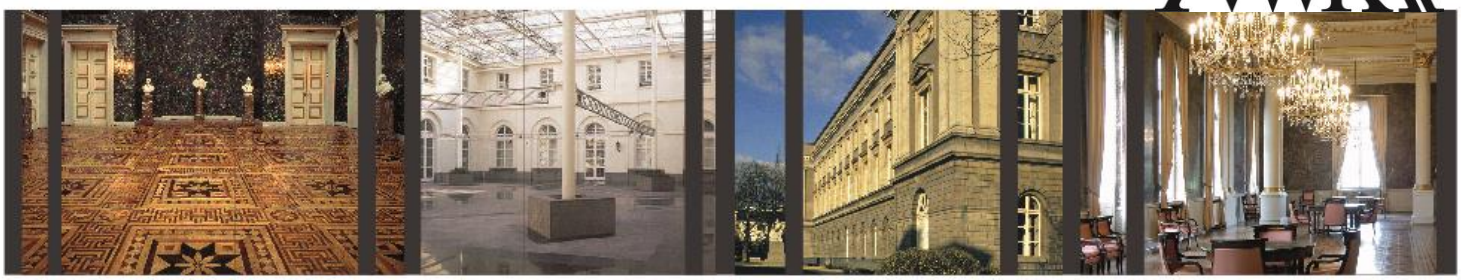
POVERTY AND/IN EDUCATION

KVAB Thinkers Programme - 2023

Luann GOOD GINGRICH

Diane REAY

Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten
Paleis der Academiën – Hertogsstraat 1 – 1000 Brussel – België
info@kvab.be – www.kvab.be



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Final Report

Introduction and Overview

The global health crisis – and government responses that followed – disrupted every aspect of everyday/everynight realities, all across the globe. Along with disruption came a denudation or stripping away, an exposure of all sorts of social and economic truths that are ordinarily concealed. In geology, denudation refers to the slow erosive processes that cause landforms and landscapes to be laid bare, to be made naked. The denudation of Covid-19 was sudden, throwing into sharp relief the truth of ourselves – our communities, institutions, nation, and world. We learned, in new ways, that we are all connected – that my actions have consequences not only for myself, but for every person with whom I have contact; that we are "in this together". But we also learned that while we are all in the same storm, we are not in the same boat. "Viral inequality" is not a new landscape; rather, long-established distractions and dressings were swiftly pulled back. And so, we are presented with an opportunity, or a dawning of a new day, of awakened imaginations for a more just and sustainable "normal".

The Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Sciences and the Arts (KVAB) set out to seize the potential of this moment, and organized the 2023 "Thinkers cycle" (Denkerscyclus) on "poverty and/in education" in the Flemish context. A fundamental premise of the publicly funded education system is equal participation of all children from all families, regardless of socioeconomic status, material circumstances, place of residence, parents' education, or migration background. The pandemic revealed this widely held presupposition to be wrong. To the contrary, it was evident that specific groups of children are denied the means and resources to fully engage in education. Specifically, for example, it was observed that some children did not have the resources necessary for distance learning when primary and secondary schools were closed, including, for example, a computer, reliable internet access, or a quiet space to attend virtual classes and study. After two years of schools closing, opening, and closing again due to public health concerns, some students dropped out. Such uneven learning opportunities, always present, were laid bare by the social and economic crises of the pandemic. Yet, education is typically considered the best – even only – effective antidote to and protection against poverty and inequality.

A disturbing gift of the global pandemic is that the inequality of our communities and nations and globe were laid bare. The Flemish government, in their *Poverty Action Plan for 2020-2024*, noted: "The crisis brought about an unprecedented severe impact on the financial situation and well-being of many people, especially those in poverty and vulnerable situations. We found that people in poverty found it increasingly difficult financially, even for the group that did not directly face loss of income." But it's important to note that poverty and inequality, though often hidden, existed long before the pandemic. We also note that the economic crisis of the global pandemic has evolved into an affordability crisis due to high inflation and the discontinuation of emergency government subsidies. We can expect to see poverty rates increasing in reports in years to come.

More specifically for Flemish schools, the sociodemographic characteristics of Flemish students shows an increasing proportion of students with migration background, more from low socioeconomic families, a higher number of single parent households, and more students living in poverty. The inequities exposed by the pandemic are not only economic, but also urge us to reflect on cultural and social factors that play a role in education. The day-to-day experience of poverty cannot be reduced to material deprivation. Thus, poverty in education is a matter of concern for sociologists, psychologists, epidemiologists, and pedagogues. The 2023 Thinkers Programme aimed to conduct a multidisciplinary consultation and analysis to develop feasible, precise and effective interventions that address the various dimensions of poverty and inequality in education in Flanders. As Downey (2023) asserts, "It is also important to society overall that the lower and middle class is well-educated, as it can be a driver of national productivity growth. Education is also a moderating influence on the intergenerational concentration of wealth in the upper class" (p. 5). The ultimate goal is for Flemish education policy and practice to adapt and respond to the shifting social, economic and political landscape, and to provide equally accessible and high-quality learning opportunities for all students in Flemish primary and secondary schools.

Methods

This report was informed by several rounds of in-depth discussions, both virtual and in person, led by the steering board with stakeholders and topic experts from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives in Flanders. The Thinkers also engaged stakeholders in numerous individual consultation meetings with teachers and school administrators, local politicians, scholars, representatives from non-government organisations, and community leaders. Individual and group consultations included academic experts from KU Leuven, Ghent University, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and University of Antwerp. Two series of fact-finding meetings were held with academic experts, anti-poverty charity and advocacy organisations, teacher organisations, and heads of Flemish school sectors. A Symposium with over 100 stakeholders in December 2023 provided the opportunity to receive feedback and input regarding the analysis and recommendations, which have been incorporated into the final report.

