

**Situating Ghent in the ISCY study:
The implications of the Flemish tracking system for equity and excellence**

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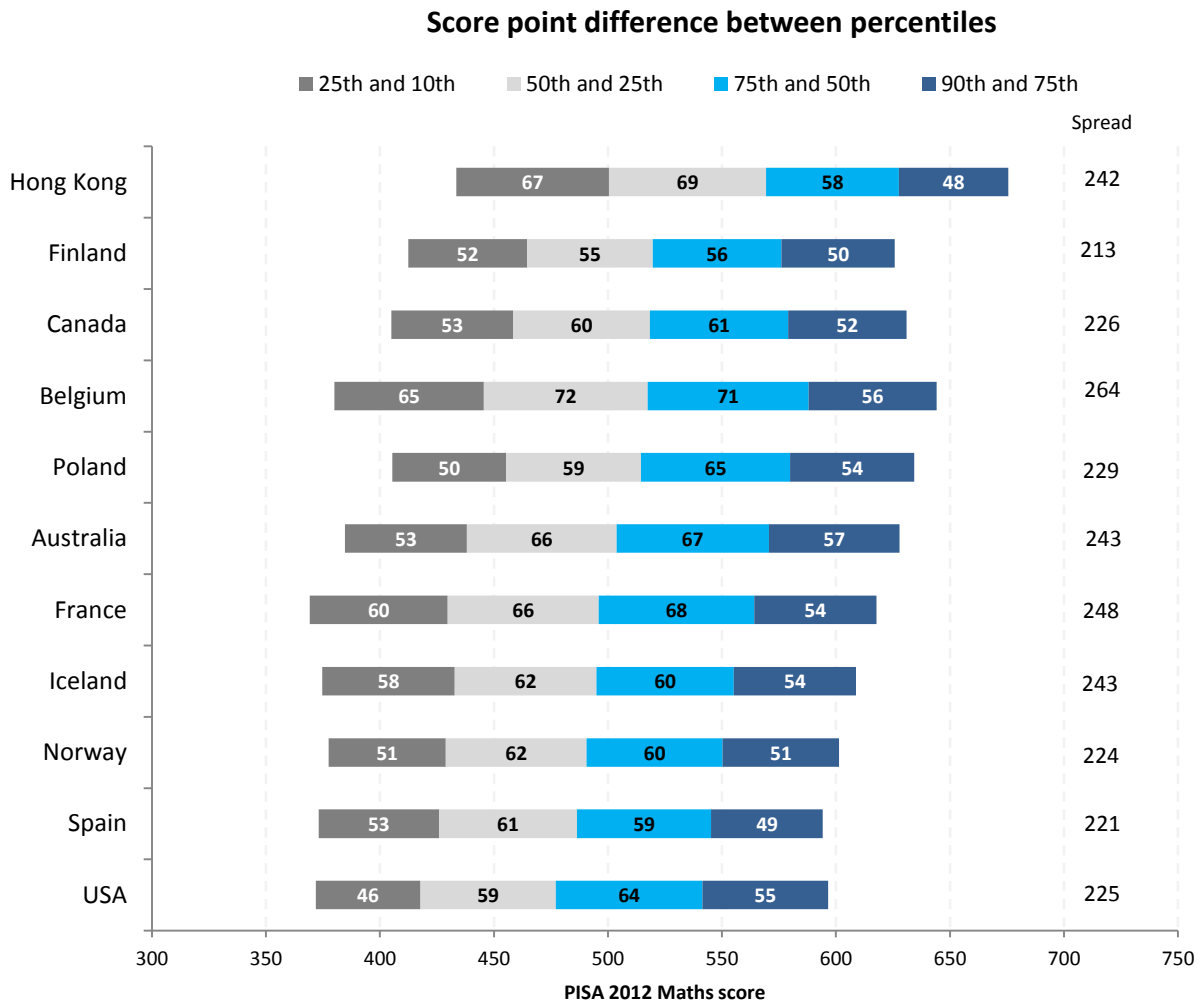
Introduction

Belgium occupies a distinct position in PISA 2012 scores (see Figure 1). First, the Belgian educational system belongs to the international top in terms of performance. The top students in Belgium score second highest of all ISCY countries on mathematics. However, Belgian 15-year olds are also among the worst performing students on these tests, scoring only slightly better than students from France, Iceland, Norway, Spain, and USA. No wonder then, that Belgium has the highest level of inequality in achievement of all countries taking part in the ISCY-study, as shown by the spread on the PISA results.

Belgium is a federal country. Since the state reform of 1989, education is a jurisdiction of the communities. Belgium has three communities: the Flemish, French and German-speaking community. As such, in Belgium, actually three educational systems exist. As Ghent – the Belgian city which participates in the International Study of City Youth – is situated in the Flemish Community, this paper is only concerned with the Flemish educational system. The Flemish PISA results roughly coincide with the results shown in Figure 1, with Flemish students having one of the highest spreads in PISA results of all countries participating in ISCY.

