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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

4 Transition from primary to secondary education in a rigidly tracked system

The case of Flanders

Simon Boone, Marie Seghers and Mieke Van Houtte

Introduction

International comparisons have repeatedly demonstrated the paradoxical performance of the Flemish education system. On the one hand, Flemish students perform very well on average, and on the other hand, gaps between students from different social and ethnic backgrounds are very large (Jacobs et al., 2009). Comparisons based on PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results consistently show that Flemish education is at the top of the rankings of OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries for mathematics and reading ability (Jacobs et al., 2009). However, it is also one of the most inegalitarian systems, as the impact of students' socio-economic background on their scores is larger than average and as differences between the scores of students with and without a migration background are very large (Jacobs et al., 2009). These social and ethnic disparities are inextricably related to the rigid, hierarchical tracking system which is in place. The combination of rigid tracking, free school choice and large pedagogical autonomy for schools leads to high levels of socio-ethnic school segregation, which in turn partly explains the variation in students' performances (e.g. Dupriez et al., 2008). The most recent Education and Training Monitor of the European Commission (2016) explicitly mentions the problematic nature of the allocation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Flanders. Disadvantaged students, and especially students with a migration background, are overrepresented in vocational tracks and special education.

In this chapter, we will show how early school and track choice lead to processes of ever increasing socio-ethnic school – and track – segregation in Flanders. The idea of choice is at the heart of Flemish pupils' school trajectories as free school choice is a constitutionally guaranteed right in Belgium. The first meaningful choice takes place at the transition from primary to secondary education. At the age of twelve, pupils are confronted with the choice of a school and the choice of an educational option. While officially the choice of an optional course is without consequences for future choices, research demonstrates that choices made at the onset of secondary education are nevertheless consequential (Van Damme et al., 1997). However, parents are not always aware

of the consequences associated with the choice for a particular educational option (Seghers et al., 2017). School choice and track choice are interrelated, since secondary schools in Flanders are usually organized along track lines. The young age at which pupils are confronted with this important decision in combination with the opacity of the educational structure complicate the decision-making process.

Our aim is to demonstrate why this early choice is especially detrimental for pupils from working-class backgrounds. To do so, we will use a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from pupils on the verge of their transition to secondary education and their parents. First, we will quantitatively establish the existence of social class differentials in educational choice. Subsequently, we will try to elucidate these findings through analysis of interview data.

The Flemish education system

General features and background

The Flemish education system can be characterized as being decentralized and choice driven. It is decentralized because school boards enjoy considerable autonomy regarding teaching methods and philosophical foundation (Department of Education, 2008). Furthermore, schools are entitled to determine curriculum, draw up time tables and appoint their own staff. The only condition for schools to receive government funding is that they meet the so-called attainment targets (*eindtermen*) determined by the government. These attainment targets are defined in such a way that it allows for enough leeway in teaching towards their fulfilment. Virtually all schools in Flanders, both publicly and privately (Roman Catholic schools) run schools, are publicly funded (Department of Education, 2008). Free choice is another important feature of Flemish education. The Belgian constitution guarantees parental freedom of choice – that is, parents are free to select the school of their choice for the schooling of their children. As secondary schools in Flanders are organized along track lines and choice of a school is free, the allocation of students to tracks is quite loosely organized. Flemish students' school careers throughout secondary education can therefore be seen as the result of a long series of free choices (Spruyt & Laurijssen, 2010).

The important choice at the transition from primary to secondary education

Choice is at the core of Flemish pupils' school careers, as pupils are expected to make a series of choices throughout secondary education (Spruyt & Laurijssen, 2010). The first important choice has to be made at the transition from primary to secondary education. While primary education is undifferentiated, secondary education is hierarchically and rigidly tracked. There are four tracks

in Flemish education – that is, general academic education, technical education, arts education and vocational education (Figure 4.1). Whereas general education is commonly perceived as the most prestigious and demanding track, vocational education is widely regarded as the least prestigious and least demanding track (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Technical and arts education can be situated in between these two extremes. Secondary schools are usually organized along track lines, which means that pupils are separated from each other according to the track in which they are enrolled (Wielemans, 1996). This separation is not without consequences, as research shows that pupils develop different academic cultures according to the track – and school – they are enrolled in (Van Houtte, 2006). Moreover, teachers also adapt their expectations towards pupils and their teaching styles according to the track they face (Van Houtte, 2004; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). A particularity of Flemish education is that, notwithstanding the clear differences between tracks, all degrees of secondary education give access to tertiary education. Nevertheless, research shows that students with a degree of technical or vocational education are much less likely to enrol in tertiary education and less likely to be successful when they enrol than students with a degree of general education (Vanderheyden & Van Trier, 2008).

