

EDUCATION IN FLANDERS

Balancing social and economic rationales while tackling early school leaving

Noel Clycq*, Ward Nouwen*, Rut Van Caudenberg* & Christiane Timmerman*

Abstract: Tackling early school leaving is one of the main EU 2020 targets and Flanders – responsible for education policy in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium – fully endorsed these targets. However, educational issues are often heavily politicised in Flanders, and in particular the fundamental restructuring of secondary education is seen as one of the most salient issues. In this paper we study the tensions between a social equity and an economic rationale underlying this debate. A general finding is that the position of Flanders in the PISA rankings is often recuperated by both sides of the ideological spectrum to illustrate the need to maintain Flanders' top position or to combat the large social achievement gap. This article builds upon the data collection and analysis of the policy analysis and field description work package of the «Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe» (RESL.eu) research project and more in particular draws upon the findings presented in the Country Report of the Belgian (Flemish) partner (Nouwen, Clycq, Braspenningx, & Timmerman, 2014).

Keywords: early school leaving, Flanders, social equity versus economic rationales, PISA rankings

L'ENSEIGNEMENT EN FLANDRE: EN PESANT LES LOGIQUES SOCIALES ET ÉCONOMIQUES, TANDIS QU'EN LUTTANT CONTRE LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE

Résumé: La lutte contre le décrochage scolaire est un des plus importants objectifs de l'UE 2020, et la Flandre – responsable pour l'enseignement dans la région néerlandophone en Belgique – a fortement approuvé ces objectifs. Néanmoins, les sujets scolaires sont souvent intensément politisés en Flandre, et particulièrement la restructuration fondamentale de l'enseignement secondaire est considérée comme un des problèmes les plus saillants. Dans cet article, nous investiguons les ten-

* Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS), Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp (Antwerp/Belgium).

sions entre l'égalité sociale et une logique économique qui sous-tendent ce débat. Une conclusion générale est que la position de la Flandre dans le classement PISA est souvent récupérée par les deux côtés du spectre idéologique pour illustrer la nécessité de maintenir la haute position de la Flandre ou de lutter contre l'impact de la position socio-économique des élèves sur leur réussite scolaire. Cet article se base sur la collecte de données et l'analyse de l'analyse des politiques et de la description du terrain du projet de recherche «Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe» (RESL.eu), et particulièrement sur les résultats présentés dans le Rapport National du partenaire belge (flamand) (Nouwen, Clycq, Braspenningx, & Timmerman, 2014).

Mots-clés: décrochage scolaire, Flandre, équité sociale *versus* logiques économiques, classements PISA

EDUCAÇÃO NA FLANDRES: EQUACIONANDO AS RACIONALIDADES SOCIAIS E ECONOMICAS NA LUTA CONTRA O ABANDONO ESCOLAR PRECOCE

Resumo: Combater o abandono escolar precoce é um dos principais objetivos da UE 2020 e da Flandres – responsáveis pela política de educação na parte da Bélgica onde se fala holandês apoiaram plenamente estes objetivos. No entanto, as questões educacionais são, muitas vezes, fortemente politizadas na Flandres e, em particular, a reestruturação crucial do ensino secundário é vista como uma das questões mais proeminentes. Este artigo foca as tensões entre a racionalidade de equidade social e a racionalidade económica subjacente a este debate. A conclusão geral é que a posição da Flandres nos rankings do PISA é frequentemente recuperada por ambos os lados do espectro ideológico para ilustrar a necessidade de manter a posição de topo da Flandres ou para combater a grande lacuna social em termos de aquisições académicas. Este artigo baseia-se na recolha e análise de dados de políticas e na descrição do campo do bloco de trabalho do projeto de pesquisa «Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe» (RESL.eu) [Reduzindo o abandono escolar precoce na Europa] e, mais em particular, nas conclusões apresentadas no relatório do parceiro Belga (Flamengo) (Nouwen, Clycq, Braspenningx, & Timmerman, 2014).

Palavras-chave: abandono escolar precoce, Flandres, equidade social, racionalidade económica, rankings do PISA

1. Introduction

Tackling early school leaving (ESL) is an important educational issue discussed in various EU policy documents. The decrease of the EU wide ESL rates is part of the five headline targets of the EU 2020 Strategy for a «smart, sustainable and inclusive economy». In these policy documents early school leavers are defined as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training (EU Council, 2011;

European Commission, 2013). This benchmark is used to compare the different national and regional educational systems and their ESL position. In this paper we discuss the particularities of the Flemish educational system on the issue of ESL. This article builds upon the data collection and analysis of the policy analysis and field description work package of the «Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe» (RESL.eu) research project and, more in particular, draws upon the findings presented in the Country Report of the Belgian (Flemish) partner (Nouwen et al., 2014).

Due to a series of federalisation processes during the past decades, Flanders – the northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium – has received almost full competence with respect to education and training. One of the few exceptions is the regulation of the compulsory learning age – set at the age of 18 –, which remains a national competence. Given this situation with respect to education it is more befitting to discuss the context of Flanders in particular rather than the context of Belgium. A general imagination of Flemish education is that it is a democratic and meritocratic system in the sense that everyone has equal access to education and can achieve according to one's talents and efforts displayed in education (Clycq, Nouwen, & Vandenbroucke, 2014). However, educational reality shows that strong social and ethnic inequalities persist (Groenez, 2010; Nicaise, Kavadias, Spruyt, & Van Houtte, 2014).

