

## **“That way there are no surprises in the end”: The cooling out function of reception education for newly arrived migrant students in Flanders**

Laura Emery ([laura.emery@vub.be](mailto:laura.emery@vub.be)) is a Ph.D. student at the sociology department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) and member of the research group TOR. Her recent work on education has been published in *Educational Research*. Contact information: Laura Emery, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sociology Department, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, +322 614 81 52 [corresponding author]

Bram Spruyt ([bram.spruyt@vub.be](mailto:bram.spruyt@vub.be)) is a professor of Sociology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) and member of the research group TOR. His research interests include the sociology of education, cultural sociology and public opinion research. His recent work on education has been published in *Social Forces*, *The Sociological Review*, *Leisure studies*, *Youth & Society*, *Young*, *European Journal of Education* and *Educational Research*. Contact information: Bram Spruyt, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sociology Department, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, +322 614 81 46

Piet Van Avermaet ([piet.vanavermaet@ugent.be](mailto:piet.vanavermaet@ugent.be)) is a professor of Linguistics at the Ghent University (Belgium) and member of the Policy Research Center on Diversity and Learning. His research interests include multilingualism, social inequality in education, language policy and practice and language assessment. His research on education has been published in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *British Educational Research Journal*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *Language and Education* and *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Contact information: Piet Van Avermaet, Ghent University, Linguistics Department, Sint-Hubertusstraat 7, 9000 Ghent, +329 264 70 47

## **Abstract**

The educational aspirations of immigrants are often high, inspired by the hopes of newly gained opportunities available in the host country. This is also the case for students between 12 and 18 years old who have recently migrated to a new country (NAMS). However, they often perform below their non-immigrant peers and are overrepresented in vocational education. In Flanders (Belgium), the educational trajectory of NAMS starts in a separate program that prepares them for their integration into regular education. This study aims to gain insight into how the interplay between pressures from the education system, the gatekeeping function of teachers and the agency of students and their parents unfolds. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted across two schools (2017-2019). The analysis shows how teachers in reception education try to align idealistic aspirations of NAMS with the options that the regular education system offers. We use Clark's concept of 'cooling out' as an analytical tool to describe the incremental process that takes place.

**Keywords:** Cooling out - Reception education - Migrant students - Educational aspirations – Educational transition

**Wordcount:** 9621

## **Introduction**

The experience of migration has been described as a twofold process of 'looking backward' to what has been left behind, whilst also 'looking forward' to new possibilities and expectations afforded by host countries (Lee, 2010). These objectives are often closely associated with the desire for greater opportunities regarding advancement and prosperity (Guo, 2014). Immigrant families consistently refer to education as both a goal in itself and as a means for upward mobility (Portes & Rivas, 2011). These expectations may be framed as positive psychological adaptations to the stressful demands of migration and acculturation (Berry, 1997). This

observation is widely referred to as ‘immigrant optimism’ (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Despite their high aspirations and expectations, however, immigrant students often perform below their non-immigrant peers (OECD, 2016; 2019).

The literature on the aspirations of migrant students distinguishes between idealistic aspirations; what a person hopes to attain without considering any constraints, and realistic aspirations which refer to what a person believes s/he are capable of attaining (Miyamoto et al., 2020). One of the barriers in forming realistic aspirations is an information deficit: because immigrant families are not familiar with the educational system in the host country, they tend to overestimate their opportunities and underestimate the risks of failure (Beicht & Walden, 2019; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Similarly, literature that departs from explaining social class differences in education have described how students from lower social backgrounds have less access to the tacit knowledge that is necessary for effectively maneuvering the education system (Smyth, 2018). Draelants (2014) uses the term ‘*initié*’ (initiated) to describe how the middle and higher social classes have more public, official and informal knowledge on the education system or have the social network to retrieve this information, in comparison to the lower social classes. This affects the orientation of students from different social classes.

The lack of formal and informal information and the effective strategies of action have also been shown to be decisive in the educational trajectories of immigrants (Emery et al., 2020; Antony-Newman, 2018). This is particularly the case for Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS), a group of students between 12 and 18 years old who have recently migrated to a new country (Emery et al., 2020). This is exacerbated further when they are confronted with an education system that is characterized by early tracking, as in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium).

The first step in integrating NAMS into secondary school education in Flanders is *reception education*; a separate program aimed at teaching the language of instruction (LOI) and

providing an introduction into regular education. The teachers in these reception education classes take up the role of counsellors to guide NAMS to the most appropriate study option. This study aims to gain insight into how the interplay between systemic pressures, the gatekeeping function of teachers (Cuconato, 2015) and the agency of students and their parents unfolds. The tension between these three elements becomes clear in cases where the aspirations and expectations of NAMS are not aligned with those of their teachers and/or the opportunities the education system offers them. Therefore, we focus on a specific group of NAMS whose aspirations are considered unrealistic by their teachers and seek to answer the question: *How do teachers in reception education try to align idealistic aspirations of NAMS with the options that the regular education system offers?*

