch classes, being prohibited from taking part in out-of-school excursions and losing the right to additional counselling. The next step in sanction plans are disciplinary measures, which are temporary or definitive exclusion from school, and can be imposed only by a principal. These policies are reserved for when there is no change in behaviour after order sanctions, when students compromise the safety or learning opportunities of other students, when students endanger the pedagogical project, in the case of serious criminal offences, or when students endanger the normal course of events at school. Less than half the schools (n=29) mention restorative justice to be an option, never placing it at the forefront of their policy. Forms of restorative justice that are offered, include a mediation conversation between actors, a recovery circle with an entire class, and recovery-oriented group discussion.

To gain more insight into how different forms of exit are reacted to, it is interesting to study specific school policy domains. Sanctions with regard to being late vary greatly, ranging from stating ‘this can happen’ (N°16, p. 7) to immediate detention. Most schools take note of every time students are late, imposing sanctions from the third time on, most commonly: having to come early, an extra assignment, detention, and punctuality contracts. Some resetting this count every two weeks, every trimester, or every year. While some schools indicate taking into account valid reasons for being late, others state ‘it is the student’s responsibility to be on time’, making no distinction between valid or invalid reasons, explicitly stating that ‘factors such as public transport will not be taken into account’ (N°66, p. 26). Whereas some schools allow students a margin of up to ten minutes to join class, others require students to be at least five minutes early. Most schools mention that disciplinary measures can be taken if students are often late, with some also stating specific numbers, such as ‘being late sixteen times will result in temporary or definitive exclusion’ (N°15, p. 21).

When students don’t show up to school or arrive very late, this is categorised as truancy and registered with a B-code per half day. Most schools allow up to one hour of being late, before allocating a B-code, however, some schools already do so when students are 15 minutes late and others give them up to two hours of being late. The registration of B-codes has consequences, as schools are required to transfer the files of students with 30 B-codes to the Flemish Department of Education, possibly resulting in students losing their allowance. Schools further mainly use disciplinary measures to combat truancy, stating that students can get excluded when they are absent for a certain number of days, going from 5 to 30 half days. Moreover, being late or absent can have irreversible consequences for students’ grades, making it difficult to re-engage. Most schools (n=33) leave it up to the discretion of teachers whether students will be able to

re-take a test after an unwarranted absence, however, quite some schools (n=15) specify that students will not be able to re-take a test, automatically resulting in a zero for said test, with very few schools (n=5) outright guaranteeing students the right to re-take missed tests. The interventions thus mainly focus on monitoring absence and sanctioning, rather than directly addressing the issue, with only a handful of schools stating the teachers will talk to students about the possible troubles they are experiencing.

More behaviours that generate disciplinary actions are infringements of the alcohol- and drug policy, violence, vandalism, aggression, gambling... Many schools making use of measures resembling zero-tolerance policies, claiming that such violations will result in immediate removal from school. These kinds of behaviours are also strictly monitored, with 31 schools stating they have the right to search students' personal lockers at any time there are suspicions of violating school rules and 32 schools utilising cameras to 'guarantee the safety of everyone at school' (N°55, p. 11). Some schools go even further, mentioning they have the right to check students' bags and luggage, administer an alcohol test and perform unannounced searches by police using drug dogs. A total of 52 schools mention co-operating with police regarding these issues, with the goal of 'keeping the surrounding area safe and reducing youth delinquency' (N°18, p. 17).

#### *No more opportunities to re-engage*

Once students are excluded from school, following a disciplinary measure, they cannot re-enrol in this school within the same school year. Furthermore, in most of the schools (n=52) they can be banned for the following two school years and 22 of those schools even mention they can refuse the registration of students that were excluded by other schools during the same school year. In addition, schools have the right to decline any registration that exceeds their capacity and although schools are not allowed to pass on details about the violation of school rules to other schools, they are required to pass on

the number of problematic absences and other information concerning compulsory school attendance. These regulations might make it impossible for students to re-engage or re-enter education at all.