Various scholars have argued that educational structures have an important impact on educational outcomes of specific social and ethnic groups and that similar social groups might be successful in one context while unsuccessful in another structural context (Crul, Schneider, & Lelie, 2012; OECD, 2012a). Nevertheless, (educational) structures are malleable as they are by definition constructed by (groups of) individuals and can thus be defined as intentional and political actions (Myers & Grosvenor, 2011; Reay, 2010). Therefore it is interesting to study the rationale underlying the construction of these structures, and the present discussion on their reproduction or transformation in the light of alarming rates of ESL among specific categories of youngsters. To grasp these issues we focus on the regional, local and European context while – as explained above – the national (Belgian) context is less relevant. More in particular, we study how important stakeholders such as policy makers, educational governing bodies, civil society organisations, employment agencies and labour market representatives view the issue of ESL and how their perspectives influence their (policy) initiatives.

In this paper, we study – based upon document analysis and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions – how the issue of ESL is discussed by some of the most important policy and civil society stakeholders in Flanders. The following research questions guided the analysis presented in this paper: (1) Is early school leaving an issue discussed by «educational stakeholders» in Flanders and to what extent does the EU policy context influence Flemish educational policy regarding ESL? (2) What are the main rationales underlying Flemish strate-

gies to tackle ESL? (3) What are the solutions proposed for tackling ESL and how do they relate to the reproduction or transformation of educational structures in Flanders?

2. System level risk factors for early school leaving in Flemish education

To comprehend the educational policies in Flanders, it is best to start with a short overview of the general structure of the educational system. In Flanders, compulsory education is provided by different governing bodies and almost all schools are publicly funded. Nevertheless, the main governing body is privately organised by the Flemish Secretariat for Catholic Schools (VSKO), and this umbrella organisation represents «their» schools in policy discussions on the system level. Additionally, some other privately operated schools of a different denomination (mostly alternative schools, like Steiner, Freinet, etc.) are grouped in specific representative governing bodies. Besides privately operated schools, there are public schools organised by the Flemish Government (GO!), by the different Flemish provinces (POV) and by different local authorities in the larger Flemish cities (represented by OVSG) (Nouwen et al., 2014). Schools and governing bodies have a high degree of autonomy, in particular in the way they organise their school policy and in their provision of curricula. However, to be eligible for funding from the Flemish Ministry of Education, schools have to be in compliance with a certain amount of general rules related to, e.g., developmental objectives and curriculum targets. Also, for receiving additional funding within the Flemish Equal Educational Opportunities (EEO) policy, schools are bound by legislation like the right to enrolment and the obligation to draw a school level action plan for providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Therefore high school autonomy, government level educational developmental objectives and curriculum targets with attention for equal opportunities are basic policy principles that underlie the Flemish educational system.

Next to the organisation of education and the level of school autonomy, Flemish education has some other structural characteristics that are important to mention as a contextual background for the analysis of Flemish policies in tackling ESL. Although the first two years in secondary education are often presented as being comprehensive, students are already enrolled in an A-track or a B-track. The B-track is primarily for students that leave primary education without having attained specific developmental or curricular objectives and were advised to enter secondary education based on age difference with other pupils in primary education. The official aim of the B-track is to remediate and redirect some of these pupils to the A-track or to steer them more directly towards vocational education. Thus, although these first two years are presented by policy makers as more or less comprehensive, in practice

there is a first tracking of students from the age of 12 onwards. Administrative data show that those students starting secondary education in the B-track will predominantly follow the vocational pathway and have a much lower probability to finish secondary education with an educational qualification (Nouwen et al., 2014). However, not only the B-track students, but also the A-track students are confronted with specific structural risk factors of «streaming down the water fall» of the Flemish hierarchical educational tracking system. Many students and their parents choose to start secondary education in the higher status track of general education, but they are reoriented to lower status tracks in vocational education (i.e., the technical, school- and work-based vocational tracks) (Timmerman, Hemmerrechts, Wets, & Clycq, 2014). Although the different tracks are presented as equally important and valuable in official policy documents, in everyday educational practice this hierarchy exists between the general/academically oriented track as the most, and the vocational track as the least prestigious and desirable track (Van Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2012). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that negative stereotypes about the vocational tracks become part of a general imagination of Flemish education (Nouwen, Clycq, & Wets, 2014b).

With respect to the issue of ESL, these structures and resulting educational practices are important to discuss in relation to the negative educational experiences of a large proportion of students (e.g., regarding grade retention and reorientation to different tracks), which have been shown to increase the risk of ESL (Lamote, Pinxten, Van Den Noortgate, & Van Damme, 2014; OECD, 2012b). Furthermore, while the work-based vocational track was partly designed as a policy strategy to prevent and compensate for ESL by offering students the opportunity to acquire some work-experience starting from the age of 15, in practice for many students this track became a final stop in streaming down the educational waterfall, right before leaving education without an upper secondary qualification (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014; Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2014a).