It is important to answer this question as the prevalence of NAMS has increased rapidly in many Western European countries in recent years and has presented challenges to their different educational systems (Emery et al., 2020; Koehler, 2017). Although NAMS are an extremely diverse and ambitious group, it is striking to see the homogeneity towards poor educational outcomes: the majority of students are guided towards vocational education, which is seen as the lowest education track in Flemish secondary education (D'hondt et al., 2015). Although we must not underestimate how much energy is spent learning to adapt to a new environment or even to overcoming possible trauma, the overrepresentation of NAMS in the vocational track implies a loss of potential (Van Avermaet et al., 2017). Understanding the mechanisms that lead to this loss of potential is essential for both NAMS and the host country. Against that background, we conducted in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in two schools (2017-2019) in Flanders to better understand the process of aligning NAMS' idealistic ambitions with the reality of the educational opportunities offered to them.

To analyse this process, we focus on the 'cooling out' function of (reception) education. We borrow this concept from Clark (1960: 1980) who focused on higher education in the USA and

suggested that one of the functions of community college, particularly the community college counsellor, is *to cool out* students whose academic ambitions seem to exceed their abilities (for recent applications, see Bahr, 2010; Grubbs, 2020). Clark (1960: 1980) described community colleges as a setting where “failure or denial is the effect of a structured discrepancy between culturally instilled goals and institutionally provided means of realization”. He characterizes five aspects of cooling out which are likely to be found across comparable contexts. The first aspect is the ‘alternative achievement’; these are substitute avenues that do not seem too far from what is given up but are displayed as more suitable and less frustrating. Second, cooling out entails a ‘gradual disengagement’; rejection is stalled, while an incremental movement away from the initial goal is deployed. Third, ‘objective denial’ entails the confrontation experienced with accumulating evidence of poor performance. Fourth, the cooling agent is also the ‘agent of consolation’, who works to change the original intentions and believes in the value of the alternative achievement options. Fifth, the ‘avoidance of standards’ stresses the relative value of many types of people and many kinds of talents other than the preferred choice.

Clark (1960) appeared to write from a system perspective and describes the counsellors as actors who assist students whose aspirations are misplaced according to the system and guide them to a more appropriate and less frustrating option. In guiding the students, recognition of their situation is delayed, so that they have the time to recognize and adjust to their lower prospects (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002).

In Clark’s (1960) initial description, the cooling out process was seen as an act of tactful kindness, a way of gently reorienting students to a study option in which they have a higher chance of success. Several scholars, however, have drawn attention to its perverse effects. First, the cooling out process is seen by some critics as deceptive, as counsellors are aware of students’ poor prospects from the outset, but delay telling them. This approach inhibits and delays students’ awareness of their educational status and causes them to misjudge their

prospects up until the moment their choices are limited (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002). Second, the cooling out process has been criticized for demoralizing students and lowering their plans not only regarding their educational career but also beyond. Precisely because education is such an authoritative institution and study performances are judged based on ‘objective’ standards, being cooled down in terms of educational aspirations may have long-lasting effects (McIntyre & Hall, 2018).

Third, some authors state that students of disadvantaged ethnic groups or low social class (Bahr, 2010; Uno et al., 2010) incur greater detriments from cooling out than advantaged groups. Bahr (2010) shows there are sizeable racial gaps in the likelihood of successful remediation in math in postsecondary remediation for higher education in the U.S. Uno et al. (2010) find that advantage stemming from the family of origin and changing occupational circumstances engender persistence or reappraisal of earlier educational goals.

Against that background, this study assesses whether and how cooling out occurs in reception education among NAMS whose aspirations are seen as unrealistic and maladapted to systemic mechanisms that are at play in the context of an early tracking hierarchical education system.

## **Context**

Flanders is an interesting case to study the alignment of NAMS’ ambitious aspirations and the options provided by the educational system. As can be seen in Figure 1, the educational trajectory of NAMS in Flanders starts in a reception class. Students can enter a reception class when they are between 12 and 18 years old (in Flanders education is compulsory until 18), have not been in Belgium longer than 1 year and have not mastered the Dutch language sufficiently enough to enter regular secondary education (Flemish Government, 2006). Reception education

classes have the primary goal of (1) teaching the LOI (Dutch) and (2) subsequent orientation to regular education. Most NAMS stay in reception education for one school year.

Flemish secondary schools are relatively autonomous in how they educate NAMS. Indeed, no specific way of organizing reception education is prescribed by Flemish educational policy. The guidelines on the curriculum of reception education are limited to a few broadly formulated development goals on language acquisition (Van Avermaet et al., 2017). Therefore, schools develop their own policy, whereby they often make use of ‘ability’ groups. In practice, the ‘ability’ groups lead to different tracks, and this is anticipated by differentiating the pace, academic standards, and curricula between the groups (Emery et al., 2021). In this regard it is important to note that over the past half-century practices of allocation have been consistently shown to be biased based on class and ethnicity, and not necessarily reflective of students’ ‘ability’ or prior attainment (Francis et al., 2020).