Although our discussions with stakeholders were informal and open-ended, they were seeded with a list of questions circulated in advance of each meeting. The following is a sample of the questions presented to stakeholders:

1. To what extent do politicians, educators, parents, and the general public recognize the issue of poverty and inequality in education?
    - If so, how is it defined and identified?
    - Is it considered a problem, and why?
    - Who is responsible?
2. How is poverty in education addressed in the Flemish context, past and present?
    - To what extent are a) teachers b) parents being made responsible for problems of poverty in wider Flemish society?
    - How pervasive in Flemish education is the ideology of resilience as an acceptable solution to poverty?
    - What role does aspiration play in how poverty is understood in relation to education?
    - How do students' different routes into poverty affect the educational system's ability to address poverty?

- What impact do neoliberal orthodoxies (e.g., (individualization, privatization) have on school policies to address poverty?
- What insights does the history of Flemish education provide into contemporary attitudes to, and strategies for addressing, poverty in education?

3. What do we know about the implications of poverty in education in the Flemish context?
   a) Subjective experience:
      - How do children from families living in poverty experience school, as opposed to children from more affluent families?
      - What are poor children's levels of subjective well-being in relation to their schooling? and how does it compare to their more affluent peers?
      - What is the relationship between fear of educational failure and poverty?
      - What is the relationship between attitudes toward education (at the level of the individual, family, culture) and poverty?
   b) Interpersonal experience:
      - How does growing up in poverty affect children's relationships with teachers?
      - What are the problems of social inclusion facing poor children in school?
   c) Policy and practice:
      - What is the relationship between poverty and segregation of students in Flemish education?
      - What is the relationship between poverty and funding of school districts/regions?
      - What is the relationship between rates of incompletion and suspension/expulsion (by school and school district) and family income, race, and nationality?
      - What is the relationship between the educational streaming of students and family income level, race, nationality, religion?
4. How is the education system organized, funded, and situated within the larger social welfare system?
      - What is the relationship (in policy and in practice) between the education system and social services, child welfare, and police?
      - How are poverty-related issues (such as homelessness, domestic violence, food insecurity, and mental illness) addressed, and by whom? How is the educational system engaged in addressing those issues?
      - In what ways do private corporate interests influence publicly funded education?
      - What are immigration policies and trends, how have they changed over time, and what are the implications for education?
5. The Flemish government is introducing central assessment tests. In view of evidence from other countries that such systems increase segregation and teaching to the test, what protections will there be in the Flemish context?
6. What data is available related to Flemish public opinion in relation to 1) tracking; 2) repetition; 3) levels of educational spending?
7. What lessons can we learn from successes in policy advocacy from the past?
8. What windows of opportunity for policy change do you see in the present?

Extensive and detailed notes of the stakeholder consultations and the Symposium discussions were recorded, and the valuable input is reflected throughout the report.

We heard a diversity of viewpoints in our consultations with stakeholders, but consensual positions that emerged include:

i. Shared concern for PISA scores in general, especially among politicians and attention in media. As recently as December 2023, declining PISA scores in Flanders sparked political attention and public discussion.
ii. Shared concern for inequality in Flemish education system that is manifested in a variety of ways, including segregation of students, polarization of schools and implications for resources, including experienced and qualified teachers and difficulty in facilitating more diversity in schools.
iii. Shared concern for shortage of teachers and lack of attraction to the profession.
iv. Shared concern that teachers and schools do not have adequate resources and training to address poverty, yet they are confronted with serious challenges of poverty in their students and families every day.

We discuss each of these in some detail in our Analysis, and propose strategies for change in our Recommendations.

Theoretical framework and definition of terms

How we define and understand poverty directs our analysis and recommendations that follow. In the political and social context of market neoliberalism that is dominant in Flanders and most of the Global North, poverty is typically conceived as a private trouble to be addressed through "pulling up one's bootstraps." The associated underlying assumption – or judgement – that people get what they deserve is embedded in law and policy. Income assistance programs of most developed social welfare systems are increasingly privatised, devolving responsibility for the inequality of the market to the individual, families, and the volunteer sector. Government and school officials often deem child poverty to be the fault and obligation of parents. This is market meritocracy that denies the truth of our social essence and justifies the privilege and devaluation generated by unjust social systems. We discuss the implications of this seductive ideology for Flemish students in our analysis.

To the contrary, we resituate the individual in dynamic webs of relations of power in time. We adopt a person-in-place-in-space-in-time point-of-view to see and analyse the official procedures and everyday practices of Flemish education. A systems analysis aims to trace how groups are *made* and positioned in physical place (material) and social space (symbolic). This theoretical commitment rejects the ease of simplistic views of poverty as individual deficiency or deviance. Rather, we are compelled to see and understand the structural violence of poverty, and to draw attention to the social, political and economic realities that function to make individuals and groups poor. Through this framework, the bootstrap analogy is nonsense, as it denies the fact that each one of us lives in steeply uneven and competitive social relations of power that influence whether one has boots and bootstraps at all.

We emphasize the *multidimensional*, *dynamic*, and *relational* nature of both the causes or sources of poverty and the lived realities. This analysis connects the micro, meso, and macro levels of Flemish education in its specific historical context – not as a static social system that is inevitable and fixed, but as social relations that are constantly being produced, reproduced, negotiated, and challenged. In keeping with Amartya Sen's identification of poverty with multiple injustices and constraints on the full expression of capabilities, we conceptualize poverty as *a deeply personal and subjective experience that is embedded in complex social systems and structures that function to (re)produce economic, spatial, sociopolitical, and subjective divides*. Preserving a dynamic concept, we begin from the premise that the steeply hierarchical

organization of sociodemographic groups and individual identities is not given in social reality. Groups are made. Classifications of social class, nationality, ethnicity, and race are *produced* through symbolic processes that show up in uneven material realities. Our vantage point is guided by the theory of *intersectionality* that analyses identities and experiences to be "created by the synthesis of inequality structures (white supremacy, sexism, ableism, cisgender-ism, heterosexism, etc.)" (Christoffersen 2023: 3). The intersectionality lens requires both individual and structural levels of analysis. A relational and dynamic frame of reference situates the more common focus on multiple identities and experiences – which invites a simplistic additive understanding of intersectionality – as *outcomes* of intersecting "axes of privilege and oppression" (Christoffersen 2023: 4), which generate and organise inequalities that are mutually constitutive and self-perpetuating.