The structure of the first two years of secondary education differs from that of the higher years (Figure 4.1). Tracking is less formalized in the first two years, creating a certain opacity. According to the Department of Education (2008), pupils and their parents are confronted with a basic choice between A-stream and B-stream at the start of secondary education. While B-stream provides tuition for pupils who already had to face learning difficulties throughout primary education, the large majority of pupils enters secondary education in A-stream. A-stream is said to offer a common curriculum to all pupils which prepares them for the choice of one of the four tracks at the start of the third year of secondary education. However, this common curriculum amounts to only 27 hours of the total of 32 hours of lessons, leaving 5 hours for optional courses. It is precisely these optional courses which allow schools to differentiate pupils from the first year on. Typical optional courses offered by secondary schools are Latin, modern sciences, technology and arts. While Latin and modern sciences are seen as a preparation for general education, technology and arts are considered to be a preparation for technical and arts education, respectively. As a result, students make a de facto choice between four distinct tracks already in the first two years. Research shows that a lot of pupils switch between optional courses during the first two years of secondary education (Van Damme et al., 1997). However, these changes are nearly exclusively movements from the more demanding to the less demanding educational options. A phenomenon denoted by researchers and educational professionals as the cascade system – that is, the tendency for pupils to start secondary education in Latin or modern sciences and to switch to more practically oriented courses in the course of their secondary school career (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013).

A choice for a technical option in the first year is as good as irrevocable. Pupils starting secondary education in a technical option generally end up in

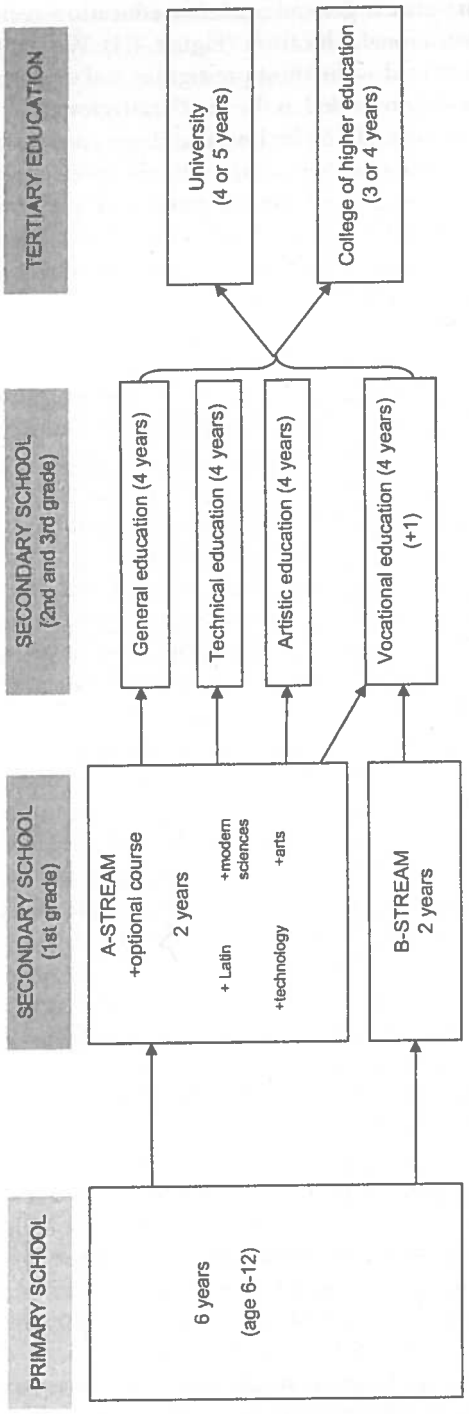

Figure 4.1 Schematic presentation of the Flemish education system

technical and vocational education in the higher years of secondary education (Van Damme et al., 1997).

The transition from primary to secondary education confronts Flemish pupils aged twelve and their parents with the important choice of both a school and an optional course. This choice is virtually unrestricted, as there are no centralized standardized tests nor binding teacher recommendations regulating access to either of the optional courses within A-stream. As a result, parents enjoy a great deal of freedom in deciding which school their child will attend and which optional course they will enrol in.

A sociological perspective on choice in education

While policies of free school and track choice may come across as a sound idea to laymen, sociological research has repeatedly pointed to its perverse consequences. Free school choice policies have been introduced by several European governments as a means to increase the quality of schooling. The reasoning was that schools would have to compete for pupils and would therefore be motivated to prove their effectiveness to the general public, encouraging schools to perform as well as possible. However, there is no clear evidence that the introduction of school choice policies has led to a substantive increase in the quality of schooling (Waslander et al., 2010). In fact, research seems to point out that policies of free school choice have worsened socio-ethnic school segregation (Reay, 2004; Waslander et al., 2010). In-depth qualitative studies have demonstrated the relational and interdependent character of school choices (Reay & Lucey, 2003; Reay, 2004). Middle-class families' strategic behaviour deprives less advantaged families of certain choices.