In Flanders, the strong increase of NAMS in reception education in the last years can be explained by the increased influx of refugee children. In schoolyear 2017-2018 42,8% of all the students in reception education came from either Syria (16,5%), Afghanistan (13,5%), Iraq (7,3%) or Somalia (5,5%) (AgODi, 2020). Students with a refugee background are more likely to experience trauma and an interrupted school career. This makes their integration into education more challenging. Next to that, students in reception education are often students with a lower social background, as students with a high social background more often pursue education in international schools. When we look at the educational level of the mothers in schoolyear 2017-2018 of the students in reception education, 63% has a low educational level (not higher than lower secondary education) (Flemish Government, 2021). In that same schoolyear, 33% of the students received a study allowance based on their family income. Since the students in reception education only recently arrived in Flanders, the relatives who may have accompanied them are often following an integration program themselves and are

therefore often unemployed. Further, the language of education in Flanders is Dutch, a language that few students are familiar with.

Regular secondary education in Flanders is characterized by early tracking, which implies that the study choice NAMS make after reception education is decisive for their educational career. Regular secondary education consists of three grades for two school years (see Figure 1). In the first grade, there is an A-stream and a B-stream. A-stream students can enrol in all of the different tracks in the second and third grade. The general track (GT) is the most academically oriented track and, in practice, is regarded as the most prestigious track, while the vocational track (VT) is seen as the least prestigious. The technical track (TT) and artistic track (AT) are placed within this spectrum. Due to the difference in prestige between the tracks, the educational system can be considered hierarchical (Seghers et al., 2019).

The first year of the B-stream is designed for students who were not able to get a certificate at the end of primary education. From 1B, students are able to go to 1A, however this is very rare, and the majority of students continue on to the second year of the B-stream (2B). This is a pre-vocational year, leading to the VT in the second and third grades (Flemish Government, 2006). NAMS can transfer into any grade of any track after reception education but are strongly overrepresented in the VT (AgODi, 2020).

Figure 1 about here

## Methods

In this study, we attempt to understand the *mechanisms* that are at play when teachers in reception education attempt to align idealistic aspirations of NAMS with the reality of regular education. Rather than identifying the different elements that are at play in the cooling out process, we aim to shed light on how these elements interact in practice. To assess this dynamic



approach, we opted for an ethnographic study that relied on the triangulation of insights derived from different types of data (focus groups, observations and group interviews) gathered among various types of respondents (students, parents and teachers). We used an ethno-case study design (Parker-Jenkins, 2016) applied to two schools in a large city in Flanders.

The ethnographic methods required the first author to spend one day per week at both schools, which amounted to approximately 108 hours in each school per school year. Eberdeen High (pseudonym) took part in the study for two school years (2017-2019), whereas Adelene High (pseudonym) participated in the study for one school year (2017-2018). During this time, the researcher observed classroom practices, had informal interviews with students and teachers and attended monthly teachers' councils. In these councils, teachers discussed the organization of reception classes and the students' academic performance and behavior. In each school, a focus group with teachers took place on the topic of assessing the NAMS. After the students of the first observation year (2017-2018) had transitioned to regular education, the first author visited 15 students and their families in their homes and conducted group interviews (Reczek, 2014).

### ***Ethical considerations***

To receive ethical approval for the study, a research plan that detailed all steps of the study was submitted to the university ethics committee of human sciences of the university of the first author. The principals of the schools that participated gave written consent for the research. An informed consent form was presented to the teachers prior to data collection. For the group interviews, the families gave oral informed consent before the start of the interview. The informed consent guaranteed confidentiality to the participants. To assure the anonymity of the participants and all others involved in the study, protocols were used including pseudonyms in the transcriptions and reported data.

## *Participants*

NAMS are overrepresented in the VT (AgODi, 2020), but to understand the dynamics of orientation it is necessary to inspect both sides of the educational hierarchy as well, namely the GT. Therefore, we selected two schools that provide both VT and GT study options in regular education. That way, the context of the school facilitates the transition to the GT; teachers are more familiar with GT study options and students do not have to leave the school to enrol in the GT. We decided to focus on two cases to be able to identify similarities and differences between schools in the context of the same city. Furthermore, both schools had over 10 years of experience in reception education which limits the chance that our results are solely determined by imperfections due to the introduction of a new form of education.

In Adelene High, 14 teachers taught reception education. In Eberdeen High, there were 19 reception education teachers. Most teachers in both schools had a middle-class background and were born in Belgium. The number of NAMS in Adelene High in the school year we studied was 66. In Eberdeen High the average number over the two school years was 74. In recent years, the general population of NAMS across Flanders consisted of more boys than girls (AgODi 2020). This was reflected in the sex ratio of students at both schools. In Adelene High, 55% of NAMS were boys, and in Eberdeen High, 53% of NAMS were boys on average. In both schools the mean age of NAMS was 14 years old, compared to the mean age of 15 years in the general population of NAMS across Flanders (AgODi, 2020).