These system level risk factors of the Flemish education system are particularly salient for the main at risk groups for ESL: e.g., boys, students with another home language than Dutch and/or with an immigration background and those from lower SES families – particularly, as these groups are overrepresented in the (part-time) vocational track, in grade retention rates and in ESL rates (Van Landeghem, De Fraine, Gielen, & Van Damme, 2013; Clycq et al., 2014). Although similar groups are at higher risk of educational failure and ESL across Europe and in the USA, this specific structural context of Flemish education needs to be highlighted before discussing our findings from the analyses of Flemish ESL policies (Alba & Holdaway, 2013; Gibson, Carrasco, Pàmies, Ponferrada, & Ríos-Rojas, 2013; Nouwen, Clycq, & Ulicna, 2015). As will be discussed further in this paper, while it might seem a straightforward reasoning that such constraining educational systems – characterised by early and hierarchical tracking –

should be «restructured» because vulnerable groups seem to suffer most, other rationales and intentions influence these restructuring plans. To underpin the now often «politicised» discussion on (inequalities in) educational achievement levels, the use of comparative international studies such as the OECD PISA assessments can play an important role. We now discuss how the position of Flemish students in the PISA studies has been used by different actors on the Flemish education policy spectrum to their advantage.

3. Assessing educational systems based on PISA data: the case of Flanders

A focus on the PISA-assessment is justified in relation to education policy discussions as several scholars are criticising the power and impact of ranking national educational systems in a more or less unified comparative framework (Meyer & Benavot, 2013). Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the results section, also in Flanders the findings emerging from PISA are used by policy makers, educational practitioners and other stakeholders to argue for or against specific types of transformations of Flemish secondary education, such as the reform of Flemish secondary education.

From a general perspective, the PISA-assessment scores show that Flanders is ranked among the top performing countries for mathematics, science and reading. Even though in some cases a small decline in performance scores is appearing, compared to many other developed countries and regions, the overall picture is still quite good (Danhier, Jacobs, Devleeshouwer, Martin, & Alarcon, 2014; De Meyer & Warlop, 2010). However, when probing deeper into these findings, strong inequalities emerge. For example, Flanders also holds a top position when one focuses on the performance difference between the 10% highest scoring students and the 10% lowest scoring students. This achievement gap is mainly related to two variables: one's immigration background and one's socio-economic status. With respect to the former, PISA-data consistently show that «native» Belgians (those without an immigration background) score much higher than students with an immigration background. Moreover, within the latter group, a second consistent finding is that first generation migrants outperform second generation migrants on all subjects: mathematics, science and reading. In a similar vein, the PISA results show that in the Flemish educational system the impact of the socio-economic status on educational performance is among the highest of all OECD countries (Danhier et al., 2014). This means that students from families with a lower socio-economic status (based upon the parents' educational and/or labour market situation) will have a higher chance to perform lower compared to students from a higher SES family (Timmerman, Clycq, Hemmerechts, & Wets, 2015). This therefore also hampers social mobility based on the meri-

tocratic ideal of self-direction and achievement (Clycq et al., 2014). Lower SES students have fewer chances to score higher and the Flemish educational system does not seem to compensate (or only very limitedly) for these background features. Moreover, despite significant financial support from the Flemish government in, e.g., the Equal Educational Opportunities program, these inequalities seem not to have decreased significantly (Poesen-Vandeputte & Nicaise, 2012). The picture of the Flemish educational system emerging from the PISA-assessments is thus quite complex and ambiguous (Danhier et al., 2014). Flanders is ranked among the top performing countries for its overall assessment scores as well as for its inequalities between social groups. The findings from our research show that this ambiguity is also present in the discourses of policy makers and practitioners when advocating for a transformation or preservation of Flemish educational structures.

5. Methodology and sample

This paper is based upon a comparative analysis within the context of the RESL.eu project: Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (www.resl-eu.org). Each of the partner institutions in this consortium studied the national/regional institutional and educational policy context according to a pre-defined research design and methodology, the latter to facilitate the comparative analysis that lies at the heart of the RESL.eu project.

The methodology applied was twofold: a literature study combined with qualitative fieldwork. We started with a study of (policy) documents and other relevant literature on early school leaving in Flanders.

5.1. Document analysis

We applied a quite comprehensive approach towards the search and analysis of (policy) documents by collecting a broad range of documents related to these issues. These documents are often publicly available and were easily accessible through specific websites related to an organisational or institutional structure. As in Flanders the educational governing bodies have a large amount of autonomy on how they want to approach certain educational issues, we consistently searched their websites and media appearances. A similar approach was used with respect to the documents made available or the media appearances by representatives of the labour market. Particularly relevant in this respect are the documents produced by the two advisory boards established by the Flemish Government: the Flemish Educational

Advisory Board (VLOR) and the Socio-Economic Advisory Board of Flanders (SERV). Both are established as advisory boards in the process of designing Flemish educational legislation but also as assessors of legislative actions in other Belgian or Flemish policy domains as well as of EU educational policy. With respect to the political perspectives, we collected policy documents and vision statements by political actors from the different policy levels, the Flemish level and the city level, as well as from the individual political parties in as far as they discussed these issues. We deliberately incorporated the official reports from the various debates held in the Flemish parliament – and within its specific Commission for Education and Training – on ESL and related issues. For the search of documents in the news media (mainly interviews and opinion pieces), we relied upon the database MEDIARGUS¹. As such, we did not only collect documents developed within the educational context or by educational practitioners, but also collected information and insights on these issues from a wide range of representatives of civil society organisations, labour market actors, social service and (mental) health care organisations.