Good Gingrich's definition of social exclusion guides this theoretical framework, and provides the following working definition of poverty in our analysis:

> *The systematic denial of access to legitimate means of acquiring and exchanging various types of resources (or capital) – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic – thus restricting the volume and functional quality of those assets, reinforcing devalued and dispossessed positions, and (re)producing economic, spatial, sociopolitical, and subjective divides.*

A posture of reflexivity

A person-in-place-in-space-in-time point-of-view requires a reflexive posture, in that we call into question our own common sense. In other words, we examine popular ideas in official education discourse – such as socioeconomic status, migration background, achievement – as *ideas* that are put to work to sort students and organize schools. Thus, our analysis has a dual focus or object of study: the *ideas* and *social reality* of poverty in education in Flanders.

The Flemish education system, as is true for all social fields, functions according to specific and discernible "schemes of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu 1977: 97) that account for the means by which individuals advance; the taken-for-granted logic and beliefs that determine the distribution and worth of all available resources in a social field, including those that are economic, and those that need to be converted to have material value (Good Gingrich, Banerjee, & Lightman 2023; Good Gingrich & Lightman 2015; Lightman & Good Gingrich 2018). To the extent possible, our analysis and recommendations attend to material relations of power (social structures) as well as the symbolic relations of power (cognitive structures) that produce them. Our theoretical framework zeroes in on the constitutive power of such "schemes of classification" or "cognitive structures" to construct "social structures," or to make and order groups (Bourdieu 1989). Classificatory schemes, often assumed to be given or inevitable, show up as the expression of social and material differences in physical space. This is the production or reification of cognitive structures as social structures.

More precisely, for our focus of this report, guiding questions for our analysis are:

What are the official procedures and everyday practices of Flemish education systems, schools, and classrooms that reproduce poverty and inequality among students, schools, neighbourhoods, and society?
What are the mechanisms through which cognitive structures are translated to social structures that are universally accepted as "real"?

The Problem of Measuring the Problem

Measuring poverty in education

There is no consensus in research or policy regarding the concept of poverty and how to measure it. Furthermore, there is increasing recognition that familiar frames of reference are inadequate to represent evolving social and economic realities that divide our communities, nations, and world. Theories and indicators of poverty fall along the full range of several continua, including monetary vs. non-monetary, relative vs. absolute, material vs. subjective experience, and self-reported vs. empirical. Poverty lines, inherently relative, are typically based on measurable metrics, such as income and consumption, to create a scale of minimal needs. In Canada, for example, common official Statistics Canada poverty lines are:

- Low Income Cut-Offs (LICOs) that take into account community size and family size, and
- estimate an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter and clothing
- Market Basket Measure (MBM), based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living for a reference family compared to the disposable income of families
- Low Income Measure (LIM) thresholds, which are relative measures of low income set at 50% of adjusted median household income, and categorized according to the number of persons present in the household, reflecting the economies of scale inherent in household size.

In the EU, including Belgium, the rate of monetary poverty is a relative and one-dimensional measure that depends on the level of income in each country under review. Those considered poor are people whose income falls below 40% to 70% of the median national income. The main poverty line used in the OECD and the EU is based on a level of income set at 60% of the median household income. Often, measure selection is ideologically driven, as there are social and political implications. Governments (including the Flemish government) are notorious for setting poverty lines low so that the proportion of people living "in poverty" is also low.

The relational and relative realities of poverty have received renewed focus in recent years (UNICEF Office of Research 2016), and researchers and policymakers have developed indicators to capture the social realities that income measures overlook. With this, we see a growing emphasis on rising rates of inequality rather than absolute levels of poverty (Capéau et al. 2020b; Riddell et al. 2024). In many fields of study and political debates, the term 'poverty' has fallen out of fashion, having been replaced by concepts and measures of social exclusion, deprivation, well-being, happiness, inequality, social cohesion, socioeconomic status, and so on. Similar to the imprecision of the concept of poverty, literatures do not offer agreement on the explicit or implicit meaning of these terms. In the absence of standard concepts and associated indicators, terminologies are frequently inserted and interchanged without definition. Many (sometimes fleetingly) popular concepts prioritize subjective experience and/or self-reports of material possessions, and omit objective (i.e., administrative) data regarding income and wealth. With the popular assertion that poverty is about more than money, we have also seen in recent decades the introduction of measures that omit monetary-based indicators altogether. With Vobrula (2000) and others, we assert that the particular role of monetary measures in processes that make and

keep people poor and in need, especially in a market economy such as Flanders, "might be provisionally formulated as follows: money is not everything, but without money (almost) everything is nothing" (p. 605).

Although the empirical measurement of poverty is contested, no one questions any longer that poverty – especially its everyday/everynight lived realities – is a multidimensional concept. For instance, an extensive research tradition considers standard of living using primarily self-reported indicators of living conditions or material deprivation (Atkinson et al. 2002; Nolan & Whelan 2010). Multi-dimensional empirical measures of poverty (including income, purchasing power, wealth, employment, wages, benefits, etc.) using administrative data rather than self-reports have become more common in recent years. For example, Kuypers and Marx (2019) make a case for adding measures of wealth and liquidity to more standard one-dimensional measures of income to identify the "triple precariousness" of "households with low income, few assets, especially few liquid assets" (Kuypers & Marx 2019: 144). Combining administrative income data and self-reported indicators of living conditions, the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) includes variables on income, housing, employment, health, and general life satisfaction. Of particular relevance to poverty in education, Guio et al. (2018) add a child-specific deprivation indicator, adopted at the EU level in March 2018, to the EU-SILC to analyse "absolute" levels of child poverty across countries.

We note that this discussion of poverty lines and related measures is in no way comprehensive. Although relevant to our examination of poverty in education in Flanders, a more in-depth review of poverty-related measures is beyond the scope of this report. For a recent and comprehensive examination of conceptualising and measuring poverty and well-being in Belgium, see Capéau et al. (2020a).