Research into track choice has proven to be as prolific as research into school choice. Since the publication of Raymond Boudon's (1974) seminal work *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality*, there is a clear understanding among sociologists of education that track choice plays an important role in the persistence of social class differentials in educational attainment. Studies conducted in several European countries have repeatedly shown that pupils make different educational choices according to their social class background (Ditton & Krüsken, 2006; Schneider, 2008: Germany; Kloosterman et al., 2009: the Netherlands; Jaeger, 2009: Denmark). When confronted with a choice between academically oriented and more vocationally oriented tracks, students from working-class backgrounds are less inclined to choose the more academically oriented tracks than students from middle-class backgrounds, irrespective of prior scholastic achievement. Some education systems have quite successfully tried to tackle this issue by introducing binding teacher recommendations (Blossfeld, 2013; Dollmann, 2016). In systems in which teacher recommendations are binding track allocation is more merit based than in systems in which parents are free to choose.

Free school and track choice at the transition from primary to secondary education appears to be especially detrimental for certain groups of pupils, that

is for less advantaged pupils. There are several explanations for this finding. First of all, there is the explanation that revolves around differences in parents' cultural capital, and more specifically, in the knowledge parents possess (Draelants, 2014; Reay, 2004). As a result of prior experience, middle-class parents are generally more knowledgeable about the education system and about local schools than working-class parents. Middle-class parents are therefore better equipped to navigate their children through the choices that have to be made. A related explanation is the one that revolves around Bourdieu's (1972) concept of habitus (Reay, 2004). Social class differences in school and track choice are then explained by the fact that parents have certain class-based preferences for particular schools or tracks. Secondly, there are explanations that emphasize the importance of parents' social capital, that is of the information that is available to parents through their social networks (Ball, 2003; Van Zanten, 2010). Middle-class parents tend to rely on their rich networks for crucial information about schools and educational trajectories.

A third explanation which is especially applicable to social class differences in track choice conceives of educational choices as simple cost–benefit calculations (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). In fact, according to rational action theories track choices are the result of an evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with a particular educational alternative and an appraisal of the chances of success in that particular educational option. According to Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) parents' first goal when confronted with an educational decision is to avoid downward social mobility. Rational action theories predict that middle-class parents will be more motivated to enrol their children in academically oriented tracks than working-class parents, who will probably reach the goal of avoiding downward mobility even without sending their children to academically oriented education.

Methods

Design

We will proceed in different steps. First, we will establish the patterns of choice according to pupils' social and ethnic background. We will examine the bivariate association between track choice and pupils' social and ethnic background. In a further step, we will add controls for pupils' prior achievement. We assume that pupils and their parents make a series of binary choices when choosing between the educational options available at the start of secondary education. First of all, they have to choose whether to send their children to A- or B-stream, subsequently, whether within A-stream they will take up an optional course leading to general education or rather an option that leads to technical or arts education, and finally, if they choose an option that leads to general education whether they will start in Latin or modern sciences. As the outcome is dichotomous we will use logistic regression analyses. We start by determining whether parental social class has an influence on track choice. Next, we

examine whether this effect holds when we control for pupils' school performance. Finally, we will try to explain the observed patterns by analysing focus group and interview data.

Data

The data for this chapter come from two research projects on educational choice at the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders. The first one of these projects was funded by the Flemish Ministry of Education (OBPWO 07.03, 2008–2010), and the second one was funded by the Flemish Agency for Innovation (Transbaso, 2014–2018). During both projects quantitative and qualitative data were collected. We will use quantitative data collected from the Transbaso project and qualitative data from OBPWO and Transbaso.

Survey data were gathered during the months of May and June of 2016 from 1,128 pupils in their last year of primary education in a sample of thirty-six primary schools in the cities of Antwerp and Ghent. Participating schools were selected using a disproportionally stratified sample of Antwerp and Ghent primary schools based on two criteria, namely school sector and number of pupils with a poorly educated mother. First, we separated private (Catholic) schools from public (run by the city council or by the Flemish Community) schools for each city. Subsequently we divided these schools into three equal sized groups based on the percentage of pupils with a poorly educated mother per school. As a result, we arrived at six sample frames per city from which we drew samples. Schools were contacted in April and May 2015 and asked to participate. Our goal was to reach a total of thirty-six primary schools, and we had to contact seventy-six schools to arrive at this goal. That means that we had a response rate of 47.4% (36/76). This rather low rate of positive responses is due to the fact that schools in Flanders are overloaded with requests to participate in research. We know from earlier research that schools reply to these kinds of requests with a logic of 'first come, first served'. We therefore suppose that this project suffered more from negative responses because schools were contacted by the end of the school year. However, we have no indication that this could be of influence on the results of our study.

Qualitative data were gathered by means of focus groups with pupils who had just made the transition to secondary education, and interviews with parents throughout the decision-making process. The focus groups with pupils took place in two secondary schools in the autumn of 2009. The schools were randomly selected from a list of secondary schools in the province of East Flanders that offer both optional courses that prepare for general education and optional courses that prepare for technical education. Each focus group consisted of eight pupils, of whom three were enrolled in Latin, three in modern sciences and two in a technical option. Discussions were guided by a topic list centred on how pupils had made a choice.