The aim of the current paper is to offer explanations for this peculiar position of Flanders by searching for system influences on student performance. First, we will discuss the specificities of the Flemish educational system. Thereafter, we will argue that the Flemish tracking system is one of the most important reasons for the existence of the large performance gap.

Figure 1: The position of Belgium in PISA 2012 mathematics



The structure of the Flemish educational system

One specific feature of the three educational systems in Belgium is the constitutional right of freedom, which implies freedom to establish primary or secondary educational institutions. This has led to political discussions and impasses in Belgian history, whereby the Catholic party firmly opposed any intrusion of this freedom. As a result, there are public and private schools, with a large majority of private primary and secondary schools. However, also private schools receive conditional funding from the government for personnel and operating costs. These

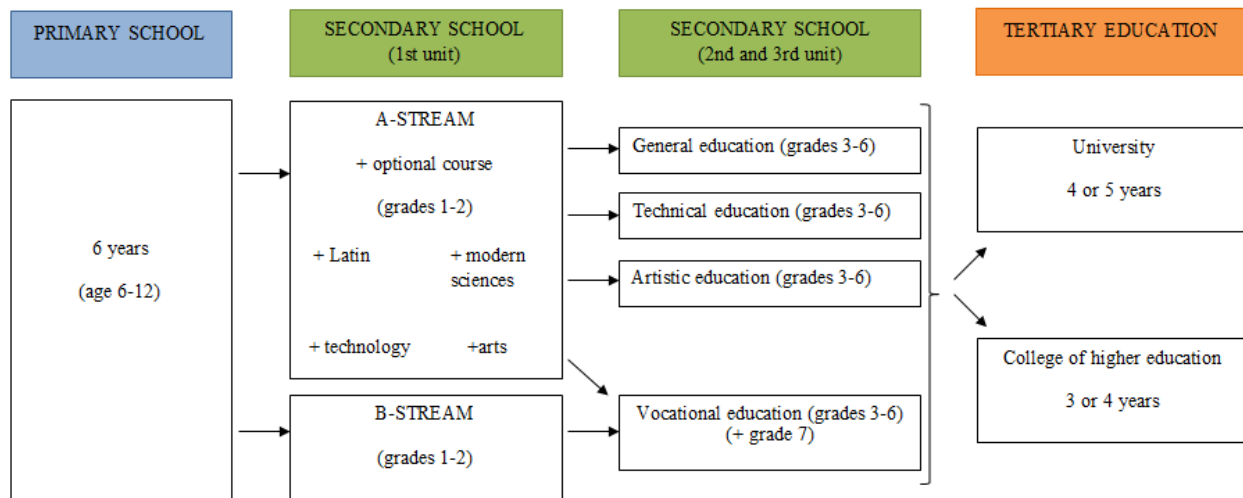
schools are mostly catholic. The funding for private schools is almost always lower than for public schools due to divergent allocation formulas. Even though private education has a certain pedagogical freedom, it needs to meet the attainment targets of the Flemish Community.

Compulsory education starts at the age of six with primary education. Nevertheless, 99 percent of the children attends at least one year of kindergarten, starting at the age of two-and a half (Bekkers, Bennet, Kahiluto, Neuman, & Penn, 2000). Primary education lasts six years and is comprehensively organized (see Figure 2). At the age of 12, children make the transition to secondary education. Secondary education consists of six years, which are divided in three ‘units’ of two grades each. In first and second grade, there is a choice between two streams, called the A stream and B stream. The B stream is meant *‘for students who are less suitable for theoretical oriented education’* (Flemish Department of Education, 2008). Most pupils enroll in the A stream, which has a general curriculum with a broad scope and aims to orient students to the different tracks in the third grade. From the third grade on, grades are divided in four main tracks: academic, technical, artistic and vocational education. The academic track prepares students for higher education. The technical track emphasizes general and practical training. The artistic track combines general education with an arts training, but the number of pupils in this track is quite low. The vocational track prepares students for a specific vocation. A student who followed the A stream in first and second grade can choose one of the four tracks in third grade. Students in the B stream can only enter the vocational track, except if they first repeat the initial two grades in the A-stream.

In Flanders, between-school tracking is most common, though within-school tracking exists. Thus, many schools offer one or two tracks, giving rise to academic schools, technical/vocational schools and a few vocational schools (Van Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2012). Besides these categorical schools, multilateral schools offer academic, technical and vocational tracks.

Nonetheless, in multilateral schools groups are not heterogeneous, as these schools are also characterized by stringent tracking.

Figure 2: Structure of the Flemish educational system



Although the pupil's choice of track officially occurs at the age of 14, mostly that decision is already made at the age of 12. In first and second grade, there are optional courses, which can be grouped into four clusters: classical languages (Latin and Greek), general subjects, technical-theoretical options, and technical-practical options (Van Damme, De Fraine, Van Landeghem, Opendakker, & Onghena, 2002). These options are supposed to prepare students for particular tracks. In addition, these optional courses give shape to homogeneous, fixed class groups in first and second grade of secondary education (Boone, 2013). Moreover, not every school offers all optional courses, as most only offer those optional courses in accordance with the available tracks in second to sixth grade. Hence, the choice for a certain school in first and second grade often determines the track from third grade on.