5.2. Qualitative fieldwork

The second method used to gather information on the issue of ESL and its relation to the policy and institutional context was by way of qualitative data-gathering. A total of eight in-depth interviews were conducted with MPs, Flemish and local policy makers, organisers of education and labour market representatives. Next to this, four focused group discussions with local stakeholders from the educational and employment sectors were conducted in Antwerp and Ghent. In these discussions a total of 30 participants were involved. A topic list was used focusing on respondents' views on issues such as: (i) the main drivers underlying local, national and EU youth policies and in particular policies tackling ESL; (ii) respondents' awareness and evaluation of these policy actions; (iii) how policies on various levels are adapting to, among other things, changing demographic, economic and social situations; (iv) and national and/or local policy makers' engagement with EU policy and the forms of resistance or compliance with these policy initiatives.

However, what became apparent during our fieldwork is that the main stakeholders

¹ Mediargus is a digital media platform hosted by all major Belgian news media consortia. We searched for all documents containing the (common language) Dutch words related to early school leaving such as *«vroegtijdig schoolverlaten»* (early school leaving), *«ongekwalificeerde uitstroom»* (unqualified outflow), *«drop out»*, *«jongeren zonder diploma»* (youth without an upper secondary degree).

seldom expressed other opinions than those of the official documents made public by their political, educational or civil society organisations. The issues discussed were – especially at the time of the fieldwork in 2013 – highly sensitive, and respondents seldom strayed from the general standpoints of their respective organisations. As a consequence, the qualitative fieldwork was in general an interesting but seldom innovative addition to the information gathered from official statements. Therefore, we do not use the quotations from the interviews and focus group discussions as participants were also wary of being explicitly quoted in our reports.

In this paper, we mainly discuss the main viewpoints of Flemish policy makers towards EU and regional policy initiatives in tackling ESL and the competing drivers underlying the Flemish policy initiatives on the issue of ESL. In a final section, we illustrate these findings with the case of the reform plans for secondary education, which is the result of an almost two decade long discussion.

6. Results

We divided our findings in two sections. We start with a discussion of Flanders as, in general, eagerly adopting EU education policy and, in particular, ESL policy. In a next section, we aim to deepen our understanding of the two dominant yet competing drivers underpinning the broader debate on countering ESL in Flanders, and we present the case of the restructuring of secondary education in Flanders as an illustration of how these competing drivers come into conflict.

6.1. Flemish and EU education and ESL policy, a close relationship

As discussed in the introduction of this special issue, EU education policy, and in particular policy on ESL, came to the fore following the EU Lisbon Strategy (2000) and is currently expressed most explicitly in the current EU 2020 Strategy. Flanders to a large extent adopts the EU policy initiatives by implementing its policy frameworks and vocabulary (Nouwen et al., 2014). Examples of this implementation process are the following Flemish policy documents and programs: the Pact of Vilvoorde (2001), the Flanders in Action Plan or VIA (2006) and the Pact2020 (2010). The current Flemish Reform Program presented to the EU is built on both the VIA plan and the Pact2020 (Flemish Government, 2013) and shows strong links with the existing EU policy documents on early school leaving such as the Commission and Council

documents on ESL from 2011 and the Thematic Working Group report on ESL (2013). As we discuss in more detail below, the Flemish action plan for tackling ESL takes on the EU policy framework developed and disseminated by the EU Commission's thematic working group on tackling ESL by phrasing and classifying 50 concrete actions according to the main headings and concepts in the EU Commission's report: i.e., identification and monitoring, coordination of policies, prevention, intervention and compensation (European Commission, 2013; Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2014b)

Flemish policy actions that were taken specifically to combat ESL and youth unemployment can be clustered into two main categories: (i) a focus on concrete actions that directly target students leaving education without an upper secondary education degree, and (ii) a focus on the structures and particular educational pathways that are more indirectly linked to tackling ESL.

With respect to concrete actions, great emphasis is placed upon the detection and monitoring of early signals of disengagement measured through the truancy behaviour of students. With this aim, the Minister of Education launched in 2006 a Truancy Action Plan to combat rising numbers of truancy (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). Although the aim was to design a holistic and contextualised approach of the phenomenon of truancy, in practice a strong focus on the individual student remained present. In 2012 the new Minister designed an updated Truancy plan with more detection and monitoring and with a stronger focus on raising awareness, prevention, supervision and repression (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). Local policy makers received more power on this issue and from September 2012 onwards all enrolments, school changes, presences and absences during the entire school year are monitored more closely. Although the underlying rationale is that truancy and school changes need to be approached from a holistic perspective, the focus on the individual pupil and his parents that need to be held accountable remains central in the policy discourses.

The current Flemish Reform plans in response to the EU 2020 Strategy are very ambitious towards the ESL target, which is illustrated by the objective of the Flemish Minister of Education to decrease the ESL rate to 5.2%, which is even significantly lower than the EU 2020 national target for Belgium of 8.6%. However, ESL related policy actions that have already been taken up until 2013 have internally often received criticism for being too isolated or for being focused on only a few issues and therefore not making a significant difference (VLOR, 2012; focus group discussions in Ghent and Antwerp and consultations with educational stakeholders, 2013). The VLOR and the SERV argued that the policy actions were too limited. In particular the VLOR recommends a more active qualification policy and further investment in existing policy levers, such as increasing participation in pre-school, equal

opportunity policies, action plans against truancy, time-out projects, a reform of part-time vocational education and apprenticeship programs, extra support for education policies through local authorities and investing more in adult education (Nouwen et al., 2014). The VLOR also feared that a fragmentation of implemented policy initiatives would not lead to significant positive effects and would not bring about a more fundamental transformation than was indicated to be necessary. The SERV, from its perspective as representative for the labour market organisations, pointed out that, next to sufficient investments, (also) a reform of secondary education and a stronger link between the labour market and qualifications attained in (compulsory) education are required to combat ESL (SERV, 2010, 2011).