Furthermore, we conducted interviews with thirty-two parents selected through purposive sampling. First, we selected four schools out of the eighteen

schools participating in the Transbaso research project: three schools with a mixed population in terms of social and migration background and one school with a population of only working-class families of non-Belgian descent. Within these four schools thirty-two parents were selected for an in-depth interview based on three criteria, that is, their socio-economic and ethnic background, whether they had already made a decision and scholastic achievement of their children. To select parents based on these criteria, we combined data from pupils collected through a survey administered in September 2015 with observation data of the first parent–teacher conferences in those schools held between October and December 2015. The interviews were conducted between November 2015 and January 2016, mostly at the parents' homes. All focus groups, interviews and observations were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. Nvivo8 software was used for the analysis.

Variables

Track choice was measured by asking pupils which optional course they would enrol in at the start of secondary education (Table 4.1).[1] Pupils were first asked to indicate whether they would start secondary education in A- or B-stream. If they indicated that they would start in A-stream, they were then asked to indicate whether they would start in Latin, modern sciences, technology or arts. In the bivariate analyses we have added together pupils indicating that they would

Table 4.1 Descriptive statistics: percentages, means and standard deviations between brackets

Track choice	*N = 922*
B-stream	3.9%
Latin	32.8%
Modern sciences	45.4%
Technology	14.8%
Arts	3.1%
Social class	*N = 1082*
Working class	28.2%
Lower middle class	27.3%
Middle class	29.5%
Higher middle class	15%
Ethnic background	*N = 1095*
Belgian and north-Western European	58.4%
Eastern European	8.1%
Maghreb	16.2%
Turkey	6.7%
Other	10.6%
School performance	*N = 600*
Dutch	78.9 (10.97)
Mathematics	*N = 566*
	72.38 (14.56)

start in a technical option with those who indicated that they would start in an arts option. For the multivariate analyses we have recoded the initial variable into two dichotomous variables, a first variable that distinguishes between choice for options leading to general education (0) and choice for options leading to technical or arts education (1) and a second variable which distinguishes between choice for Latin (1) and choice for modern sciences (0). We did not include the distinction between A- and B-stream in the multivariate analysis, as we know that this choice is primarily based on prior achievement and as we have very few pupils choosing B-stream in our sample (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010).

Social class background was measured by asking pupils what their parents' occupation was at the time of the survey or, if they were unemployed, what their previous occupation had been. Answers were then recoded according to the Erikson et al. (1979) class scheme. Scores range from 1 to 8 in which 1 stands for unskilled manual labour, 2 for specialized manual labour, 3 for skilled manual labour, 4 for employees, 5 for self-employed craftsmen and farmers, 6 for lower middle management, 7 for higher middle management and 8 for managers, professionals and company holders. To determine social class background the highest of both scores is then used. To provide a more informative picture, we decided to additionally recode these scores into four categories, in which 1 stands for working class (regrouping categories 1 to 3, 28.2%), 2 for lower middle class (regrouping categories 4 to 5, 27.3%), 3 for middle class (category 6, 29.6%) and 4 for higher middle class (regrouping categories 7 and 8, 15%).

Ethnic background was measured by asking pupils the country of birth of their maternal grandmother. For the bivariate analyses, we consider five broad ethnic groups: native Belgians together with pupils from north-western European descent (58.4%), pupils with Eastern-European origins (8.1%), pupils with origins in the Maghreb (16.2%), pupils with roots in Turkey (6.7%) and finally pupils with roots elsewhere (10.6%), regrouping pupils with Middle Eastern, Asian, Sub-Saharan African, Southern American origins. For the multivariate analysis, we created a dichotomous variable, distinguishing between native (0) – including pupils from other northern-western European countries, as is common in research in Flanders and in line with the official Flemish definition of non-native groups (see Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009) – and non-native pupils (1).

To obtain a measure of *pupils' school performance* we requested pupils' results on a standardized test for Dutch and mathematics administered to pupils at the end of the school year.[2] We asked parents' permission to request their children's test results. Unfortunately only slightly more than half of the parents (53.19%) gave permission to obtain their children's results on these tests. The mean score for Dutch is 78.9 (SD = 10.97), and the mean score for the mathematics test is 72.38 (SD = 14.56).