## ***2. Resolving conflicts***

### *A for attitude*

The school policies make it clear that schools expect students to behave in a certain way, imposing a clear identity on students. The characteristics students are supposed to possess and display, include effort during class, respect, good general attitude, positive language attitude, enthusiasm, active participation, interest, punctuality, concentration, and so on. Almost all schools (n=62) evaluate the attitude of their students one way or another. Some schools using separate attitude reports, arguing that attitudes are not to be confused with competencies. Though only one of these schools specifically states that students' attitudes cannot have a negative impact on evaluation, the others recognising that they will be taken into account during deliberations or specifying that students need to pass both attitude- and regular reports to graduate. Other schools incorporate attitudes into the permanent evaluation of students. While most schools leave it up to teachers themselves to determine how much permanent evaluation will depend on attitudes, some state a precise percentage of up to 30% of permanent evaluation being determined by attitudes. It is striking that such evaluation methods are mainly used in vocational education, as certain schools argue that it is 'of greater importance for these students to receive immediate feedback on positive or negative behaviour' (N°37, p. 25). Only one school policy mentions that students self-evaluate, which is then discussed in a one-on-one conversation with their teacher.

*A representative of the school in any way, anytime, anywhere*

A further analysis of the school policies shows that the expectations of schools do not stop at classroom behaviour. Schools have a very clear picture of their desired students in mind, which extends to all areas of students' lives. This can be noticed by the multitude of rules that seem to contribute to this imposed identity. These rules, which we will elaborate on below, refer to clothing that pupils can wear, language they must use at school, climate awareness, and so on. While recognising clothes are an important way of expressing yourself, most schools (n=57) prescribe rules about clothing, claiming 'clothes can provoke others or take focus away from education' (N°37, p. 32). A few schools impose a school uniform or uniform colours, others give a list of banned clothing, most commonly flip-flops, sweatpants, beach clothes, and hats, but also: ripped jeans, spaghetti straps, skirts above the knee or under the ankle, coloured hair, hair that is too short or too long, a beard or moustache, hair gel, piercings, tattoos, jewellery, nail polish, handbags, sunglasses... Our analysis showed that one of the most contested pieces of clothing is the headscarf, as it is explicitly banned in 39 schools, mostly based on the argument that 'schools should be a political and philosophical neutral place' (N°61, p. 26) allowing no room for religious statements. All schools stipulate that Dutch is the only allowed language at school, both in class and on the school playground, possibly even sanctioning students speaking any other language with an extra assignment on Dutch language. Schools are also becoming increasingly concerned with raising ecologically aware students, banning PMD, tinfoil, individually wrapped snacks..., and generating healthy students, banning crisps, calorie-dense snacks, chocolate, fast food, sweets, soda, energy drinks..., connecting sanctions to consuming these. All schools ban smoking and the use of drugs or alcohol on school grounds and during activities outside of school. Only some policies (n=15) allow smoking or alcohol during multiple-day school trips, albeit under

strict regulations. Many schools also make a claim to students outside of school, as they ‘expect their behaviour to always be impeccable’ (N°50, p. 31). To ensure this, some schools ban group formation near the school, going to a pub, going shopping, hanging around the local playground, sitting on doorsteps of houses, and so on. As certain schools state that ‘students are representatives of the school, and they are not allowed to endanger the good reputation of the school in any way and that all actions that give the school a bad image will be reacted to’ (N°32, p. 18).

### *Wellbeing as an afterthought*

Although schools have a far reach concerning many aspects of students’ lives, they often lack attention for students’ wellbeing. All schools do mention the availability of care, but this is often mainly focused on the educational trajectories of students, merely translated into anti-bullying policies or dealt with by mentioning the centres for pupil guidance and attaching their operations. Some schools do argue that teachers are primarily responsible for the wellbeing of students, appointing contact points inside the school that students can call upon and some schools even developing more extensive policies, for example one class teacher being appointed to a certain class group during their complete school career or the development of a multidisciplinary team to ensure the wellbeing of students.