As a more holistic approach is also stressed in EU policy documents – and arguing that only comprehensive plans can have long term effects in tackling ESL –, in the fall of 2013 the Flemish Government drafted an Flemish Action Plan on Early School Leaving together with the main stakeholders on different policy levels and sectors. This plan strongly adopts the EU policy framework and concepts in tackling ESL and presents a Flemish plan that stresses the identification and monitoring of ESL and the development of different prevention, intervention and compensations measures. This resulted in a range of 50 concrete actions, often subdivided in more specific actions, various stakeholders from the educational field, the labour market and civil society actors can – or sometimes are obliged to – adopt.

Next to the Flemish Action Plan on Early School Leaving, also other more structural reform plans have been discussed among policy makers and various educational stakeholders. One major example are the policy reforms and discussions surrounding the provision of an apprenticeship based educational trajectory focused on providing an alternative learning pathway for those youngsters who throughout their school career have «grown tired» of the general provision of school-based learning and/or are attracted by workplace learning. The development of the Learning and Working Decree (Decreet betreffende het stelsel van leren en werken in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2008) can therefore be considered as an important compensatory strategy for ESL, because it aims to provide workplace learning that allows attaining an upper secondary qualification and demands a full-time engagement from its students (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014). It aims to offer students the opportunities to achieve educational as well as professional qualifications while being in remunerated employment starting from the age of 15.

Although combining learning and working was already seen as an important strategy in tackling ESL in 2002 (Flemish Parliament, 2002), current studies show that ESL is strongly concentrated in these part-time vocational tracks (Van Landeghem et al., 2013; Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). Nonetheless, as was discussed above, this is mainly due to the structural educational context of secondary education systems in Flanders where early track-

ing is combined with a hierarchical structure wherein students often start in the most «prestigious» track, but a large amount of these students end up in the part-time vocational track after having experienced a series of educational failures (e.g., grade retention and non-voluntary reorientation to other educational tracks). So, while the work-based vocational education provides an alternative pathway for attaining an educational qualification, it currently attracts a large proportion of students with negative educational experiences that therefore have higher risks of leaving education underqualified.

During the past years, awareness is rising about the high level of truancy, and ESL in work-based vocational education and new policy initiatives are being discussed to combat the low educational attainment levels in the part-time educational track (Flemish Parliament, 2015; VLOR, 2015). A very recent policy initiative is the presentation of a joint concept note for a new «Dual Learning System» by the current Flemish Ministers for Education and Work in 2015 (Flemish Government, 2015). In this note the current system of workplace learning is described as failing to provide students with sufficient educational qualifications and does not provide real labour market experiences and skills for a large proportion of their (most vulnerable) students. To strengthen the power of the work-based vocational education and training (VET) as a preventive and compensatory measure for tackling ESL, current reform plans for this work-based educational track aim to improve the track's reputation and increase the number students that make a positive study choice for work-based VET. To succeed, the main focus is placed on opening up the workplace learning opportunities to more students in a vocationally oriented study track and to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities (Flemish Government, 2015).

The concept note on the reform of the Flemish system for «dual learning» was received with mixed feelings (VLOR, 2015; Agoria, 2015). On the one hand, some educational stakeholders, for instance, fear that too much responsibility and power is shifted from the education to the employment sector. Furthermore, some stakeholders indicate that there is a lack of vision towards maintaining the provision of specialised (youth) care instruments that are available in the current system for workplace learning and allow students that are not deemed eligible for apprenticeships in mainstream economy to keep perspectives on labour market participation. On the other hand, VLOR (2015) indicated that this concept note might be a step in the right direction if it is integrated into a broader reform plan for secondary education in which the structural reform of the hierarchical tracking system can strengthen the position of vocational education and training as a whole. Moreover, VLOR (2015) also reconfirmed the standpoint that the provision of a dual learning track is a strong preventive tool in reducing ESL among students who do not fit full-time school-based educational tracks.

These policy initiatives and discussions presented above show that there is a large and growing awareness about the issue of ESL in Flemish education. Even though Flanders has an official ESL rate that is well below the EU 2020 target of 10%, some categories of students, such as students in vocational tracks, are much more at risk than others. This growing awareness accumulated from concrete one-off policy actions into the presentation of the Flemish Action Plan on Early School Leaving that is currently being implemented in cooperation with (local) stakeholders (Flemish Ministry for Education and Training, 2014b; Flemish Ministry for Education and Training, 2014b). Other recent initiatives such as the reform plans for Flemish secondary education (see next section) and the concept note on Dual Learning (2015) discussed above are rather long-term strategies that are in the process of being designed and implemented and directly link up with this ESL Action Plan (Flemish Ministry for Education and Training, 2014b).