Poverty and education – Discrete fields of study and policymaking

It is noteworthy that poverty (as a concern of social policy and distribution) and education operate as distinct fields of study and are seldom integrated in national and international research and policymaking. This may reflect a more general disconnect between education and the social welfare system, which is discussed in the recommendations section that follows. Education research has relied almost exclusively on education-specific concepts and measures that serve as proxies for poverty, specifically student and parental questionnaires to capture family socioeconomic status (SES): the Economic, Social, and Cultural Status instrument (ESCS) used in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); and a compound scale of Home Educational Resources (HER, in the later cycles, changed to Home Resources for Learning, HRL) used in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Social policy research on poverty in Flanders does not consider the same social reality as research on poverty in education in Flanders. Indeed, despite a wealth of valuable research on inequality and SES in education in Flanders, research on poverty in education in Flanders is lacking. Thus, we argue that we know little about poverty in education in Flanders or in comparison. Consequently, in the following analysis, we refer to the specific measures or indicators used in relevant research rather than (inaccurately) identifying them as measures of poverty or class, etc.

Measuring socioeconomic status in education: ESCS, HER/HRL and OKI

Despite the high level of trust currently enjoyed by International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs), and the significant influence of PISA reports for education policy and practice, the validity and reliability of standardized tests, sociodemographic measures, and interpretations have been called into question. A growing chorus of scholarship challenges PISA's sampling methodologies (e.g., Hargreaves & Sahlberg 2015; Rutkowski & Rutkowski 2016), the inherent social and cultural bias of standardized tests and measures (e.g., He, Buchholz, & Fischer 2022; Neuschmidt, Issa Al-Maskari, & Beyer 2022; Strietholt & Strello 2022), and the social benefit of its testing model (Downey 2023; Strietholt & Strello 2022). Most relevant for our examination of poverty in education in Flanders, Downey's (2023) detailed analysis of the (lack of) validity of PISA's ESCS as a measure of SES "calls into question the relevance of all PISA findings related to educational equity" (p. 6).

Given the predominance of the ESCS measure in education research in Flanders (and thus in the following analysis), a closer look at the component indicators is important. Downey (2023) notes that "PISA attempts to control for SES with the ESCS instrument, a composite summary of a student's parental education, parental occupational status, and family income. Education, occupational status, and income are, in turn, operationalized by [parental education] PARED, [Highest International Socio-Economic Index] HISEI, and [home possessions] HOMEPOS, each of which is derived from data provided by students on the contextual questionnaire that accompanies the cognitive exam" (p. 8). While a comprehensive discussion of the challenges to reliability and validity of the ESCS measure is beyond the scope of our report, our theoretical framework draws attention to the following concerns:

- The conceptualisation and operationalisation of SES is imprecise and variable. Downey (2023) points out that PISA refers to SES as a range of disparate constructs. For example, SES is defined "in terms of 'financial, social, cultural, and human capital;' 'wealth, prestige, and power;' 'a wide range of outcomes pertaining to [a person's] physical, economic, and social well-being;' and 'objective material living conditions.' Synthesizing these various constructs into a single attribute is problematic from a theoretical standpoint" (p. 31). Similarly, Rolfe and Yang Hansen (2022) observe inconsistencies in the definition and operationalization of cultural resources, a core indicator of SES in ILSA studies, thus leading to variable results.
- SES indicators reflect regional, cultural and temporal bias (He, Buchholz, & Fischer 2022; Strietholt & Strello 2022). Tramonte and Willms (2010) state "A glaring problem is that some studies assess the possession of cultural attributes and resources, particularly 'highbrow' preferences, tastes, and attitudes, while others do not distinguish cultural capital from the common measures of SES" (p. 202).
- SES scores are not meaningfully comparable across country contexts or cycles. For example, PISA's ESCS model parameters change between each cycle and between countries, undermining the validity of comparisons across time and countries.
- Scholars have challenged the construct validity of the ESCS measure, and PISA's validation tests are considered insufficient (Downey 2023; Strietholt & Strello 2022).
- Self-reported SES measures based on children's responses to questionnaires is unreliable. Researchers note that children have difficulty answering the detailed questionnaire (Merola 2005), and the proportion of missing values is high (Strietholt & Strello 2022).
- All measures of SES use self-reports to assess social realities that are ultimately manifested in objective and material terms. While there is often a substantial overlap, self-reported

indicators of income or material deprivation do not strongly correlate with administrative or registered data (Kuypers & Marx 2019; Wiberg & Rolfsman 2023).

- Relatedly, SES is not a personal attribute or fixed identity, despite common interpretations and applications as such. SES scores are commonly interpreted by educational stakeholders as "being causally determined by quantities of a personal SES attribute that exists in a realist sense, impacting social outcomes. This ontological commitment, in turn, implies a latent variable model of measurement" (Downey 2023: 25). To the contrary, the ESCS and HER/HRL indicators consist exclusively of *acquired* capital or assets, the volume and functionality of which depend on the precise social relations of power in which agents compete for them. SES is socially produced and reproduced through everyday practices of valuation and devaluation in a highly competitive context of a specific structure of capital. Downey (2023) notes that "Even if SES were an attribute, 'measured' ESCS values do not correspond to quantities of any single underlying attribute" (p. 35).

A similar measure of SES that is often used by Flemish schools is the *Onderwijs Kansarmoede Indicator,* or OKI score. The OKI is an "indicator of disadvantaged education circumstances" or education poverty of opportunity, and "is used in the Flemish education system to quantify and estimate the socioeconomic status of students to enable contextualised comparisons between specific groups of students (e.g., schools)" (Milkaite et al. 2021: 3). The OKI score is calculated per student and ranges between 0 and 4. This number is then aggregated on the level of schools. The calculation of the score counts several *disadvantaged education circumstances* that apply to students, including:

- low level of education of the mother
- home language other than the official language spoken at school
- entitlement to the school grant (based on tax declaration)
- living in a neighbourhood with a high degree of school delay (Milkaite et al. 2021).

A fifth indicator recently added was children not living with biological parents and/or itinerant families (e.g., Roma).