### ***3. Reforming practices***

Schools are required to give students some kind of participation in their educational trajectories. The majority accede to this expectation by implementing a student council. Some (n=4) only mentioning they have the obligation to do so if 10% of students request it, but most (n=49) indicating they have an active student council. Several schools ensuring this council is representative, with members from every year and every

trajectory, others simply drawing upon those that are willing. In most schools these are monitored to some extent, generally organised and overseen by teachers. Contrarily, in a handful of schools, the council operates completely autonomous. Some schools implement their own ways for voice as a student council did not always have the desired effect, examples including *lunch with the boss* during which students get to sit down and talk with the principal, the organisation of a student forum during which students discuss certain topics that were extracted through inquiries or even a dedicated hour a week in each class to discuss and advise the functioning of the school. Most school policies do not mention possibilities for more informal participation. Only one school outright states that students can always mention their problems or ideas to any teacher, administrator or the principal.

### ***School policies as random guesswork***

When studying these policies vertically, it can be concluded that, despite there being a few strict and mild schools, there is little to no consistency within school policies. One school, for example, merely mentioning ‘being late can happen’, only to mention a few pages later that ‘unauthorised absence will automatically result in a zero on missed tests’ (N°52, p. 11, p. 13). Another school being very strict about being late with a detailed sanction plan, while being very lenient with regard to drug infractions, solely mentioning that ‘sanctions may be imposed’ (N°15, p. 62). Yet another school states it wants to ‘raise students that are critical and empowered, capable of listening and resolving divergent views’ (N°11, p. 8) but then imposes a uniform and bans the use of mobile phones, political symbols, and so on, without ever explaining the reasonings for such seemingly contrary practices.

## **Discussion**

The studied regulations reveal different interesting observations about young people's navigational agency. First of all, school regulations show that enter is not as equally available as one might hope. It is found that schools install subtle and not-so-subtle barriers through conscious policy to filter out certain students. This adds to the segregation between secondary schools in Flanders, which further induces several disadvantages for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Agirdag et al. 2012). This is only expected to increase as the human capital approach penetrates education further, because, to thrive in an educational market where there is an emphasis on monitoring results, schools may increasingly influence their student intake by attracting students who require minimum investments but yield maximum outcomes (Wright et al. 2000), further excluding vulnerable youngsters from entering certain schools. Our analysis showed that current school policies leave very little room for exit by conveying excessive lists of rules — which reduce students' space to manoeuvre within and carry the risk of students being penalised over trivial issues — and harsh discipline procedures. Whereas restorative justice remains a mere afterthought, the use of exclusionary practices is the universal go-to practice. While originally reserved for the most severe offences, they are increasingly used for minor violations. Such exclusionary practices have been shown to not only be ineffective but even increase the number and severity of problems they were designed to reduce (Maag 2012). These students inevitably fall behind in education, because of several policies making it difficult to re-engage. Nonetheless, the use of exclusionary practices is increasing (Maag 2012), partly because a growing number of schools make use of zero-tolerance policies. These kinds of policies limit the discretion and disciplinary options of educational staff, as they impose standardised punishments as a one-size-fits-all solution without regard to the seriousness of the behaviour, mitigating circumstances,



or the situational context (American Psychological Association 2008). This goes hand in hand with the increased surveillance and police presence at school, which may lead students straight from education to juvenile justice agencies, also known as the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Heitzeg 2009). As such, the exit-chances of youngsters are limited and only decreasing further. This is a symptom of a socio-political climate that is increasingly fearful and punitive. While not yet to the extent of other countries, such practices are increasing in Flanders, as can be seen in current proposals about re-criminalising truancy. What were once disciplinary issues for school administrators are now called crimes, which raises questions as to where this leaves the mission and pedagogical responsibility of the school and school personnel.