Track choice: who chooses what?[3]

The descriptive statistics for track choice (Table 4.1) show that the great majority of pupils will start secondary education in optional courses which prepare for

general education. In fact, 78.2% of the pupils chose to start in Latin or modern sciences. Only 17.9% of the pupils indicated that they would start in a technical or arts optional course, and only 3.9% will start in B-stream. These figures demonstrate what educational professionals in Flanders denote as the tendency of pupils and their parents *'to aim high' (hoog mikken)* at the transition from primary to secondary education, that is the tendency to start in options conducive to general education even if chances of success are doubtful (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). This is a first consequence of the fact that choices are entirely free, and it highlights the prestige accorded to general education in Flemish society. However, research on the school trajectories of a representative cohort of pupils by Van Damme et al. (1997) has shown that over 40% of the pupils starting in the modern sciences option end up in a technical or vocational track by the third year of secondary education. This raises doubts about the sustainability and usefulness of this strategy of aiming high, as these changes between optional courses often come about after having failed certain courses. As indicated by Gale and Parker in Chapter 3 of this volume, the dominant discourse of aiming high as a mechanism to ensure social mobility of the working classes hides the structural constraints attached to this mobility. Simultaneously, this connects with the idea of individualization of working-class failure developed by Reay in Chapter 2. Research has shown that the cascade-like movements of students throughout secondary education lead to very difficult learning contexts in the less esteemed – especially vocational – tracks. The social background of students who flow into the less prestigious tracks is varied (Van Praag et al., 2015), and students appear to be demotivated due to the failure they experienced.

When we look at the bivariate association between parental social class and track choice (Table 4.2), we can observe some marked differences. Pupils from working-class backgrounds are far more likely to start secondary education in B-stream and technical options and clearly less likely to start in Latin than pupils from upper-middle-class backgrounds. Among those courses preparing for general education, Latin is clearly the preferred choice for pupils from upper-middle-class backgrounds, and modern sciences is more popular among pupils from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds. While differences between pupils from working-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds are most pronounced, lower-middle-class and middle-class pupils are somewhat

Table 4.2 Association between parental social class and track choice, row percentages and Cramer's V ($N = 887$)

	B-stream	*Latin*	*Modern sciences*	*Technical or arts option*
Working class	8.9%	11.6%	57.1%	22.3%
Lower middle class	5%	26.1%	46.5%	22.4%
Middle class	0.7%	40.1%	43.4%	15.7%
Upper middle class	0.7%	64.2%	28.4%	6.8%

*Cramer's V = 0.230, $p < 0.001$

in between these two extremes. Working-class pupils are thus more inclined to choose options which restrict future choices, while upper-middle-class pupils are more likely to start in optional courses which leave all possibilities open.

Table 4.3 shows the bivariate association between pupils' ethnic background and track choice. Differences between pupils of different ethnic backgrounds are less clear-cut, and we should refrain from over-interpreting these figures, as groups are quite small. The choices of the more recent Eastern European immigrants differ most clearly from those of native pupils. They are markedly more inclined to start secondary education in B-stream and technical options. Pupils with origins in Maghreb countries – one of the earliest mass migrations in Belgium – are especially more likely to start in the option of modern sciences and less likely to start in Latin in comparison with native pupils. Pupils with origins in Turkey are less likely to opt for the technical options and more likely to start in modern sciences. The group of pupils with origins in other countries seems to make the most ambitious choices.

Before turning to multivariate analyses to control for pupils' scholastic achievement, we first have a look at the association between scholastic achievement and track choice. Table 4.4 presents the results of an ANOVA analysis in which track choice is the grouping variable and scores on the standardized

Table 4.3 Association between ethnic background and track choice, row percentages and Cramer's V ($N = 896$)

	B-stream	*Latin*	*Modern sciences*	*Technical or arts option*
Belgium or north-western Europe	3.3%	37.3%	41%	18.4%
Eastern Europe	9.9%	21.1%	42.3%	26.8%
Maghreb	4.5%	18.7%	56.7%	20.1%
Turkey	5%	30%	55%	10%
Other	1.1%	37.9%	52.9%	8%

*Cramer's V = 0.127, $p < 0.001$

Table 4.4 Mean scores on standardized tests according to track choice (ANOVA): means, standard deviations, F-statistics and Scheffe post-hoc comparisons

	B-stream (1)	*Latin (2)*	*Modern sciences (3)*	*Technical or arts option (4)*	*F*	*Scheffe post-hoc*
Dutch standardized test ($N = 516$)	62.45 (12.34)	84.25 (9.48)	77.80 (10.12)	74.41 (10.41)	32.923**	1 < 2,3,4* 2 > 3,4*
Mathematics standardized test ($N = 492$)	44.64 (21.8)	79.49 (11.65)	71.84 (13.11)	66.53 (14.53)	37.606**	1 < 2,3,4* 2 > 1,3,4* 3 > 4*

*$p < 0,05$; **$p < 0,001$

tests for Dutch and mathematics are the dependent variables. We find very marked differences in test scores for Dutch and mathematics according to track choice. Pupils who will start in B-stream have much lower test results for Dutch and – even more pronounced – for mathematics than pupils who will start in Latin. The scores for pupils who chose modern sciences and those who chose a technical or arts option are somewhere in between these two extremes. This clearly suggests that track choices at the transition from primary to secondary education are at least partly driven by differences in school performance throughout primary education. Although pupils' choices are entirely free, we see that choices tend to conform to certain unwritten rules, that is that on average weaker-performing pupils start in B-stream or technical or arts options and that the best-performing pupils start in Latin. While this does not come as a surprise with regard to B-stream – B-stream is meant to provide education for pupils who faced learning problems during primary education – for the other choices this is a notable finding.