When we look at the educational level of the mothers of the total school population in Adelene High in schoolyear 2017-2018, 68% had a low educational level (AgODi, 2021). By low educational level we mean not higher than level 2 (lower secondary education) of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). In the same schoolyear, 65% of the students in Adelene High received a study allowance based on their (low) family income. In Eberdeen High 70% of the total school population had a mother with a low educational level

in school year 2017-2018. In the same schoolyear 47% of all students received a study allowance.

The families that took part in the group interviews were asked to participate at the end of the first school year of observation (2017-2018). By then the parents and students had already met the first author of this article a number of times at the school. The 15 families were chosen such that they included students from separate 'ability' groups, various study options in regular education and included different genders. All interviews took place in the family homes during weekday evenings. Professional translators were present during all interviews.

### ***Data analysis***

Throughout the study the fieldnotes and transcriptions of focus groups were brought together using the software MAXQDA. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was applied, categorizing text segments into families of codes. During the observations and later in the analysis, a tension between the ambitious aspirations of the NAMS and their educational reality became clear. The teachers' role in managing this tension became crucial. Inspired by literature on the cooling out function as described by Clark (1960), we continued the analysis by looking for findings that supported or falsified the presence of cooling-out mechanisms in reception education.

### **Results**

The start of the fieldwork in Eberdeen High and Adelene High coincided with the beginning of the school year. After a few weeks of observation, the first informal conversation with the students occurred naturally. In the weeks that followed, students were asked during these encounters about their aspirations regarding their future. In both schools, many of them expressed ambitious educational aspirations. For a number of students, these aspirations were not realistic according to their teachers.

*“I want to study to become a doctor. A dentist or a normal one. [...] I want to help people.” (Anita, student, Eberdeen High, 17 years old, informal conversation)*

*“They all want to become doctors, but we have to be realistic. They really have to be extraordinary to make that happen. [...] I was born here, and I think I wouldn’t even be able to study medicine if I wanted to.” (Sarah, teacher, Adelene High, focus group)*

The teacher’s reaction in the quote above clearly illustrates that NAMS are seen as a group of students who face more challenges than other students. By saying that she was ‘born here’, we can derive that the teacher sees herself as someone who has the necessary formal and informal knowledge, knows the cultural conventions and has native proficiency in the LOI. However, she still does not see herself capable of studying medicine. NAMS come from ‘elsewhere’, which positions them as less prepared for the more academic study options in secondary education in Flanders. Teachers are assigned the task of finding a place in this system for these students and see downscaling their ambitions as the most realistic strategy.

In the quote above, Anita expressed her dream to become a doctor. She echoes an ambition that is highly prevalent among NAMS. For instance, Bilan, a 14 year old boy from Somalia, revealed he wanted to become a heart surgeon and Hiba, a 13 year old girl from Syria, wished to become an architect. However, based on the teachers’ assessment of these students’ abilities, their aspirations were considered unrealistic. Eventually, Anita made the transition to the TT after reception education and Bilan and Hiba transitioned to the VT, instead of the GT which would have been more in line with their initial ambitions.

To understand the discrepancy between the students’ aspirations at the start of reception education and their later educational trajectories, we will discuss the course of a school year in reception education chronologically (see Figure 2) with the different aspects of the cooling out process (i.e., objective denial, gradual disengagement, avoidance of standards, alternative

achievement and agents of consolation). To be clear, this process is not performed on all NAMS, but on a specific and substantial group of students whose aspirations are considered unrealistic.

Figure 2 about here

### *Objective Denial*

In both schools, the school year begins with an observation and testing period of two weeks while the students are randomly assigned to class groups and begin their initial courses in Dutch. After this testing period, the students are distributed over five ‘ability’ groups. These constitute a cascading system; students in the first group are considered the ‘most academically able’. The fifth group is composed of students whose first language uses a different alphabet or who are illiterate.

The allocation to ‘ability’ groups is based on the observations of the teachers, as well as on tests the students take at the beginning of the school year. In a teachers’ council meeting, all teachers discuss their observations and evaluations. The tests they use are mainly aimed at determining at what pace the students can learn Dutch (i.e., their language aptitude). In this way, from the very beginning of the orientation process, students’ specific language capabilities (i.e., the ease of learning Dutch) becomes conflated with general academic ability (Cummins, 2011, 2017; Collier & Thomas, 2017).

In Eberdeen High, the teachers used in-class assessments of the Dutch learned during the first two weeks and an online standardized language learnability test (SLLT), developed by a commercial testing institution, to assess students’ language aptitude. This last test claims to predict the pace at which students will be able to learn a new language. Students receive a score that assigns them to a learning trajectory. The higher the score, the better the student is expected

to learn a new language and the less support s/he will need to learn Dutch. In Adelene High, teachers developed a test on the Dutch vocabulary that they taught during the first two weeks of the school year. All students took the same test, and scores were compared during the allocation council meeting.