At the end of each school year, students receive a certificate which determines the student's options for the next school year based on the evaluation of their performance. The A-certificate confirms that a student may proceed to the next grade in the same track. The B-certificate gives a student access to the next grade, but only in a different, usually lower track. If a student wants to remain in the same track, he/she has to repeat the same grade. A C-certificate obliges grade retention, possibly in a lower track. Consequently, the choice of track is not irreversible and pupils can switch, but the existence of the B-certificate and C-certificate principally creates a flow of students in one direction, namely from the more academic oriented tracks to more practical tracks. Therefore, this phenomenon has been called 'the cascade system' (Van Praag et al, 2012).

Compulsory education ends at the age of 18. There is a possibility of part-time vocational secondary education at the age of 15, however, only 8867 students were enrolled in this type of education in 2012-2013 (Flemish Department of Education, 2013). It is enshrined in the Belgian Constitution that every child has the right to education, which ensures education without tuition fee during compulsory education. After six years of secondary education, students receive a high school diploma, granting unlimited access to higher education (with the exception of medicine, which requires an entrance exam). In the vocational track, however, an additional seventh grade is needed to obtain a high school diploma. A central exam does not exist, so the decision to award a diploma is the responsibility of the school. Educational institutes have a lot of autonomy in Flanders (Stevens, 2007). The government ensures high quality in compulsory education through attainment targets and development objectives, which are monitored through inspections. A high school diploma gives access to higher education, as for most programs in tertiary education the only precondition is a high school diploma. Thus, although academic education is intended to prepare for higher education, every student with a high school diploma is allowed to enter tertiary

education. Nevertheless, the chances to succeed in tertiary education are higher for students that completed the academic track (Vanderheyden and Van Trier, 2008).

Institutes of tertiary education are divided in universities and colleges of higher education. After the ratification of the Bologna declaration in 1999, the diplomas of higher education in the European Union were unified into bachelors and masters degrees in order to ensure free movement between EU member states. In Flanders, there is an additional distinction between an academic and professional bachelor degree (Flemish Department of Education, n.d.). A professional bachelor provides a direct enrollment into employment and is traditionally offered by colleges of higher education. An academic bachelor prepares for a master's degree and is mostly awarded at universities. There is also the possibility for students with a professional bachelor to get a master's degree after completing a supplementary transition year.

The constitutional right of freedom discussed at the beginning of this section also implies that parents may choose the school and track for their children. First, parents can choose the primary and secondary school of their children. The allocation of students to schools has not been regulated (e.g. by place of residence) and each student has the equal right to enrollment in the school chosen by his parents, except for certain priority rules in larger cities. The freedom of parental choice has led to socioeconomic and ethnic segregation (see Agirdag, Van Houtte & Van Avermaet, 2012). Moreover, the transition from primary to secondary education is not characterized by standardized tests or binding recommendations. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the parents to select the track of their children at the start of secondary education, usually based on the prior achievement in primary school. However, research has shown that socio-economic status plays an important role in the choice between different tracks (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010).

The implications of the track system for equity and excellence in Flanders

The stringent tracking system is generally said to be responsible for the peculiar position of Flanders in the PISA results. Worldwide there has been a long tradition of grouping students in secondary education according to their ability level. Ability grouping is the practice of dividing students for instruction according to their purported capacities for learning and usually refers to the placement of students into homogeneous learning groups (Gamoran et al., 1995). It is applied with the expectation that teaching a group of students with similar ability is more efficient. Moreover, students are expected to have different kinds of talents, therefore have different futures, and thus they need to learn different things (Oakes 1985, 2005). This grouping of ability is organized in a myriad ways. For example, ‘tracking’ refers to a situation in which students are taught an entirely different curriculum depending on their ability group.

In spite of these good intentions, tracking seems to have adverse effects for students in certain tracks. In our present knowledge society, notwithstanding that there is a profound need for well-skilled, specific craftspeople, the occupations for which students are prepared in technical/vocational tracks are little esteemed. Additionally, technical/vocational students face fewer post-educational opportunities, as unemployment rates are higher for those with lower educational credentials. All this leads to technical and vocational tracks being undervalued. Consequently, tracks are – in the mind of students, parents, and teachers – hierarchically ordered, placing academic tracks at the higher end, and technical/vocational tracks at the lower end (Van Houtte, 2004; Van Praag et al. 2012). As a result, a technical or vocational training is usually not a positive choice, but rather a second choice because one does not meet the standards set by academic tracks (Ainsworth & Roscigno 2005; Jellab 2005). This has led to the aforementioned “cascade-effect”, in which students start in higher tracks, but when they fail to gain the necessary academic credentials, they move to lower – and less valued – tracks (Van Praag et al. 2012).

