

Dropping down the cascade system: comparing the educational trajectories and perceptions towards tracking between and within ethnic minority and majority students in Belgium

Lore Van Praag, Simon Boone, Mieke Van Houtte en Peter Stevens

Tracking and other forms of ability grouping such as streaming or setting, are a general feature of many educational systems in Europe. Tracks are important as they determine future work and higher education opportunities. In Belgium, there are four main tracks in secondary education, namely an academic, an art, a technical and a vocational track, which are hierarchically ordered. Students can only change from the more prestigious academic tracks to the less esteemed vocational tracks. Within these tracks, a similar status hierarchy exists between fields of study. Because of this, the Belgian educational system is often referred to as a 'cascade system'. Although tracking is intended to group students with similar abilities, some groups, such as the immigrant background students, are overrepresented in the lower status tracks or follow downward educational trajectories more often. This study builds on a rich body of literature on tracking and race/ethnic inequalities in education by a) comparing ethnic minority and majority students' subjective evaluations of the different tracks and the cascade system in general b) developing explanations for students' positive or negative evaluations of the tracking system considering the educational trajectories they followed.

In order to examine this in more detail, qualitative research is presented with data derived from participant observations and interviews with students from 5th grade of secondary education in three multi-ethnic schools in Ghent (Flanders, Belgium). Results indicate that all students recognize the status hierarchy between the tracks and the cascade system, nevertheless, variations exist according to the track the student is enrolled and the knowledge they have about other tracks. Furthermore, perceptions differ according to the initial and final tracks of the students. Students' evaluations of tracks appear to be especially dependent, in the end, on the final track they are enrolled in, because this largely determines their future possibilities. Immigrant students in vocational tracks experience more negative feelings towards their track because they had different expectations over the content of the curriculum and the specific future opportunities. In contrast, immigrant students in academic and technical tracks have more positive perceptions after changing track, because they indicate the importance of pursuing higher education. Comparing immigrant and Belgian background students, similar perceptions regarding these tracks are voiced, but their trajectories differed due to the different knowledge about the educational system at home, experiences of racism and exclusion during their school career and future perspectives. Differences according to socio-economic status of

the family and tracks offered in school are found. The conclusions discuss the implications of these findings for social policy and future research.