Given that second language acquisition is a dynamic, longitudinal process and multiple measures and tasks are needed to evaluate language development (Vandommele et al., 2017), these assessment tools provide a rather poor indication of the students' language learning aptitude. They do not encompass the multi-layered dynamics of an individual's language competencies and thus do not meet the standard quality criteria of construct and consequential validity. Nevertheless, the teachers use these results to distribute students into 'ability' groups. The test results are the first in a series of 'facts' teachers use pragmatically to confront students and their parents with when their academic aspirations are considered unrealistic. That way an '*objective*' denial is built up.

*"We also use the results of the tests to formulate advice [on the orientation of the students]. If a parent wants his child to go to the general track, but the tests show he can't keep up with the fast learning pace in group A... then at least you've got something to show them."* (Ester, teacher, Eberdeen High, focus group)

In Adelene High, the groups are given numeric names (e.g., group 1- group 5). Eberdeen High uses non-numeric names to make the hierarchical nature of the groups less transparent to the students. Hereinafter the 'ability' groups will be given pseudonyms (A-E) with group A being the highest and E being the lowest in both schools. In both schools, the 'ability' groups differ in pace, academic rigor, and curriculum. In practice, they prepare the students for different study options in regular education. Group A is composed of students who may transition to the GT. The lower 'ability' groups gradually prepare students for less academic tracks, such as the TT and VT (Emery et al., 2021).

The three students mentioned earlier were not placed in the highest ‘ability’ group (group A). They were assigned to group B (Anita and Bilan) and group C (Hiba). This means the teachers perceived their language aptitude to be too slow and evaluated the students as less likely to pursue the GT in regular education. The ‘ability’ group expresses the student’s place in the academic hierarchy and determines his/her preparation towards the transition to regular education. This differentiated preparation leads to differences in Dutch proficiency which are monitored throughout the school year with in-class assessments. This record-keeping generates a sense of (false) objectivity (Shohamy, 2001) but justifies the advice teachers give at the end of the school year. That way, it is the accumulation of facts that forces the denial of unrealistic aspirations (Clark, 1960).

### ***Gradual disengagement***

With the allocation to ‘ability’ groups and the initial assessments of the students during the first weeks of the school year, a blueprint of the educational possibilities of each student is made, already at the start of reception education. From this point onwards, teachers begin to manage aspirations and communicate in a way that facilitates a *gradual disengagement* from educational ambitions that might be unrealistic. The first time teachers reflect on the students’ progress and explain the meaning of the ‘ability’ group they are allocated to is two months after the beginning of the school year when a report card is given with the results of the first semester. In the comment section of the report card, the ‘ability’ group is often mentioned, clearly demonstrating where the student has been placed in the hierarchy of ‘ability’ groups.

### ***Comments from the teachers’ council***

*You did not pass Dutch vocabulary and the other results for Dutch are poor too, Lindsey.*

*You are in group A now, the group with the highest learning pace. We have the impression this learning pace is too high for you. That is why the teachers’ council has decided to move you to*

*group B. This group works at a pace that suits you better. You will learn more in this group. We are convinced you will perform very well in group B.*

In this example from Eberdeen High, it is remarkable that the different paces of learning in the ‘ability’ groups are made explicit. With regard to the cooling out process, two elements are relevant here. First, the value of the lower ‘ability’ group for the students’ learning is stressed and changing to this group is framed in a positive way. That way, altering educational plans is normalized, setting the tone for future decisions. Second, making the student’s place in the hierarchy explicit during decisive moments is an initial step in counteracting overly ambitious aspirations. This was also apparent during the parents’ meeting at the end of the first semester.

During the parents’ meeting, the class teacher for each group meets the students of that class with their parents individually. When unrealistic aspirations are encountered during this conversation, the teacher explains that there are different paces of learning and reveals the student’s relative position in the class. A relatively low position should then indicate that the chances of pursuing more academic study options are rather low. When parents or students show resistance to this message, teachers tend to refer to future performance across the rest of the school year as a possible way to improve the outcome. That way the discussion is postponed to a later moment.

*“Of course, a lot also depends on how you’ll do the rest of the year. [speaks toward student]. We are going to keep working together and we’ll look for a study option in which she’ll feel comfortable. [speaks towards mother and aunt]” (teacher during parents meeting, Adelene High)*

The parents’ meeting also offers an opportunity for teachers and the students’ family to get to know each other and to build a relationship of trust. Parents were comforted and assured that the teachers would help their child in finding the right study option by the time the students



transition to regular education. This engagement from the teachers asserts their authority on making educational decisions for the students. During these parents' meetings, it was clear that the teachers took the lead during the interaction. Information and expectations were more transferred from the teachers to the parents than the other way around.

In the second semester, the students in both schools in all 'ability' groups start working on themes like interests, talents, and hobbies, during class. Building on these themes, students start discussing the subjects of professional careers and study choices. The students also received an introduction to the regular education system. Due to the language barrier, teachers try to explain the education system in a simplified manner. This renders the differences between the tracks more explicit. It is also questionable as to whether this basic explanation makes the complex system and its nuances easier to understand. In the worksheets provided by Eberdeen High, the main aspects are summed up in a figure with bullet points (Figure 3).