In general, we can therefore argue that Flanders eagerly adopts many of the EU proposed education policy recommendations, in particular with respect to ESL. However, while tackling concrete issues such as ESL and the lack of quality apprenticeships in workplace learning seem to be politically feasible, this is not the case for the more holistic restructuring of secondary education. This issue has become heavily politicised in recent years and became a salient and sensitive issue that lead to a political stand-off and (therefore) a delay in the actual implementation of the reform of Flemish secondary education. Nonetheless, the reform of Flemish secondary education was explicitly addressed by some of the main stakeholders as a fundament for ESL policy plans to be successful. In the next section, we illustrate the competing rationales underlying policy discussions regarding structural reforms of secondary education.

6.2. Competing drivers in Flemish education policies, illustrated by the case of the reform of secondary education

As Meyer and Benavot (2013) argue, one of the main drivers of international education policies are the findings – in particular the ranking of countries and regions – in the PISA databases. The influence of such comparative studies on educational achievements is also found in the narratives of Flemish educational stakeholders. It is interesting to notice that the argumentation of the actors in the continuum of the two main competing drivers for the reform of Flemish secondary education – an issue that was strongly linked to tackling ESL by most stakeholders – to a large extent relies upon the findings from international comparisons of the Flemish education systems such as the PISA data and the yearly monitoring the EU

2020 headline targets by the EU Directorate-General on Education and Culture. As indicated above, Flanders (Belgium) is generally ranked high in country/region comparisons like the student assessments for science, reading and mathematics by the OECD PISA study. However, one concern is the finding that Flanders' top position has been weakening over the past years. Another important finding is the large gap between the 10% top performing students and the 10% lowest performing students, and Flanders is ranked at the very top compared to other OECD countries/regions for the explanatory power of socio-ethnic differences between students for this performance gap (Danhier et al., 2014; De Meyer & Warlop, 2010). As argued before, this implies that background variables to a large extent determine students' performance and limit one's perspectives on social mobility through education. In our analyses of policy discourses regarding the reform plans for secondary education, the two main competing rationales motivated their views by these two specific findings from the PISA studies. One of the main rationales focuses on maintaining the current structures of the Flemish educational system in order to maintain the overall top position of Flanders in the performance levels, while the other argues for a fundamental structural reform of secondary education, which would allow the socio-ethnic achievement gap to decrease (Nouwen et al., 2014).

These two driving forces for steering structural reforms are combined with a rhetoric with different focal points. The social equity rationale strives primarily for the reduction of the large socio-economic status and (ethnic) achievement gaps in Flemish education. Protagonists argue to aim for the effective realisation of the possibility for upward mobility in the hierarchical tracking structure. Especially socially vulnerable students with an immigration and/or lower SES background are negatively affected by current structural environment and are disproportionately more oriented towards the vocationally oriented tracks. The overall aim of this social equity discourse is to raise the educational performance of all students and to decrease the existing inequalities, and it claims that this is possible without losing Flanders' current top position. This claim is partly based on referring to the top position of the Finish education system that combines high overall performance rates with low levels of social inequalities in educational achievement. The protagonists state to strive for emancipation opportunities for all students and also strongly link the structural reproduction of educational inequalities to the high amount of early school leavers (Nouwen et al, 2014).

The competing rationale driving the reform plans for Flemish secondary education – and other policy initiatives for that matter – is the economic rationale, which argues that the Flemish education system should be mainly oriented towards the current and future labour market opportunities and changes. In this sense, education systems need to become more economically efficient and need to adapt to ensure first and foremost the economic prosperity of Flanders by investing in science and technology oriented study courses and maintaining its

top position in international performance assessments. However, not only economic intentions are underlying this rationale as some of these protagonists argue that the main problems of the current Flemish educational system are not of a structural nature but are more related to the people that participate in education. The Flemish nationalists, for instance, mainly ascribe the performance gap to the language deficiencies and the lack of integration in the Flemish education system of lower SES families and in particular families with an immigrant background (NV-A, 2013).

This overview shows how policy discourses and initiatives can apply similar research reports differently to fuel their own policy objectives and to motivate competing rationales based upon the same data. In the context of the Flemish educational system this is accumulated into the policy impasse surrounding the reform plans of secondary education.

7. Discussion

Our analysis of Flemish education policy showed that the main educational policy makers in Flanders (Belgium) in general often adopt EU policy targets and recommendations on education and on early school leaving in particular. This is illustrated by the adoption of EU policy targets, vocabulary and the concrete ESL policy framework in many official policy documents at the Flemish level (e.g., Flemish Action Plan on ESL, vision statements of advisory boards of educational and economic stakeholders). However, these policy goals and measures raise tensions that mainly revolve around more fundamental – in many ways ideological – discussions about the primary goals of education. These ideological discussions are particularly salient when the policy discussions surpass concrete policy actions and concern more holistic structural reforms, such as the reform plans for secondary education. Stakeholders and policy makers can be found on both sides of a continuum in which some predominantly stress the economic role of education to prepare youngsters for insertion into the labour market, while others mainly stress the democratic and emancipatory role of education for personal development and in combatting social inequality.

As an illustration of the combatting rationales underlying major educational reform plans that the main stakeholders link to tackling ESL, we presented the tensions surrounding the broader discussion on the scope and aims of the reform plans for Flemish secondary education. Many of the motivations for this reform – on both sides of the ideological spectrum – are based on the status of Flemish education in international comparative studies such as the PISA assessments. Where Flanders overall holds a top position in international comparative studies, it also has the strongest socio-economic and ethnic stratification, which is largely

ascribed to the early tracking of pupils in a hierarchical and segregating tracking system. The document analysis and qualitative fieldwork with stakeholders and policy makers illustrate the power struggles in Flanders to maintain its top position while at the same time reducing the strong social reproduction of educational inequality.