This hierarchical ordering of the different tracks is responsible for the large gap between students in the higher tracks and those in the lower tracks. First, due to the cascade system, groups in the higher tracks tend to become more and more homogeneous, whereas groups in the lower tracks – because of the influx of ‘failed’ students from the higher tracks – tend to become more and more heterogeneous in terms of previously followed trajectories (Van Praag et al., 2012). As a result, teachers in the technical and vocational tracks have more difficulty in tuning the subject matter to all students in class. Especially in more academically oriented courses in technical/vocational tracks, there is a high level of heterogeneity in ability. Students following the vocational track from the start of secondary education generally have difficulty in mastering these courses, whereas students coming from higher tracks often have already seen the subject matter (Van Praag et al. 2012).

Secondly, students ending up in technical/vocational tracks are likely to perceive they have failed the educational system. Being enrolled in the lowly valued technical/vocational tracks, students develop a sense of futility – which means that students believe that putting effort in studying and gaining good grades is pointless (Van Houtte & Stevens 2008). Moreover, from the end of the 1960s (starting with Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970; Rosenbaum 1976) it has been demonstrated repeatedly that students in lower tracks develop an anti-school culture to overcome the status deprivation resulting from being in a lower track (e.g., Ball 1981; Berends 1995; Catsambis et al. 1999; Oakes 1985, 2005). This is – amongst other factors – apparent in lower levels of study involvement (Van Houtte & Stevens 2009) and higher levels of school misconduct (Van Houtte & Stevens 2008) for students attending technical/vocational tracks. The hierarchical ordering of the tracks has implications for the teachers as well. Many teachers in the lower tracks are not confident that students will meet their expectations with respect to educational performance (Van Houtte, 2004, 2006). The lower levels of trust that teachers have of their students attending

technical/vocational schools lead to lower levels of sense of belonging (Van Houtte & Van Maele 2012). Moreover, it has been shown that low teacher expectations give rise to higher rates of school misconduct (Demant & Van Houtte, 2012). As such, teacher attitudes in technical/vocational schools may contribute to the anti-school culture manifested in these students.

Moreover, the tendency of the Flemish tracking system to increase the educational gap between high and low achievers is responsible for creating an achievement gap between students from the higher and lower social strata. Research showed, namely, that students' allocation within the various tracks is not only dependent upon academic credentials, it is also affected by social background. More specifically, students from a higher socio-economic background are not only more likely to choose for the A-stream in lower secondary education, they also more often opt for theoretical courses in that A-stream, for example by choosing Latin (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a). This observation may – in part – be explained by biased teacher recommendations: teachers are more likely to recommend a more theoretical curriculum for students of higher socio-economic backgrounds (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b). Eventually, these students are more likely to end up in the higher tracks than their equally-performing counterparts from lower social strata. However, this role of the teacher may only partly explain social differences in track allocation, as the decision whether to follow these recommendations lies with the parents. In line with the idea of relative risk aversion (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), parents want their children to be at least as successful as themselves. Therefore, parents from the higher social strata more readily limit the choices of their children to following the academic track, while parents from lower social strata allow for more choice options (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a). As such, for a child from a more disadvantaged background, it may suffice to follow technical or vocational education in order to attain the education level of their parents. For students from more affluent

families, only the academic track suffices for that end. Moreover, due to a lack of valid information about the secondary educational system, many ethnic minority students actually aiming for higher education end up in the technical or vocational track (Van Praag et al. 2012). This seriously jeopardizes their postsecondary opportunities, a fact that these students eventually become aware of, when it is already too late to change tracks.

In summary, the strict tracking system in Flanders has given rise to a highly stratified and hierarchically ordered system. The students that perform excellently on PISA tests are enrolled in academic tracks – clearly, this system is well-suited to ensure educational growth in students. In Flanders, though, this comes at a large price. The hierarchical ordering of the various tracks leads to the perception among the many students in the lower tracks that they have failed the educational system, giving rise to an anti-school culture that jeopardizes future educational success. As selection into the various tracks is codependent upon social background factors, the Flemish tracking system eventually exacerbates social inequality in opportunities. No wonder, then, that, while Flanders scores high on excellence in PISA tests, it also tends to score low on equity.

The current study

To demonstrate the effects of the Flemish track system, we will present some results of the International Study of City Youth data on Ghent. First, we will consider the role of social background characteristics in track allocation. Second, we will investigate differential attitudes and behaviors across the tracks of the Flemish educational system. More specifically, we will investigate students' sense of futility - which concerns students' attitudes about whether putting effort in studying and gaining good grades is pointless -, and the level of school misconduct – which is minor rule-breaking behavior at school. Moreover, as students with antischool attitudes

are likely to value part-time working as a way to demonstrate their adulthood (Willis 1977), we also investigate differences between tracks with regard to part-time working.

Methodology

Sample

We use data from the International Study of City Youth (ISCY), a longitudinal cross-national study in Ghent and 11 other cities (Barcelona, Bergen, Bordeaux, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Montreal, Reykjavik, Sacramento, Santa Barbara, Turku, and Wroclaw). The study tracks one cohort of students in 2013-2014 in the modal grade for 15-year olds – e.g. the 10th grade in the US, the 4th grade of secondary school in Flanders – in each city over five years. Hence, the ISCY study charts cross-national differences in educational pathways through the microcosm of cities in different countries.