Figure 3 about here

In the worksheet, it is strongly emphasized that the GT includes many theoretical subjects that require a lot of studying. The TT and the AT are also described as demanding, but with more room for practical courses. The aspects of the VT that are stressed are the high number of practical courses and the fact that students learn a profession, so that they can start working when they finish secondary education. The words that are emphasized on this worksheet are also the words the students often used in informal conversations to explain the difference between the tracks when they were asked during informal conversations.

In Adelene High, the teachers utilized a presentation in class, stressing the same aspects of the different tracks. Especially in the lower 'ability' groups, the GT was presented as difficult, laborious, and hard to succeed in, alluding that this was not the best option to choose. Making

this statement to the whole class group renders it possible to transfer this discouraging message clearly, while not confronting students individually makes it a less aggressive approach (Clark, 1960).

Furthermore, when students express the ambition of pursuing a study option in the GT in day-to-day situations, they are often countered by teachers with small discouraging remarks, such as: *“In that case you’ll have to study harder for Dutch”* or *“Then you’ll have to remember to bring your textbook to class, because those excuses won’t work there.”*. These small comments are often used in a humorous way. At this stage in the orientation teachers refrain from directly saying they believe that the student’s ambitions are unrealistic, partly because this gradual disengagement is not always carried out intentionally. However, the cumulative result of the repeated explicit messages of the teachers and their spontaneous discouraging reactions towards unrealistic aspirations may ultimately make the students question their aspirations and make them more receptive for the suggested alternative pathways.

### ***The denial of standards***

Even though NAMS are new to the system and are not acquainted with the strategic knowledge needed to maneuver through the system in the most effective way, they very quickly understand that the GT is considered the most prestigious track. As a result, they often only aim for the GT, because they understand this is what they must achieve to be ‘successful’. Teachers attempt to bypass these standards when guiding students who are not in the highest ‘ability’ group through their orientation and try to debunk these notions when students or parents have internalized them.

*“Most students and parents have the stereotypical idea that the only good jobs are lawyers, dentists, pilots and so on... they hear about the general track in their*

*community, and they say that is what they want without even looking at the other options.” (Kim, teacher, Adelene High, focus group)*

The *denial of standards* argues that many types of ability are valuable in their own right. Proper classification and placement are paramount, while standards become relative (Clark, 1960). Although the teachers value a growth mindset over a fixed mindset, they feel that what they can do in one school year is limited. For most students, aiming for a more practical study option is more feasible, and as such, the benefits of these study options are highlighted.

We also noticed the denial of standards during the information sessions provided for parents on the educational system. In Eberdeen High, the parents of the students in the two highest ‘ability’ groups were separated from the parents of students in the other ‘ability’ groups, initially for practical reasons. The slideshows used to inform both groups, however, were not identical. In the last group, considerably more information was given about the study options in the VT and less slides were dedicated to explaining the GT. When asked about this, the teachers explained that they adjusted the presentation so that it was more ‘relevant’ for both groups.

After informing students and their parents about the educational system, the focus is brought back to the interests of the students, thereby pushing the choice between the tracks further out of focus. This shifts the focus away from the choices that involve different social standards. For example, this was observed in an interaction between a teacher and a student at Adelene High.

*“Ma’m, will I go to the general track?”*

*That’s not the question now, Sam. We will be talking more about study choices the coming month and first you need to choose what your interests are.”*

The interaction above also highlights that students often consider the choice of the different tracks to be in the hands of the teachers. In theory, the teachers’ advice is not binding, but in practice it is followed in the majority of cases.

### ***Alternative Achievement***

The last exercise in the worksheets on interests and study choice used at Eberdeen High is headed: “*What is my vision for next year?*”. The text starts with: “*Before you make a study choice it is important to ask your teacher what study options you are eligible for. The teacher will take your age, interests, attitude and results into account*”. The class teacher selects two to three study options for each student in their group, which are often study options from the same track. When the study options belong to different tracks, the proposed year to which the student will transfer is often lower than if the track is positioned higher up in the hierarchy. For example, a first option could be the fifth year in a study option in the VT and the second option is the fourth year in a study option in the TT.

When the class teacher has made a selection for all students in his/her class, an individual counselling interview takes place with each student. In this interview, the student and the teacher determine in which of the selected study options the student will do an internship. That way the students become acquainted with the requirements of the study option to which they hope to transfer. The teacher explains the different options and looks over the course schedule with the student.

When unrealistic aspirations are met regarding alternatives that are more academic, the teacher will highlight the obstacles that are present in meeting these aspirations (e.g., many theoretical courses, additional languages in the curriculum). The door on their initial aspirations is never presented as definitively closed, but an *alternative achievement* is presented as more suitable for the student. These substitute avenues are often in line with the initial ambition, but have less obstacles to success (Clark, 1960).