In summary, the SES "measures" used in education research and practice are widely critiqued and are not valid measures of poverty — or of anything, according to some scholars. However, disparities in PISA and TIMSS scores by SES do indicate – and (re)produce, we argue – patterns of inequality. But we cannot accurately know the relationship between poverty and educational performance scores (or the ability to learn more broadly) from the ESCS or HER/HRL indicator.

Measuring diversity and inequality in education

The PISA questionnaire includes SES questions (Module 2) and migration and language exposure (Module 4). An index on immigrant background is developed based on responses to questions indicating the country of birth other than the country of the test for the student, their mother, and their father; and an indicator for language spoken at home. The only migration-related indicator in the TIMSS and PIRLS is language(s) spoken at home on both the Home and Student questionnaires. Analysis of student learning outcomes is often group-based, using SES scores and migration background together to classify students, thus conflating concepts and revealing "folk theories" (Bourdieu 1989) or prejudicial assumptions. For instance, speaking a language other than an official language of the host country is frequently used as a proxy for 'migration background', a euphemism for race or ethnicity, and is interpreted and applied as an

observable indicator for low SES. Kus and colleagues (2016) note that lacking certain goods may not be a result of lacking resources, it may just be a matter of preferences or spending patterns. "Taste" or cultural difference from the dominant norm is equated with inadequate or improper home supports and low SES.

Similarly, it is common practice for the OKI to be used to evaluate the "social mix" of schools. For instance, the average OKI score for a grade or schools in a city may be compared to the scores of students in a specific school, indicating the comparative level of diversity in students' socio-economic status. It is noteworthy that this common measure of diversity mixes social attributes (such as home language as a proxy for ethnicity and migration background) with acquired capital or assets (such as eligibility for the education allowance based on income, or level of mother's education). This is consequential, as the everyday practices that systematically devalue and dispossess individuals and groups, and result in associated patterns in acquired material and social capital based on social attributes (such as migration background, or perceived race or ethnicity) are obscured, as if social classes, races, and ethnic categories are given in social reality.

Despite the inadequacy and inaccuracy of SES measures, we argue (with others) that the ESCS, HRL and OKI provide meaningful indicators of socially produced patterns of **inequality** in education. The relationship between SES inequality (as a relational metric of social and economic disparity) and student achievement has been well documented (as discussed in some depth below), showing even more direct influence on educational outcomes than country level economic indicators such as GDP and the GINI Index (McCreary, Edwards, & Marchant 2015). This should not be surprising, as systematic inequality by official schemes of classification (i.e., perceived SES and migration background) give evidence to the structuring power of the "official point of view, which is the point of view of officials and which is expressed in official discourse" (Bourdieu 1989: 22), such as PISA tests and reports. Thus, we assert that the analysis of inequality in education exposes the processes and practices through which privilege and disadvantage are produced and reinforced, and is critical to the examination of poverty in education. Even more importantly, effective changes to policy and practice in education systems, schools and classrooms must take into account both the objective and material structures or outcomes of inequality in education, and the official "structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident" (Bourdieu 1989: 20). We also note the importance of qualitative data – the personal narratives of students and teachers – for informing policy and practice. Therefore, we attend to each of these in the analysis that follows.

Poverty and Inequality in Flanders – By Comparison

Data on poverty and inequality in Flanders give us, by comparison, a good news story – at least at first blush. In 2019, the OECD reported that "The current socio-economic situation in Flanders is characterised by strong performance in almost all comparative performance measures. The Flemish economy has regained strength after the crisis and currently provides a solid foundation for strong and stable growth. Economic expansion has accelerated in recent years, and the labour market is expanding. The OECD reports that "people in Flanders enjoy high standards of living, with low levels of inequality and high levels of well-being in many dimensions, such as

income, work-life balance, health, education and civic engagement (OECD 2019: 22). Poverty rates in the Flemish community are lower than in other regions of Belgium. 2019 data show that the proportion of people living in poverty is 10% in Flanders, compared to 31% in Brussels, 18% in French Belgium, and 15% in Belgium overall.

Guio and Van Lancker (2023) report that "it is clear that Flanders is one of Europe's top performers in terms of child poverty, on a par with countries such as Denmark and Finland, while Wallonia, and even more so Brussels, are at the bottom of the league table, alongside Romania and Spain" (Guio & Van Lancker 2023: 16).

However, we see a slightly different picture when we look a little closer:

- A high proportion of children in Flanders grow up in jobless households, the highest in the EU, especially for non-EU migrant families (Van Lancker 2023).
- While Flanders performs well in terms of financial poverty, it does less well in terms of child deprivation, and occupies an average position in comparison with EU countries as a whole (Guio & Van Lancker 2023).
- The data also show significant inequality in Flanders, as child poverty and deprivation are very unevenly distributed within the population. Certain categories of children have a 50% probability of falling into deprivation. The main risk factors are low income, single parenthood, low level of parental education, a non-EU country of origin and the fact that the household is (virtually) unemployed.
- There is, of course, a link between poverty and migration. The rates of poverty, un- and under-employment among people with a migration background are much higher in Flanders. The most recent child poverty rates in Flanders (based on income data) show the following sharp disparities by country of birth: Belgian origin 6%; EU-origin 16%; non-EU origin 36%. These disproportionate rates of poverty cannot be attributed to socioeconomic status (or human capital) alone. There is evidence of labour market exclusion, even for highly educated and well-qualified immigrant workers, in the Flemish labour market.
- Economically speaking, on average the Flemish outperform the Walloons. Given the strong link between economic situation and health, we might also expect them to be healthier. But some researchers have found few differences on health outcomes between Wallonia than in Flanders (Capéau et al. 2020a).