For the current study, we use the data of the baseline survey for Ghent, which was collected in 2013-2014. The general approach was to use a two-stage stratified cluster design. First, schools were sampled, in which then a sample of students in the appropriate grade was selected. The selected students filled out an online questionnaire in class. Additionally, all teachers of the appropriate grades and the principals were surveyed by online questionnaires. In each large city, 4,000 students across 30 schools were targeted.

In Ghent – as in the other smaller cities (Wroclaw, and Turku) – we took a census approach. We contacted all 39 secondary schools that offered a 4th secondary school grade in Ghent. Of these, 30 agreed to take part in the study (response rate: 76.92%). In the participating schools, we asked all fourth grade students present at the time of the visit to fill out the questionnaire. Students filled out the questionnaire in class, supervised by members of the research team and a teacher. A

few students were not present, due to absence or field trips. A total of 2354 students provided valid surveys, which amounts to a response rate of 90.25%.

Measures

Students provided us with the track they attended. Of the respondents, 55.20% followed the academic track, 17.5% attended the technical track, 7.1% enrolled in the arts track, and 19.1% attended the vocational track.

First, to show the role of social background factors in track allocation in Flanders, we compare the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of students between the four tracks. We should note that advanced socio-economic measures are not yet available for the ISCY survey, so we necessarily limit ourselves to some rudimentary measures. First, we asked the students to what extent they agreed with the following statement ‘My parents often do not have enough money to make ends meet’. Students could answer on a five-point scale, ranging from *absolutely disagree* to *absolutely agree* (1-5). The mean for the entire sample was 1.75 (SD=0.772). A second measure for SES consists of indicators whether they had a desk at home to study at, a quiet place to study, a computer that they can use for schoolwork, a link to the internet, a piano, or other musical instruments (coding: yes=1). The final scale was arrived at by summing answers over all these items. The mean in the sample was 4.59 (SD=0.986).

To denote the impact of the tracking system on students’ attitudes and behaviors, we consider three outcomes. First, the attitudinal outcome is provided by the sense of futility scale (see Brookover et al. 1975), which denotes students’ mastery concerning educational goals. Examples of items are: “People like me will not have much of a chance to do what we want to in life” and “At school, students like me don’t have any luck”. Students had five possible answers, ranging from *absolutely disagree* to *absolutely agree* (1–5). The answers across these items were

summed, yielding a range of 5 through 25 (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.74$). The mean in the sample was 11.77 (SD=2.64). The behavioral measure is operationalized by the school misconduct scale (see Stewart 2003). Students were asked how often they performed deviant acts such as being late for school, cheating on tests and doing drugs during school hours. They could answer using a 5-point scale, ranging from *never* (1) to *very often* (5). Scores were summed to a scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.85$) ranging from 17 to 65 (mean=29.70, SD=7.73). Last, we also considered whether students worked part-time. Of all respondents, 14.2% indicated that they had a part-time job at the moment of the survey administration. However, we should note that students having part-time jobs were still fully enrolled at school, combining their part-time jobs with a full-time education.

Data analyses

To determine whether there are significant differences between the tracks on the socio-economic situation of students, and on the attitudinal and behavioral variables, we performed one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA). Subsequently, we performed post-hoc tests to examine the between-group differences in more detail. For this, we used the Bonferonni procedure.

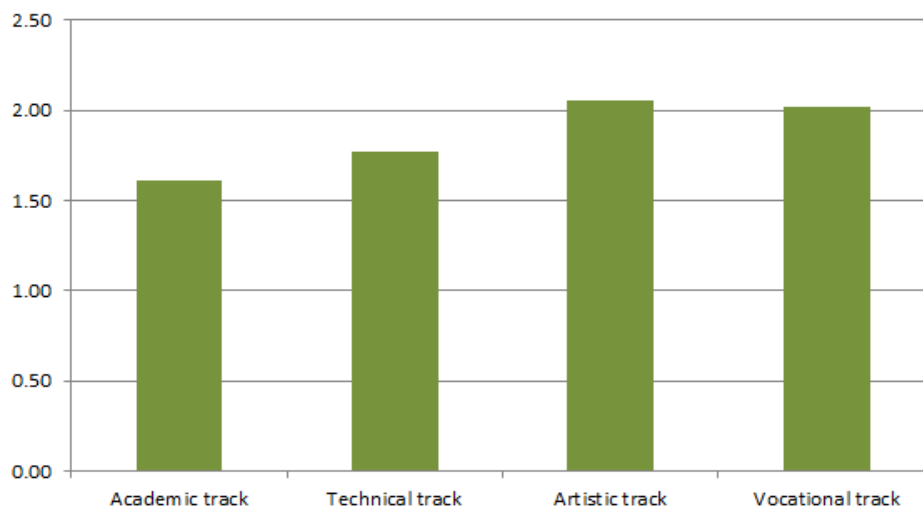
Moreover, to rule out spurious relations and selection effects, we investigated the role of tracks in the attitudinal and behavioral measures in multivariate regression analyses, in which we controlled for gender, age, and indicators of SES. The tracks were entered by means of dummy variables, with the academic track as the reference category. The findings on sense of futility and school misconduct are based on linear regression analyses, the findings on part-time working are based on logistic regression analyses, as this concerned a dichotomous variable (1=part-time job).