For instance, Anita, the student who wanted to become a doctor, was advised to consider other care professions that do not require following the GT. From the discussion that followed, it was

clear that it was not only the social aspects of the medical profession that attracted Anita, but also the social status doctors hold in society. After negotiating the possibilities, the teacher and Anita decided that she would do her internship in the third year of a social science study option in the TT. Afterwards, the teacher explained that she thought it would still be too hard for Anita, but “*sometimes they have to experience it themselves.*” After the internship, the teachers discuss the student’s experiences with them and offer further guidance and consolation if necessary.

### ***Agents of consolation***

After the individual counselling interview, another parents’ meeting is scheduled to discuss the students’ results and the plans that were made with regard to the internships. When experiencing resistance, the teachers again highlight the position of the student in the hierarchy of ‘ability’ groups and explain that making a transition to a study option that is too ambitious will result in a loss of time and motivation for the student. The teachers believe in the value of the alternative study options, even with their perceived lower social status, and through their counselling they aim to reduce unrealistic aspirations as well as to help define and to help fulfil it (Clark, 1960). The teachers feel it is important to prepare the student and the parents for the advice they will get at the end of the school year: “*That way there are no surprises in the end*”. Simultaneously, the teachers struggle with the disappointment and resentment that can emerge. Most parents, however, comply with the decisions of the teachers, especially when they feel their son/daughter agrees with it.

During the internship, the students experience the reality of the study option to which they hope to transfer. After the internship, Anita said she was shocked about how fast teachers in regular education speak, compared to the teachers in reception education. Also, she was confronted with the difference in language proficiency between her and her classmates. Upon recommendation of the teacher, she therefore decided it would be best to go to a school that offered a preparatory class especially for NAMS with the goal of entering the social science

study option in the TT. This preparation year is an example of the measures that schools take to compensate the hurdle between reception education and regular education. It also postpones the decision on the orientation partly to the next school year, as evaluation at the end of the preparatory class will show if Anita can transition to the TT. At that time, transitioning to the GT will no longer be available.

*“They talked really fast. I just watched. I recognized some of the things they were saying, but I couldn’t answer in Dutch, like the others. [...] So, I need to go to the preparation class first and if I do well there, I might go to the fourth year in social technical sciences.” (Anita, student, Eberdeen High, 17 years old, informal conversation)*

In the last parents meeting of the school year, the results of the students are discussed and the advice on the orientation of the students is given. These recommendations are drawn up together by all of the teachers in a council meeting. As described earlier, the advice never comes as a surprise, as students and parents have been prepared through the different phases of the cooling out process. However, the decision is not officially made until after the last report card and some students still hope the situation could change. Bilan, for example, who aspired to become a heart surgeon at the beginning of reception education, was until the very last moment desperately hoping to be advised to enrol in 1A (first year of the A-stream).

After the council decided to advise him to go to pre-vocational education (2B), Bilan’s class teacher told her colleagues: *“I prepared him in the last parents meeting, but he’s going to be disappointed”*. Eventually the teacher was able to console Bilan, explaining that having a score of 48% on Dutch in ‘ability’ group B would mean he would always be behind in 1A. After his transition to 2B, Bilan said in an interview at his home: *“If the teachers say you can’t go to 1A you cannot do it.”* This is exemplary for how highly the students value the support of the teachers and feel it is necessary to succeed in regular education.

In the other interviews during the home visits, it became clear that many of the parents value the advice of the teachers equally as strong as the students. They often report that the teachers are their only source of information on the education system and that they receive much of this information and its implications through their children. The father of Hiba, who aspired to be an architect at the start of reception education, explained he had had other hopes for his daughter, but trusted the judgement of the teachers.

*“In reception education they [the teachers] said the vocational track was the better option. We had hoped she could follow a more academic track, like the literature track I know exists in Syria. I hope I made that intention clear enough. I think I did, but the teachers took us in another direction. [...] They know the system, so I was inclined to follow them.” (father of Hiba, interview at their house)*

In some cases, the initial academic ambitions had not been cooled out completely. Bilan found other sources of information after his transition to regular education. *“My friend says you can go to 2A if you get good marks in 2B. I think I’m going to try that. I’m going to ask for a test to go to 2A after this year”*. This shows that the orientation process of NAMS does not end after reception education. However, the test Bilan describes does not exist. It is not clear what thresholds need to be exceeded to move in an upward direction within the hierarchy of tracks. Therefore, the rest of Bilan’s educational trajectory will most likely be a continuation of the cooling out process.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Immigrant families consistently refer to education as *the* route for upward mobility (Portes & Rivas, 2011). Their educational aspirations are often high, inspired by the perspective of the newly gained opportunities available in the host country. This also applies for NAMS, students

between 12 and 18 years old who have recently migrated to a new country. In Flanders (Belgium), the educational trajectory of NAMS starts in a separate educational program that prepares them for their integration into regular education (Emery et al., 2021). The teachers in these reception education classes take up the role of counsellors to guide NAMS to the most appropriate study option.