Secondly, schools seem to impose one (student) identity, expecting youngsters to leave their other co-existing identities at the door. They want interested, enthusiastic, well-behaved youngsters, that are neatly dressed, dutch-speaking, healthy, ecologically aware, and so on. This imposed identity refers to the so-called *hidden curriculum* (Durkheim 1961, Jackson 1968), which includes all the things that are learnt during schooling, such as behavioural norms and ideals, in addition to the official curriculum. While teachers do not explicitly teach this hidden curriculum, the regulations reveal that students are nonetheless evaluated on the appropriateness of their behaviour. As Bourdieu (1977) argues, these behavioural expectations, rules and policies are closely aligned with norms found in white and middle-class circles. Individuals who do not meet these expectations are labelled and stigmatised by both teachers and peers (Alba and Holdaway 2013). They often internalise these labels and engage in behavioural patterns that would warrant this label, turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the rare case that vulnerable students are able to beat their odds, this seems to be possible only if they adjust their attitudes to assimilate to the identity of the dominant group (i.e. behave like them, dress

like them, talk like them...). This can be seen in the paradoxical situation in which, despite widespread resistance, headscarf prohibitions are on the rise. Human Rights Watch (2004) observed that: 'The impact of a ban on visible religious symbols, even though phrased in neutral terms, will fall disproportionately on Muslim girls.' The same goes for language, as schools sanction the use of native languages, regardless of a growing body of empirical studies indicating the educational benefits of bilingualism (Krashen 1999). While education evidently has to entail certain rules and regulations, current school policies seem to leave no space to debate said identities and as such eliminate the space youngsters have to solve conflicts between their different social practices. In this way, seeing as educational systems are most beneficial for those students with a dominant ethnic and middle- or upper-class background (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970), schools function in such a way as to legitimise class inequalities, turning social classifications into academic ones that are justified (Solga 2014).

Thirdly, while schools do provide options for reforming practices, these options often remain limited to an obligatory participatory body. This is, however, only the first step of the pyramid of student voice (Mitra 2005) and the most basic form of student voice, namely 'being heard'. Best typified by such participatory bodies as student councils whose decisions require ratification by staff or school administration. Collaborating with adults is the next step and describes instances in which students work with adults to make changes in the school. The final level, at the top of the pyramid, is building leadership capacity. This includes a focus on enabling youth to share in the leadership of student voice initiatives, which is a rare occurrence in the observed school policies. A school's commitment to student voice reflects its broader commitment to social justice, as it is an effective way of helping overcome structural obstacles (Apple and Beane 1995). In addition, it is important to guarantee equal participation in student

voice initiatives and work towards encouraging all members of a school community to have the opportunity to participate, avoiding the emergence of a single student voice (Cook-Sather 2006). Certain schools do so by implementing a participation quota, to avoid the sole involvement of the usual suspects, but this is not always the case. Most schools still have a lot of growth potential with regards to offering students more autonomy in such initiatives and ensuring equal representation everywhere.

## **Conclusion**

These policies indicate that, in general, navigational agency is rather limited, and in particular for more vulnerable students. Due to the current political trends, this is only expected to decrease further. Even more so, the internal rule inconsistency of school policies makes it difficult for students to know what appropriate behaviour is in particular situations. This leaves students to decode teacher's expectations and adjust their behaviour to varying demands, which is a game better suited to the white, middle-class (Calarco 2014). Through a logic of entitlement, middle-class students see ambiguities as opportunities for reward, while working-class students, through a logic of appeasement, see ambiguities as opportunities for reprimand. Even more worrying is the fact that these internal inconsistencies highlight the fact that there is no coherent pedagogical vision in many school policies, which raises questions about how thought through these policies really are.

To make education more just, schools thus need to implement well-thought-out policies, laid down in their school policy documents, that pay attention to pupils' navigational agency. To this end, schools should engage in an open dialogue on school policy with all parties involved — including pupils and teachers — and define a coherent pedagogical vision, taking the concept of navigational agency as a guiding principle. Of

course, school policy documents are just one important part of this. Further in-depth research is necessary to uncover how these policies are brought to life in schools.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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