Results

Social background factors

The ANOVA results showed differences between tracks on parental financial difficulty ($F=41.532$; $p<0.001$). Students in the academic track indicated least financial difficulties for their parents ($M=1.61$). Students in the technical track reported more financial difficulties ($M=1.77$) than those in the academic track and less than those in the artistic ($M=2.05$) and vocational track ($M=2.02$). All these difference were statistically significant ($p<.001$). The difference between the artistic and the technical track was not significant ($p>.05$).

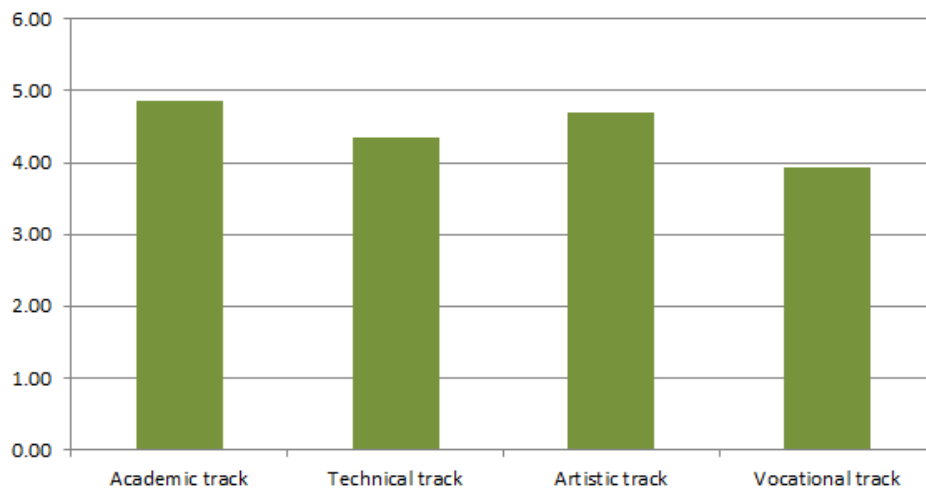
Figure 3: Association between tracks and financial difficulties. Results of one-way ANOVA



Roughly the same picture arose for the measure of SES (see Figure 4). The ANOVA results show that this differed significantly across tracks ($F=113.431$; $p<.001$). Students from the academic track had the highest level of SES ($M=4.87$). However, students from the artistic track had high levels of SES as well ($M=4.69$), and the difference between these two tracks was not significant ($p>.05$). Students from the technical track had lower levels of SES ($M=4.36$), and vocational

students had the lowest level of SES ($M=3.94$). All differences between tracks – except for the difference between the academic and the artistic track, were significant ($p<.001$).

Figure 4: Association between track and SES. Results of one-way ANOVA



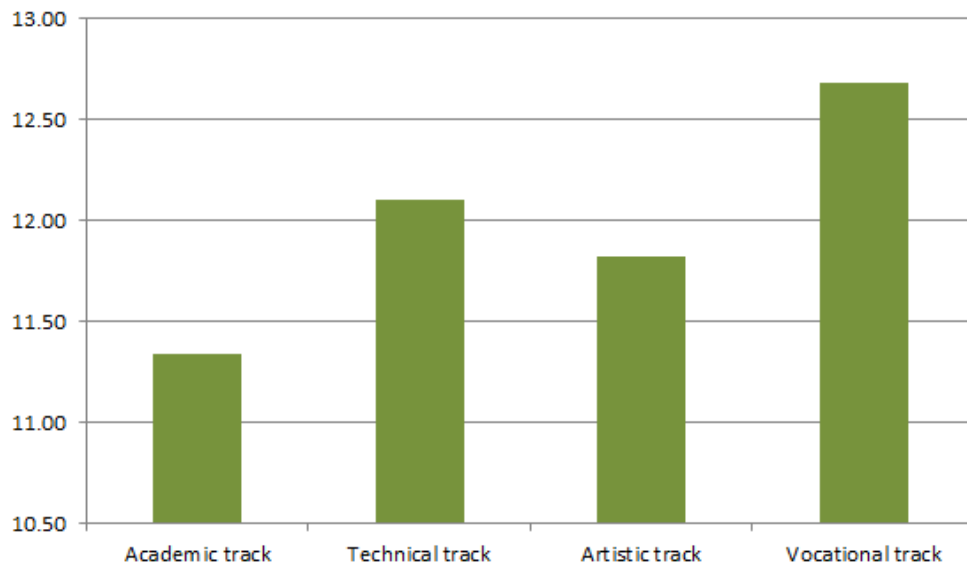
As such, these data confirm the differences in social background between the tracks: students in the academic track were the most advantaged, students in the vocational track the least, while the technical track occupied a position in the middle. The artistic track was more difficult to place in this hierarchy: students indicated that their parents have many financial difficulties, but they were high in with respect to the indicators of SES.