Based on the discussion on the reform of secondary education, that has become a deeply politicised topic, one can argue that the topic of early tracking is one aspect of international policy recommendations Flanders has not been eager to adopt (i.e., European Commission, 2013; OECD, 2012). While other EU recommendations such as setting challenging targets to lower the regional ESL rate, developing plans for detecting and monitoring risk of ESL (e.g., the consecutive truancy plans) and drafting a comprehensive ESL action plan were adopted quite swiftly, this has not been the case for more holistic reform plans. The reform plan for Flemish secondary education, that originally aimed to restructure the early tracking of students and the hierarchical tracking structure, was in line with policy recommendations by the European Commission's thematic working group regarding prevention by providing more flexible educational pathways. However, at this point our findings show that in Flanders specific political discussions and constellations have taken over the design and implementation process and have become an obstacle in the implementation of EU and OECD education policy recommendations regarding structural reforms that can support the reduction of the Flemish regional rates of early school leaving.

Acknowledgments: *This paper is based upon the findings from the research project Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe, funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Program.*

Correspondence: *Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies, University of Antwerp, Lange Nieuwstraat 55, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium*

Email: noel.clycq@uantwerpen.be; ward.nouwen@uantwerpen.be; Rut.VanCaudenberg@uantwerpen.be; christiane.timmerman@uantwerpen.be

References

- Alba, Richard, & Holdaway, Jennifer (2013). *The children of immigrants at school: A comparative look at integration in the United States and Western Europe*. New York: New York University Press.
- Agoria (2015). *Visienota Agoria over Duaal Leren*. Brussels: Agoria. Retrieved from <http://www.agoria.be/upload/agoriav3/Visietekst%20duaal%20leren%20-%2010%20maart%202015.pdf>
- Clycq, Noel, Nouwen, Ward, & Vandenbroucke, Anneloes (2014). Meritocracy, deficit thinking and the invisibility of the system. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(5), 796-819. doi:10.1002/berj.3109

- Crul, Maurice, Schneider, Jens, & Lelie, Frans (Eds.). (2012). *The European second generation compared: Does the integration context matter?*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Danhier, Julien, Jacobs, Dirk, Devleeshouwer, Perrine, Martin, Emilie, & Alarcon, Alejandra (2014). *Naar kwaliteitsscholen voor iedereen? Analyse van de resultaten van het PISA 2012-onderzoek in Vlaanderen en in de Federatie Wallonië-Brussel*. Brussels: Koning Boudewijnstichting.
- Decreet betreffende het stelsel van leren en werken in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap (2008). Retrieved from <http://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14032>
- De Meyer, Inge, & Warlop, Nele (2010). *PISA: Leesvaardigheid van 15-jarigen in Vlaanderen: De eerste resultaten van PISA 2009*. Ghent: UGent Vakgroep Onderwijskunde.
- European Commission (2013). *Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support* (Final report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving). Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop (2014). *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: Strategies, policies and measures*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- EU Council (2011). *Council recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving*. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:191:0001:0006:en:PDF>
- European Parliament (2000). *Lisbon European Council 23-24 March 2000: Presidency conclusions*. Retrieved from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm
- Flemish Government (2013). *Europa 2020, vlaams hervormingsprogramma 2013*. Brussels: Vlaamse Regering. Retrieved from <http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/>
- Flemish Government (2015). *Nota aan de vlaamse regering: Duaal leren, een volwaardig kwalificerende leerweg*. Brussels: Vlaamse Regering. Retrieved from <http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/pfile?id=1078854>
- Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2006). *Een sluitende aanpak voor spijbelen en schoolverzuim*. Brussels: Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming. Retrieved from http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/leerplicht/pdf/Een_sluitende_aanpak_voor_spijbelen_en_schoolverzuim_versie_juli_2006.pdf
- Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2012). *Actieplan spijbelen en andere vormen van grensoverschrijdend gedrag*. Brussels: Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming. Retrieved from <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/leerplicht/Documenten/actieplan-spijbelen-en-andere-vormen-van-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-2012.pdf>
- Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2014a). *Vroegtijdig schoolverlaten in het secundair onderwijs: Cijferrapport voor de schooljaren 2009-2010 tot 2013-2014*. Brussels: Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming.
- Flemish Ministry for Education and Training (2014b). *Actieplan vroegtijdig schoolverlaten*. Brussels: Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming. Retrieved from http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/secundair/Actieplan_Vroegtijdig_Schoolverlaten_def.pdf
- Flemish Parliament (2002). *Interpellatie van de heer Chris Vandenbroeke tot mevrouw Marleen Vanderpoorten, Vlaams minister van Onderwijs en Vorming, over het leerplichtonderwijs tot 18 jaar in het algemeen en het alternerend leren in het deeltijds beroepssecundair onderwijs in het bijzonder*. (02/05/2002). Vlaams Parlement, Commissie Onderwijs.