In this paper, we utilized Clark's work on the *cooling out* process (1960: 1980) to assess how teachers try to align students' expectations and aspirations with their objective chances in the education system. It should be stressed that we use the cooling out concept as an analytical concept, that is, as a tool to analyse the different processes that we observed during our ethnographic work. In most cases, teachers were unaware of the cooling out process itself, its different aspects or its consequences. Teachers are confronted with the situation of having to prepare dozens of NAMS, who differ greatly in educational and social background, do not yet understand the complex education system and who often have high educational aspirations. Furthermore, this situation is set in a context where schools have few guidelines in how to organize reception education and teachers are often not trained to teach NAMS and guide them through their orientation (Van Avermaet et al., 2017).

Given these circumstances, the teachers have created a situation that balances their function as counsellors, the pressures of the transition to a rigidly tracked education system, the flow of incoming students and the high aspirations of the students and their parents. We found that within this modus operandi, NAMS who have high academic aspirations at the beginning of reception education but who are not placed in the highest 'ability' group based on their assessed ability to acquire Dutch, are cooled out throughout reception education. Cooling out is an incremental process that teachers often follow with NAMS who they view as overambitious, so that the students make a study choice at the end of reception education that matches their



interests, assures successful completion of their educational trajectory, and makes them willingly deviate from their initial educational ambitions.

The occurrence of the cooling out process can be explained by the doxa that is present in the educational field (Bourdieu, 1977). Doxa refers to the unified whole of taken-for-granted assumptions and norms which inform teachers' practices. Several elements are important here. First, due to their immigration status, NAMS are perceived as lacking the necessary cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977) to fulfil high academic aspirations. This group of students is expected to be confronted with more barriers and have less resources and strategies to support themselves. That way they are expected to lose their educational motivation with the risk of leaving the education system early and unqualified. With this logic, teachers provide conservative advice on the orientation of NAMS; they opt for the 'safe' route which minimizes the risk on failure.

Second, due to the conditionality of Dutch as an 'entry ticket' into regular education and due to the doxa that Dutch is the 'sole' key to school success (including the banning of pupils' multilingual repertoires as an asset for learning), the acquisition of Dutch becomes conflated with students' general academic ability (Pulinx et al., 2017). Other cognitive and/or non-cognitive variables are subordinate to the importance attached to the role of the dominant language. High aspirations are only realistic when students easily acquire Dutch. This polarized view towards one language ignores the nuanced reality of multilingual learners, misjudging their potential and limiting their educational opportunities (Cummins, 2011, 2017, Shohamy, 2011; Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014).

Third, the 'grammar' (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) of the rigidly tracked education system controls the organization of reception education, especially the tendency to allocate students into homogeneous groups. From the beginning of reception education (i.e., after two weeks), NAMS are allocated to groups that seem relatively homogeneous based on 'objective' assessments of

their perceived pace of language learning. Research on second language acquisition indicates that this practice holds back the students in the lower groups whose learning would benefit from more heterogeneous groups (Saunders et al., 2013). In this ironic way, the students who are perceived as the weakest at the beginning of reception education are guided away from the most effective language learning environment and detained from reaching higher learning outcomes, which would give them access to more academic study options in regular education.

Fourth, the assessment tools used for group allocation do not meet the minimal test quality criteria with regard to both reliability and validity. Therefore, one can argue that this procedure is flawed and even unjust (McNamara, 2011). Furthermore, the test results create a ‘false objectivity’ (Shohamy, 2001) at the beginning of reception education that is decisive for the educational career of NAMS as it dictates the difference between idealistic and realistic educational aspirations, as viewed by the teachers.

In addition, although teachers’ evaluations are generally highly authoritative and usually accepted by students and parents, this is particularly the case among NAMS. Precisely because NAMS have so little other people in their network who are familiar with the educational system and their own knowledge of the education system is limited, the teachers constitute a large part of the decision-making regarding orientation. This is in line with a study by Boit et al. (2020) who found that the lack of ability to navigate the education system removes students and parents as educational partners. In cases where the educational aspirations of the students do not match the teachers’ estimates, the cooling out process takes place.

Although the previous arguments may sketch a negative picture of NAMS’ educational trajectory, at the same time, they also identify the main ingredients needed for possible improvements. More involvement of regular education in the integration of NAMS in the education system could lead the way. First, NAMS would benefit from a more integrated form of reception education (Van Avermaet et al., 2017). Students could follow a subject in regular

education after being in reception education for a certain period. Teachers from regular education could take on a few teaching hours in reception education. Expertise on teaching multilingual students could be actively shared between teachers in reception education and regular education, etc. Second, if regular education would develop a clear language policy and structural accommodation for NAMS, the students' chances for succeeding would increase, especially in the more academic tracks. That way teachers in reception education would not feel the pressure to cool out ambitious students and to orientate them conservatively. That way, we avoid further loss of the potential of NAMS.

### **Declaration of interest statement**

No conflict of interests to declare.

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