Attitudes and behavior

In this section we compare students' attitudes and behaviors across the tracks in Flanders. We start with students' sense of futility. The ANOVA results show that this attitudinal measure differs significantly between tracks ($F=31.374$; $p<.001$; see Figure 5). Students enrolled in the academic track had the lowest mean ($M=11.34$), but they did not differ significantly ($p>.05$) from students in the artistic track ($M=11.82$). Students in the vocational track had the highest levels of

futility ($M=12.68$), and the technical students again occupied the middle position ($M=12.108$). These findings are also apparent from the multivariate regression analyses (see Table 1). Moreover, net of their high level of SES, students in the artistic track were also more likely than the academic students to feel futile. We may conclude from these analyses on futility that students in the lower tracks are significantly more likely to perceive that the school system is stacked against them in comparison to their counterparts in the higher tracks.

Figure 5: Association between track and sense of futility. Results of one-way ANOVA



The image is somewhat different for school misconduct. First, the ANOVA results indicate significant differences between the tracks ($F=6.772$; $p<0.001$). However, while the means follow the pattern as predicted (see Figure 6), the bonferroni post-hoc analyses showed that only the vocational track differed significantly from the academic and technical tracks, as all other differences were not significant. This image is also apparent from the multivariate regression analyses (see Table 2). As such, the manifest opposition of the school by rule-breaking behavior is only present in the vocational track.

Table 1: Association between track and sense of futility. Results of multivariate linear regression analyses

Intercept	b	12.244***
	SE	0.951
Gender	b	-0.403***
	SE	0.112
Age	b	0.052
	SE	0.058
SES	b	-0.218***
	SE	0.06
Track (ref cat: academic track)		
Arts track	b	0.447*
	SE	0.226
Technical track	b	0.551***
	SE	0.157
Vocational track	b	1.040***
	SE	0.171

Note: The unstandardized coefficients (b) are presented, with the standard errors (SE). * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Figure 6: Association between track and school misconduct. Results of one-way ANOVA

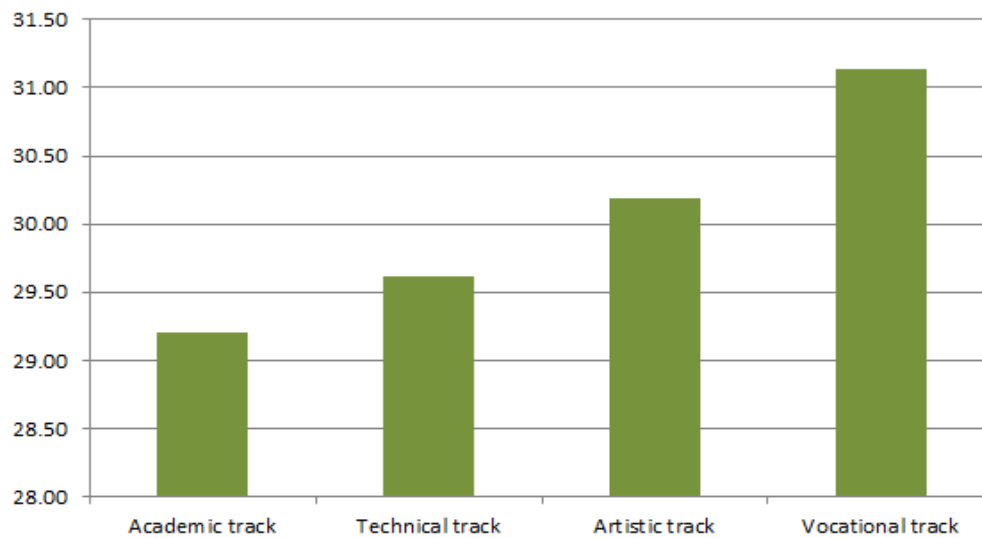


Table 2: Association between track and school misconduct. Results of multivariate linear regression analyses

Intercept	b	29.070***
	SE	2.861
Gender	b	-1.564***
	SE	0.339
Age	b	0.224
	SE	0.174
SES	b	-0.152
	SE	0.183
Track (ref cat: academic track)		
Arts track	b	1.309
	SE	0.684
Technical track	b	-0.088
	SE	0.473
Vocational track	b	1.332**
	SE	0.514

Note: The unstandardized coefficients (b) are presented, with the standard errors (SE). * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Figure 7: Percentage of students having a part-time job: differences between tracks.