- Flemish Parliament (2015). *Verslag van de boorzitting over de conceptnota van de Vlaamse Regering «Duaal leren – Een volwaardig kwalificerende leerweg», met vertegenwoordigers van de onderwijsactoren.* (01/04/2015). Vlaams Parlement, Verenigde Commissies voor Economie, Werk, Sociale Economie, Innovatie en Wetenschapsbeleid en voor Onderwijs.
- Gibson, Margaret, Carrasco, Silvia, Pàmies, Jordi, Ponferrada, Maribel, & Ríos-Rojas, Anne (2013). Different systems, similar results: Youth of immigrant origin at school in California and Catalonia. In Richard Alba & Jennifer Holdaway (Eds.), *The children of immigrants at school: A comparative look at integration in the United States and Western Europe* (pp. 84-119). New York: New York University Press.
- Groenez, Steven (2010). Onderwijsexpansie en -democratisering in Vlaanderen. *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 31(3-4), 199-238.
- Lamote, Carl, Pinxten, Maarten, Van Den Noortgate, Wim, & Van Damme, Jan (2014). Is the cure worse than the disease? A longitudinal study on the effect of grade retention in secondary education on achievement and academic self-concept. *Educational Studies*, 40(5), 496-514. doi:10.1080/03055698.2014.936828
- Meyer, Heinz-Dieter, & Benavot, Aaron (2013). *PISA, power and policy: The emergence of global educational governance*. Oxford: Symposium Books.
- Myers, Kevin, & Grosvenor, Ian (2011). Exploring supplementary education: Margins, theories and methods. *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society*, 40(4), 501-521. doi:10.1080/0046760X.2010.529835
- Nicaise, Ides, Kavadias, Dimokritos, Spruyt, Bram, & Van Houtte, Mieke (Eds.). (2014). *Het onderwijsdebat: Waarom de hervorming van het secundair broodnodig is*. Berchem: EPO.
- Nouwen, Ward, Clycq, Noel, Braspenningx, Marjolein, & Timmerman, Christiane (2014). *Flemish policies on early school leaving: A field description and policy analysis*. Antwerp: RESL.eu Working Paper Series.
- Nouwen, Ward, Clycq, Noel, & Wets, Johan (2014b). Leerlingenbetrokkenheid en het respect ervaren van leerkrachten: De bedreigende effecten van stereotypering in een sociaal en etnisch gestratificeerd onderwijssysteem. In Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman, Piet Van Avermaet, Johan Wets, & Philip Hermans (Eds.), *Oprit 14: Naar een schooltraject zonder snelheidsbeperkingen* (pp. 137-163). Ghent: Academica Press.
- Nouwen, Ward, Clycq, Noel & Ulicna, Daniela (2015). Reducing the risk that youth with a migrant background in Europe will leave school early. *SIRIUS Network Policy Brief Series*, 6, 12p.
- OECD (2012a). *Equity and quality in education: Supporting disadvantaged students and schools*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD (2012b). *No more failures: Ten steps to equity in education*. Paris: OECD.
- Poesen-Vandeputte, Mayke, & Nicaise, Ides (2012). *Tien jaar GOK-decreet: Balans van het evaluatieonderzoek van het gelijke onderwijskansenbeleid in Vlaanderen*. Leuven: Steunpunt Studie -en Schoolloopbanen.
- Reay, Diane (2010). Identity marking in schools and classrooms. In Margaret Wetherell & Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of identities* (pp. 277-293). London: SAGE.
- SERV (2010). *Advies t.a.v. Vlaams Hervormingsprogramma Europa 2020-strategie*. Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen. (15/09/2010).

- SERV (2011). *Advies t.a.v. ontwerp Vlaams Hervormingsprogramma Europa 2020*. Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen. (12/01/2011).
- Timmerman, Christiane, Hemmerechts, Kenneth, Wets, Johan, & Clycq, Noel (2014). Het sociaaleconomisch determinisme voorbij? Elementen gerelateerd aan schoolcarrières van leerlingen met en zonder een migratieachtergrond. In Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman, Piet Van Avermaet, Johan Wets, & Philip Hermans (Eds.), *Oprit 14: Naar een schooltraject zonder snelheidsbeperkingen* (pp. 21-46). Ghent: Academia Press.
- Timmerman, Christiane, Clycq, Noel, Hemmerechts, Kenneth, & Wets, Johan (2015). Does congruence between the school and the home/community environment make a difference? In Christiane Timmerman, Noel Clycq, Marie Mc Andrew, Alhassane Balde, Luc Braeckmans, & Sara Mels (Eds.), *Youth in education: The necessity of valuing ethnocultural diversity* (pp. 83-108). London: Routledge.
- Van Houtte, Mieke, Demanet, Jannick, & Stevens, Peter A. J. (2012). Self-esteem of academic and vocational students: Does within-school tracking sharpen the difference?. *Acta Sociologica*, 55(1), 73-89. doi:10.1177/0001699311431595
- Van Landeghem, Georges, De Fraine, Bieke, Gielen, Sarah, & Van Damme, Jan (2013). *Vroege schoolverlaters in Vlaanderen in 2010*. Leuven: Steunpunt SSL.
- VLOR (2012). *Advies voortijdig schoolverlaten aanpakken door een actief kwalificerend beleid*. Brussels: Vlaamse Onderwijsraad. Retrieved from <http://www.vlor.be/sites/www.vlor.be/files/ar-ar-adv-009.pdf>
- VLOR (2015). *Advies conceptnota -duaal leren: Een volwaardige kwalificerende leerweg*. Brussels: Vlaamse Onderwijsraad. Retrieved from <http://www.vlor.be/sites/www.vlor.be/files/rso-rso-adv-1415-005.pdf>