Table 4.5 shows a logistic regression analysis for the choice to enrol in technical or arts education rather than to enrol in Latin or modern sciences. Model 1 only includes dummy variables for social class as predictors. It shows that pupils from higher-middle-class families are much less likely than working-class families to start in optional courses which prepare for technical or arts education. In model 2 we control for scholastic achievement by adding pupils' scores on the standardized mathematics test to the equation. We control for the scores on the mathematics test only, as prior analyses had demonstrated that mathematics scores are more important predictors of this choice than scores on the Dutch test and as the mathematics and Dutch scores are highly correlated ($r = 0.552$, $p < 0.01$). Adding pupils' mathematics test scores to the model leads to a clear

Table 4.5 Odds ratios for logistic regression of choice for the options technology or arts (1) rather than for the options Latin or modern sciences (0), $N = 469$, (standard errors between brackets)

	Model 1	*Model 2*
Social class (ref. cat. working class)		
Lower middle class	1.144	1.331
	(0.336)	(0.347)
Middle class	0.564	0.774
	(0.338)	(0.355)
Higher middle class	0.138**	0.197*
	(0.574)	(0.586)
Mathematics test score		0.965**
		(0.009)
Constant	0.311**	3.253
	(0.263)	(0.663)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.086**	0.134**

**$p \leq 0.001$; *$p < 0.01$

Table 4.6 Odds ratios for logistic regression of choice for Latin (1) rather than modern sciences (0), $N = 389$, (standard errors between brackets)

	Model 1	*Model 2*
Social class (ref. cat. working class)		
Lower middle class	2.485*	2.039
	(0.382)	(0.392)
Middle class	4.004***	2.871**
	(0.353)	(0.366)
Higher middle class	8.149***	5.945***
	(0.385)	(0.396)
Mathematics test score		1.041***
		(0.010)
Constant	0.271***	0.016***
	(0.313)	(0.010)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.125***	0.185***

***$p \leq 0.001$; **$p \leq 0{,}01$; *$p < 0.05$

increase in the Nagelkerke R^2 statistic, indicating its importance in explaining this choice. The higher a pupil's score on the mathematics test the less likely he/she is to choose the options technology or arts. However, the effect of social class persists upon control of pupils' performance on the mathematics test. Irrespective of pupils' score on the test, pupils from higher-middle-class backgrounds are less likely to choose optional courses leading to technical or arts education than pupils from working-class backgrounds. We repeated these analyses for native versus non-native pupils but found no evidence for ethnic inequalities with regard to the choice to enrol in optional courses leading to general education rather than to enrol in optional courses leading to technical or arts education.

Table 4.6 shows a logistic regression for the choice to enrol in Latin rather than modern sciences. The first model, containing only the dummy variables for social class, shows a clear influence of social class. Pupils from higher-middle-class and middle-class backgrounds are much more likely to choose Latin rather than modern sciences than pupils from working-class backgrounds. We also observe a marked difference between pupils from lower-middle-class backgrounds and pupils from working-class families, the former being more than twice as likely to choose Latin. In the second model, we control for pupils' scores on the standardized mathematics test. We find that pupils' scores partly explain the social class differences observed, the odds ratio for the dummy variable for lower-middle-class loses significance and the odds ratios for the dummy variables for middle class and higher middle class become smaller. However, the differences remain clear. Irrespective of performance on the mathematics test, pupils from higher-middle-class and middle-class backgrounds are much more likely to choose Latin over modern sciences than pupils from working-class backgrounds. We also repeated these analyses for native versus non-native pupils, but we found

no evidence for ethnic inequalities with regard to the choice between Latin and modern sciences.

Track choices explained

We now turn to the analyses of focus group data from pupils and interview data from parents to try to elucidate the patterns observed in the quantitative data. Immediately apparent throughout the accounts of both pupils and parents was the fact that their thinking about track choice was permeated by the societal assumptions surrounding the different tracks. Pupils' narratives about their choice were imbued by stereotypical beliefs regarding the different educational options in the first year of secondary education.[4] Pupils related Latin and, to a lesser extent, modern sciences to enviable outcomes such as good jobs, good prospects for higher education and even good remuneration, thereby implicitly indicating that the other options are not conducive to these outcomes.

> I chose Latin because I want to earn a lot of money later and because my father obliged me to do so a little bit.
>
> (Lauren, Latin)

> Yes, I chose that, I think it's a good option, because then I can become what I want [study IT].
>
> (Jef, modern sciences)

Pupils' and parents' thinking about track choice seemed to be conditioned by the hierarchical structure of Flemish secondary education. It is through these lenses that we have to understand track choice. In fact, it is this hierarchical nature that pushes parents to direct their children towards starting secondary schooling in an optional course which prepares for general education. Once pupils are enrolled in a technical or arts course it is very difficult to climb back to the more demanding, academically oriented courses.