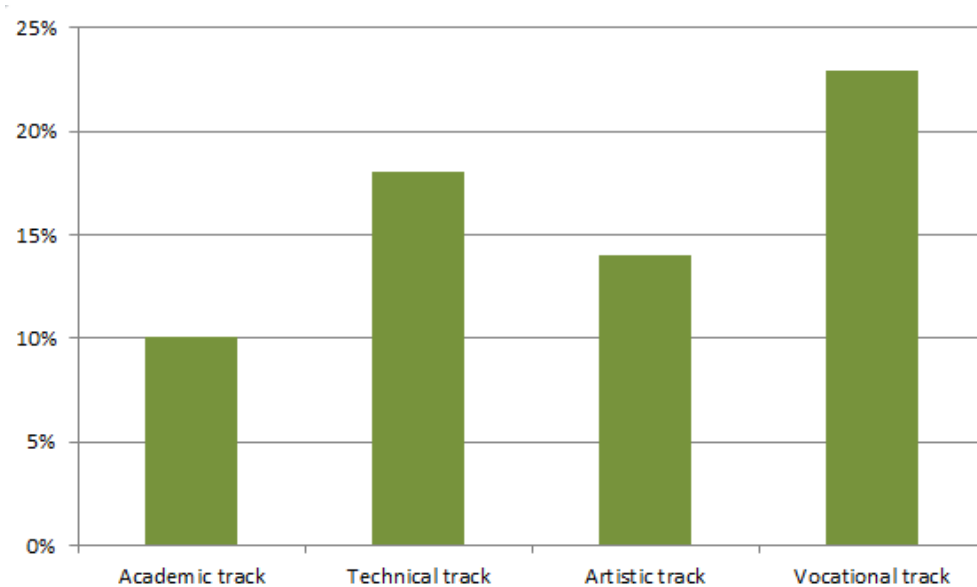


Table 3: Association between track and part-time working. Results of multivariate logistic regression analyses

Intercept		b	-6.909***
		OR	0.001***
		SE	1.196
Gender		b	0.452***
		OR	1.571***
		SE	0.135
Age		b	0.264***
		OR	1.302***
		SE	0.073
SES		b	-0.003
		OR	0.997
		SE	0.069
Track (ref cat: academic track)	Arts track	b	0.233
		OR	1.263
		SE	0.264
	Technical track	b	0.494**
		OR	1.639**
		SE	0.18
	Vocational track	b	0.654***
		OR	1.924***
		SE	0.187

Note: The unstandardized coefficients (b) and odds ratio's (OR) are presented, with the standard errors (SE). * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Last, we considered differences between tracks in whether students had part-time jobs besides their full-time enrollment at school. The percentages by track are shown in figure 7. Only about 10% of students from the academic track had a part-time job, which was less than half of the percentage in the vocational track (23%). The artistic track (14%) and the technical track (18%) fell in between these extremes. The multivariate analyses (see Table 3) showed that the difference between the academic and artistic tracks was not significant, but the other differences were. As such, students were more likely to have a part-time job when attending the technical or vocational

track. This might be, as explained above, a way for students experiencing status deprivation at school to prove their adulthood as an alternative way of gaining status.

Discussion

Flanders occupies a peculiar position in PISA scores. While the system scores high on excellence, it tends to score low on equity as there is a high gap between the highest and lowest performing students. The aim of this paper was to explain this distinct position by pointing to the specifics of the tracking system in secondary education.

We argued that the strict tracking system in Flanders has given rise to a highly stratified and hierarchically ordered system. The wide spread on PISA scores is due to the fact that students in the academic track are taught in relatively homogeneous class settings, which ensures high levels of educational growth in students. Due to the hierarchical nature of the system, however, students in lower tracks are characterized by an antischool culture. This assertion was supported by the empirical analyses shown in the current study, as students in the lower tracks – most notably those in the vocational track – are more likely to believe that putting effort in school-related tasks is pointless. Moreover, they are more likely to act out against the system by posing rule-breaking behavior at school. Finally, they are also overrepresented among the students with part-time jobs – which might be an alternative way of gaining status (see Willis 1977). The specific organization of tracking in Flemish education therefore seems directly responsible for widening the achievement gap. Moreover, track allocation is not only based on academic credentials, as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to end up in the technical or vocational track – net of achievement. This was supported by the findings of the current study that disclosed differences between tracks in the socio-economic status of students' families. Hence, the tracking system not only creates an achievement gap, it generates social inequality – a

finding which is supported by cross-national research (Gamoran, 2010; Van der Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010).

One might argue that the differences in attitudes between tracks seem not that large. However, previous Flemish research has pointed to the existence of student cultures – that is, attitudes shared by students belonging to the same school or track (Van Houtte, 2006; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2008). Hence, differences in attitudes between tracks may give rise to track-specific student cultures, which might impact on all students in those tracks, irrespective of their proper attitudes. This is important as students are socialized into the student culture at school – in other words, students tend to comply to the overall student culture of a school.

Moreover, while differences between attitudes and behaviors may be small, they are very real in their consequences. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of sense of futility (Agirdag et al. 2012) and school misconduct (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Roeser & Eccles 1998) for students' achievement and chances to be retained in their current grade. As such, these differential attitudes and behaviors may contribute to a widening achievement gap between tracks.

While tracking has a long-standing tradition in Flanders, being applied since the beginning of the twentieth century, we should note that, recently, policy makers have begun to question the way Flemish secondary education is organized. Although a secondary education revolution is not yet ready to be realized in Flanders (see e.g. Nicaise et al. 2014), it seems at least that the hierarchical nature of the tracking system is ready to be challenged by policy makers in Flanders. This might be the first step in bringing equity in the Flemish system to the same level as its excellence.

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