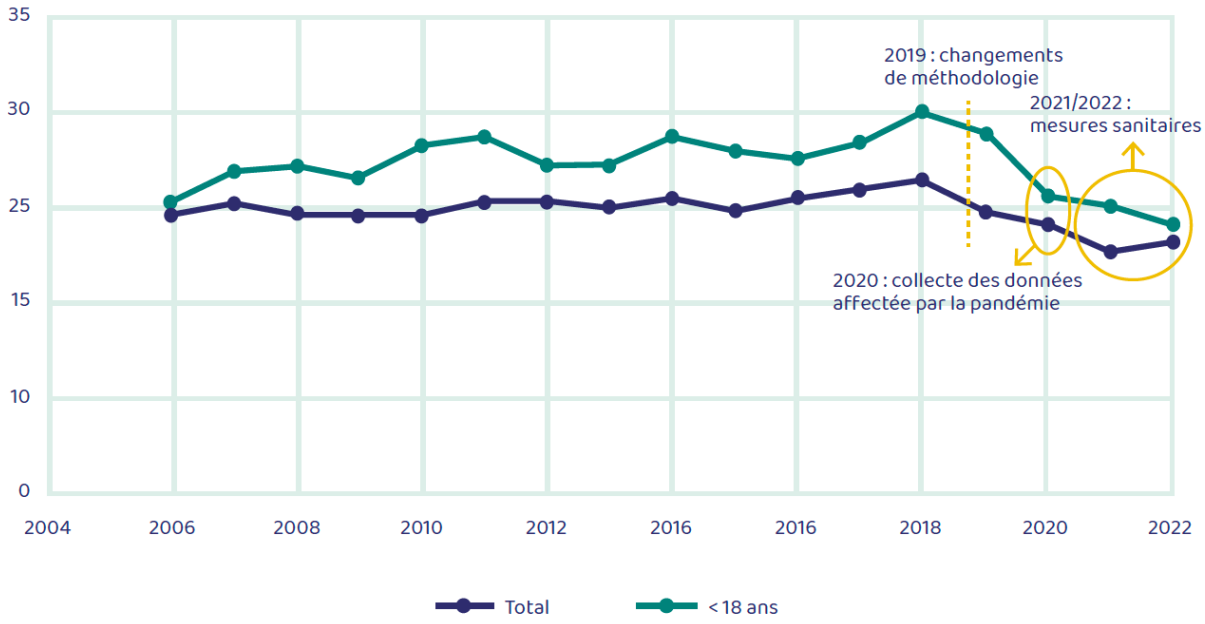
We know that the consequences of child poverty and deprivation last a life-time, and beyond. The 2021 data also show for the first time that child deprivation is associated in Belgium with health problems during childhood. This is a worrying finding, as it not only has very tangible short-term consequences for these children but can also have long-term repercussions for them as adults. The data also show that deprived children have proportionately more unmet medical needs, attend far fewer early childhood facilities, have more restricted social networks and are less able to benefit from informal childcare. Moreover, in Flanders in particular, there is a high likelihood that poverty and low SES status will be transmitted across generations, as upward mobility through the Flemish education system is all but cut off.

Trends Over Time in Flanders

Increasing child poverty and deprivation

Even though overall prosperity in Flanders has increased and today's parents are clearly better educated than those of 20 years ago (Franck & Nicaise, 2018b), inequality and child poverty in Flanders have increased systematically since the beginning of the millennium (Nicaise, Franck, & Cincinnato 2021). Cantillon reports that "For Flanders, we know that the 1990s marked a turning point in poverty trends. 1976-1985 was a period of pronounced levelling up: income poverty decreased significantly from 10% in 1976 to 6% in 1985. Between 1985 and 1992, the poverty risk remained stable at around 6%. Thereafter, an upward trend began that has lasted for three decades" (Cantillon 2022).

Figure 1: *Change in Monetary Poverty Rate for the Population and Children, (0-18), Belgium, 2006-2022, %*



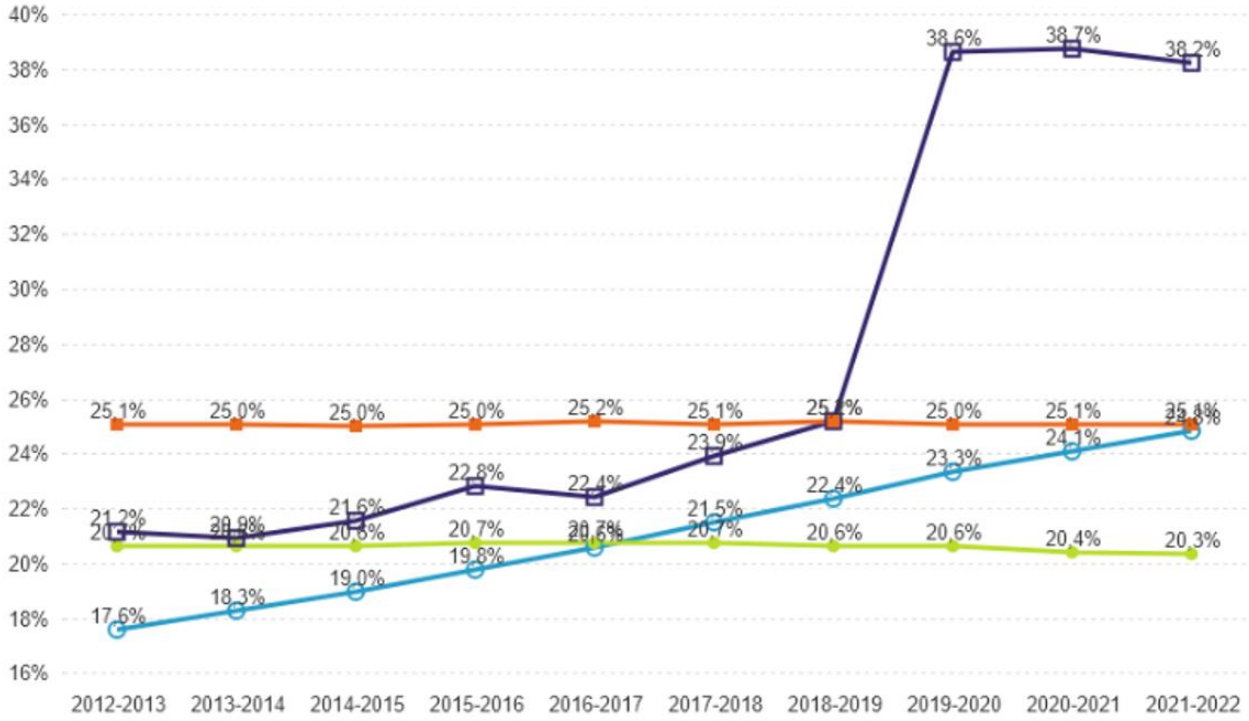
Source: Guio & Van Lancker 2023: EU-SILC 2005-2022, individual data, authors' calculations