> At the moment David says. . . 'Let me start in modern sciences, so general education, if I don't like it there, then I can still change to technology-sciences, but the other way round isn't possible'.
>
> (Elsa, middle-class mother)

> Also because he [her son] doesn't really know what he wants to do later . . . then a general option, we think, is maybe the best, afterwards you can still do whatever you want.
>
> (Caroline, middle-class mother)

Choices are clearly informed by pupils' and parents' views on the system they face. Pupils' answers to the question whether there were options they weren't allowed to consider by their parents shed some light on our finding about the social-classed nature of some of the choices. Four pupils during the first focus group and seven during the second stated that their parents had indeed limited the options from which they could choose.

> I wasn't allowed to do vocational . . . because they think that's too low and . . . but they said that's for the stupid. . . [others laugh].
>
> (Benjamin, technical education)

> I wasn't allowed lower than general, because my mother found that I . . . that I had to do general because my marks were too good for something lower than general.
>
> (Sarah, modern sciences)

For the pupils quoted, choosing an educational option clearly did not mean deciding freely between all options available. Rather, it meant choosing between the alternatives considered acceptable by their parents.[5] It was readily apparent that vocational education was not an acceptable alternative for most pupils' parents. In fact, vocational education, and to a somewhat lesser extent technical education as well, were seen as a last resort for pupils considered not intellectually able to attend general education. However, not all pupils' answers to this question revolved around technical and vocational education, as some of them indicated their parents restricted their choice in other ways. While Lizz wasn't allowed to choose Latin, Wendy was obliged to do Latin.

> What she really didn't want me to do was Latin, because she said that was too difficult [. . .].
>
> (Lizz, modern sciences)

> And why didn't she want you to do Latin?
>
> (Researcher)

> She found it too difficult and my mum went to school only until her 14th and . . . my father, I don't know really . . . but they thought it would be too difficult.
>
> (Lizz, modern sciences)

> In my case it wasn't difficult, I wasn't allowed to do anything except Latin.
>
> (Wendy, Latin)

Lizz's story was unique, as she was the only one who mentioned that her parents had precluded choice for the most prestigious option. Her answer to the question why this was the case suggests that her parents may have lacked confidence due to their own modest school careers. Wendy's case is the complete opposite of Lizz's, as she was forced by her parents to enrol in Latin. While the example of Lizz's choice may suggest that parents from working-class backgrounds are

more reluctant to choose the option of Latin as they are less familiar with it, other examples seem to indicate that pupils who chose Latin did so with conviction and without a lot of second thoughts, as their parents had also gone through that particular trajectory.

> Yeah, my parents both did this and they have a good job now.
>
> (Tristan, Latin)

School choice

Secondary schools are usually organized along track lines in Flanders. Schools for general education exist alongside schools for technical and vocational education, and still other schools offer all main tracks – that is general, technical and vocational education.[6] This means that school and track choice are often intertwined. However, schools differ not only with regard to the tracks they offer, they also differ with regard to the quality of the education offered and socio-economic composition of the student population (Jacobs et al., 2009). The transition from primary to secondary education is therefore not only about track choice but also about school choice. As the Belgian constitution stipulates that parents are free to choose a secondary school of their choice and that compulsory schooling is free of charge, in principle parents of all social class backgrounds alike have access to the secondary school of their choice in Flanders. However, parents differ with regard to the knowledge they possess about local schools and their procedures for enrolment. Moreover, schools do not always communicate clearly about enrolment procedures. Parents are therefore very dependent on their own searching skills or their social network for information about secondary schools.

> We already went to an open day last year, but that's because you hear: 'you shouldn't wait until the sixth year, you'd better attend some open days'.
>
> (Caroline, middle-class mother)

The interviews with parents clearly demonstrated that middle-class parents tend to start searching for a suitable school earlier than working-class parents. While middle-class parents can rely on their social networks for crucial information about schools and their enrolment procedures, working-class parents often do not have access to this kind of information through their networks. These differences in parents' approach to school choice are not without consequences, as places in schools are of course limited. The decentralized, unregulated enrolment procedures create social class differences in eventual school choice. Some schools are more popular than others and are therefore more in demand than others. Asked about their motives for school choice, parents invariably referred to schools' reputations. One of the things almost all parents mentioned one way or another was the composition of the school population. Immigrant parents said to look for schools with a mixed population, avoiding

so-called 'concentration schools' (*concentratiescholen*) – schools with a majority of disadvantaged and migrant students – to be sure that their child has the opportunity to speak enough Dutch at school.

At the same time immigrant parents tend to avoid certain schools which are seen as elite, upper-middle-class schools, because they fear that their child will be excluded. Rachida (working-class mother, Moroccan origin), for example, cancelled the enrolment of her daughter in such a school when she realized her daughter wouldn't fit in there.

> The pupils there, the father is a GP, the mother is that, is that, is that . . . and when you see a girl, her mom is on welfare, her dad is deceased, she has nothing. She doesn't come to school in a beautiful car or wearing designer clothes.

Parents with native origins do also avoid certain schools. In certain interviews we saw similar narratives about the desirability of attending schools with a socially mixed population.

> I think that a good school is a school where all nationalities are represented, so, yes, without being a concentration school of course.
>
> Samantha (middle-class mother)

More remarkably, however, was the fact that we witnessed that some middle-class parents who considered sending their child to a technical school pondered about schools outside of the city or at the outskirts of the city to avoid having to attend inner-city technical schools with a lot of non-native pupils.

Conclusion

Free school and track choice are undisputed features of Flemish secondary education. Pupils and their parents are free to choose a school and an optional course of their choice. While this may appear democratic, the evidence in this chapter shows the perverse side effects of this free-choice policy. Decentralized enrolment procedures and parents' preferences for certain secondary schools lead to socio-ethnically segregated schools. The school choices of some – mostly middle-class – parents constrain the options available to other – mostly working-class and ethnic-minority – parents. Because of the hierarchical and stringent tracks, free track choice leads to the tendency of making ambitious choices – what educational professionals denote as *aiming high*. However, our analyses show that working-class pupils' choices tend to deviate from that general rule. In fact, working-class pupils tend to make less ambitious choices than (higher-) middle-class pupils, starting more often in options that lead to technical education and the option of modern sciences.

The explanation for these differences in choices according to social class background isn't straightforward. While we have indications that some form of

(rational) calculation comes into play at some point for middle-class parents, it seems as if working-class parents lack the knowledge to engage in the decision-making process in a strategic way akin to their middle-class counterparts. The clear preference of upper-middle-class parents for optional courses like Latin may point to an upper-middle-class' habitus, that is a certain inclination towards this particular choice. With regard to school choice we found that working-class and ethnic-minority parents appear to avoid certain more elitist schools from fear of not fitting in. As middle-class parents are more pro-active and strategic choosers they are able to enrol their children in the school of their choice.

Class differences in educational choices seem to be driven by a combination of factors. Differences in knowledge, different preferences and the will to reproduce social status – among the higher middle classes – appear to explain some of the patterns observed.

Notes

1 We left out of the analysis those pupils who indicated that they hadn't made a choice yet. However, it is important to note that there is a clear over-representation of working-class pupils among those pupils who hadn't decided yet (44.5% versus 28.2% in the total sample).
2 These standardized tests are non-mandatory; schools are free to decide whether they participate in these tests. The results of the tests are not used in the allocation process; they are used as a tool for internal quality assurance. Moreover, each over-arching governing structure has its own test (Interdiocesane proeven for the Catholic schools, OVSG-toets for the public schools).
3 The analysis developed in this section directly connects with other chapters in this book (such as Chapters 6, 7 and 8) demonstrating the different hierarchy of academic and vocational tracks in different European education systems.
4 These stereotypical beliefs are also intrinsically connected to the idea of 'frames of reference' that Agnes Van Zanten et al, address in Chapter 9 of this book.
5 See also Chapter 7 in this book for an analysis on the capacity of different families to resist and negotiate teachers' recommendations regarding the educational transitions of their children.
6 In the academic year 2004–2005, 21% of all Flemish secondary schools offered all three main tracks, 25% offered only general education and 35% offered both technical and vocational education (Van Houtte et al., 2005). Other combinations of tracks are more marginal.

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5 Working-class boys and educational success in a socially divisive secondary education system

Lessons from Belfast (Northern Ireland)

Nicola Ingram

Introduction

In many education systems in Europe, as other chapters in this book show, there are points of transition at which young people take divergent pathways that lead to unequal educational and social outcomes. In many countries, there is an element of choice or self-selection with regards to these pathways, although academic performance can influence decisions (see Chapters 4, 6, 7, and 8 in this volume). In Northern Ireland, which is the focus of this chapter, the pathways to secondary level education (11–18) are bi-polar and strictly determined by educational performance at age 11, measured by a set of examinations. This is different from the rest of the UK, where school choice is largely determined by the proximity of the student's home. This chapter will consider the Northern Irish case, with some comparisons with England and Wales,[1] and will show that selective systems generate wider inequalities in educational outcomes than non-selective systems. It will start by providing the socio-political and policy context of the region before briefly outlining the approach to the research and the methods that were used. This will be followed by an overview of the neighbourhood. The chapter will then move beyond the descriptive statistics that evidence the injustices of selection to engage with the practices within the two case study schools, drawing on interactions between different institutional actors, including a group of young men from the same neighbourhood in Belfast who were experiencing success or failure in the two different types of school. In doing so it seeks to promote an understanding of the lived experience of success and failure for working-class young men and provides further evidence to show the failings of a selective system for the working classes in terms of both educational outcome and emotional well-being. The chapter concludes by considering the difficulties that both types of school present for working-class young people and argues for a new understanding of success and social mobility. Some of the materials from this chapter appear in a different form in the full ethnographic account of the study (Ingram, 2018).