Figure 1 shows that child poverty increased in all regions over the period 2005-2018, after which we see a decline. Before celebrating what appears to be a turning point, researchers caution that it is important to note that the data collection methodology for child poverty changed in 2019, particularly for income variables, and the effects of emergency income assistance programs during the pandemic could contribute to a temporary downward trend. The economic crisis of the global pandemic has evolved into an affordability crisis due to high inflation and the discontinuation of emergency government subsidies. Now, four years after the initial pandemic crisis, many families in Flanders (and across Europe) are experiencing insecurity in food, housing, and other basic necessities due to the climbing cost of living. Without changes in government intervention, we can expect to see rates of poverty continue to increase in years to come.

Changing student socio-economic characteristics

Compounding the growth in inequality and child poverty rates, we see changes in student socio-economic characteristics in Flanders over time. This graph shows a steady increase in non-native speakers in Flemish schools. The share of non-Dutch-speaking youngsters in education has more than doubled [since 2012], with an increasing concentration in the typical GOK schools" (Nicaise, Franck, & Cincinnato 2021). The OECD reported this year that "growth in the population of immigrants and their native-born children over the past decade has been among the fastest in the EU, outpacing that of the Netherlands, France and Germany, as well as Belgium as a whole" (OECD 2023). We also see a steady increase in schools grants for students over time. Note that the jump in entitlement to school grants, indicated by the purple line, is due to automation of rights since the 2019 reform. Nicaise et al. (2021) report that "the proportion of pupils from single-parent (with significantly higher risk of poverty) – not represented in this graph – has also risen sharply" (p. 9).

Figure 2: *Change in Student Characteristics 2012-2022, Flanders*



Source: Vlaanderen.be Dataloep

Public and Private Anti-Poverty Interventions

Anti-poverty social policies

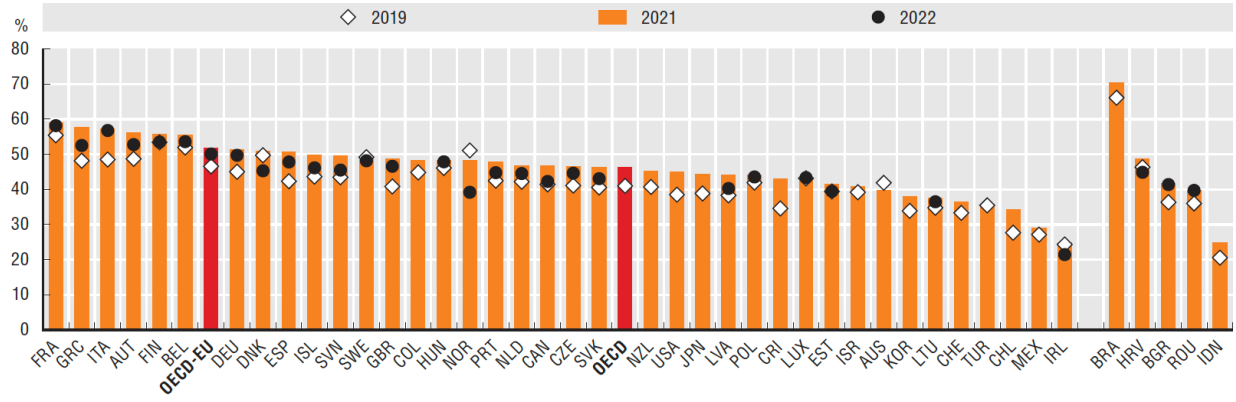
The Flemish government has demonstrated at least a discursive commitment to reducing poverty and inequality. An example is "Vision 2050", launched in 2016, that identifies seven crucial transitions for Flanders that underscore the importance of creating an inclusive, open, resilient, and internationally connected region (OECD 2019). They committed to reducing the

proportion of the Flemish population living in poverty by 30% and to reducing the number of children growing up in poverty by 50% between 2008 and 2020, goals that were far from met (Unia 2018). More recently, in September of 2020, the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health, Family and Poverty Reduction launched its Flemish Poverty Reduction Action Plan 2020-2024. Revealing an individualized, market neoliberal political ideology, they state: "The Flemish government is committed to activation, strengthening people and increasing self-reliance". They also state: "The Flemish government is setting up targeted actions against child poverty," yet the only mention in the strategy of working in or with schools is the increased spending in the school allowance: an increase of almost 36% from the 2018-2019 school year in 2020 due to the automatic allocation of the entitlement (as seen on the previous slide). Policy research suggests that such an approach will not lead to stated or manifest goals, revealing contradictory latent or implicit policy goals.

Government spending and redistribution overall

The welfare state was conceptualized to reduce cleavage between the rich and poor, and more specifically, to improve the living conditions of its most vulnerable members (Cantillon 2022). In all market economies, as in Belgium, the primary distribution of resources is the market – production and consumption markets. But the market is highly competitive and uneven, producing wide economic and social divides. It is widely accepted, even by economists of all stripes, that too much inequality and poverty is bad for economic growth and productivity. In a market economy, welfare states don't contradict capitalist market principles to deliver goods and services but rather modify and correct these market forces through re-distribution and pre-distribution laws and regulations (Van Lancker & Van den Heede 2021).

Figure 3: *General government expenditures as a percentage of GDP for 2019, 2021 and 2022*



Source: OECD National Accounts Statistics (database).

Belgium has an expensive and well-established social welfare system. Overall social expenditures in Belgium are almost 30% of its GDP, well above the OECD average. The Belgian welfare state reduces poverty by more than 50%.

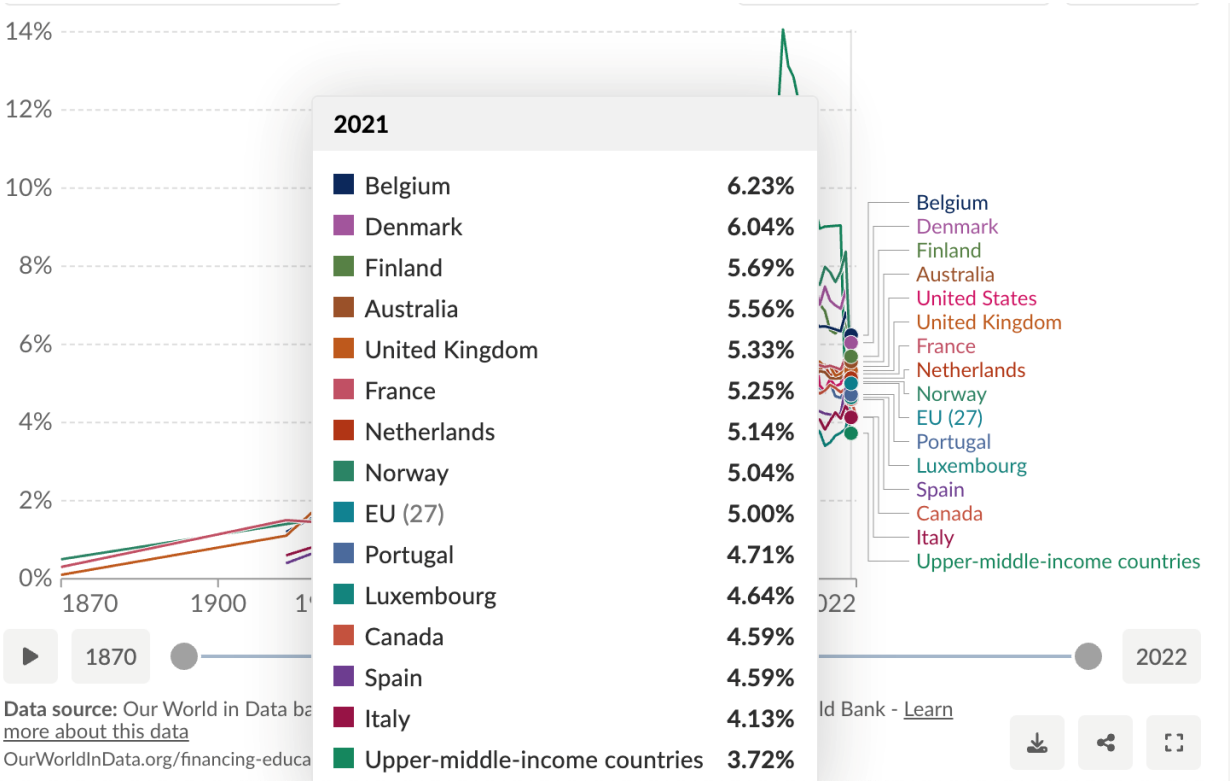
Yet, the redistributive capacity of the Belgian welfare state does not match its relatively generous social spending, owing in part to so-called Matthew effects, whereby social spending on human capital policies benefits first and foremost the middle and the higher income groups at the

expense of lower income groups. Specifically, the Belgian redistributive system is less able to shield workless families from poverty. The minimum income protection fails, and the poverty problem has increased (Van Lancker 2023).

Government spending and redistribution in education

Education as part of the social welfare system "is considered one of the most effective tools in fighting poverty and facilitating upward social mobility" (Franck & Nicaise 2022). Tax-financed public education may be viewed as a form of "active" redistribution since it is has the potential to reduce income inequality before taxes and transfers (Causa & Hermansen 2017). However, the emphasis on education as the best protection against poverty and inequality has not worked out in Flanders (Roets 2023, personal communication). Among 95 countries included in the database Our World in Data, the Belgian education system is the twelfth most expensive per primary student, at $10,767 US dollars in 2020.

Figure 4: *Total general government expenditure on education (all levels of government and all levels of education), given as a share of GDP*



Data for Belgium and Finland are very close for overall government spending on social welfare, public spending on education (all levels of government), and low levels of income inequality (Gini coefficient). In contrast, intergenerational educational persistence (or educational immobility across the generations) in Flanders is high – vastly different than Finland – and close to values for the UK. Despite relatively generous government spending, Flemish schools offer one of the lowest levels of social mobility at school among the 27 OECD countries that have participated in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since 2003

(Liu & Ding 2020; OECD 2023: 218). Furthermore, international assessment confirms the persistence of large inequalities in pupils' school trajectories and achievements in Flanders (Kostet, Clycq, & Verschraegen 2021; Nusche et al. 2015). When it comes to learning outcomes (PISA scores), countries such as Hungary and Czechia spend close to half per student and show similar learning outcome scores as Belgium.

Private sector poverty interventions

The private sector in Flanders is quite active in tackling poverty. More specifically, according to the Social Map (Sociale Kaart), 66 Flemish social non-government organizations focus on poverty and education. The daily activities of most groups are directed toward addressing immediate, practical needs of poor students, such as paying school bills, providing food, and offering homework guidance and tutoring.

The effects of charity are paradoxical, as well-intentioned individualized and selective interventions – or "people-change measures" – aim to "help" yet function to reinforce precisely uneven and unjust structures and processes, while propping up both neoliberal and neo-conservative political ideology and governments. While non-profit anti-poverty organisations do important work that makes a difference in the daily lives of those they serve, this growing "industry" inadvertently supports government withdrawal and abdication of public responsibility, trends adopted by both conservative and (increasingly) progressive governments in wealthy countries across the globe. The necessarily conserving consequences of the trend toward privatization (both for-profit and not-for-profit) of education and social welfare replaces a commitment to universalism and social care with exclusive and competitive access to public goods and human rights, and ultimately reproduces social and economic divides between and within individuals, communities, and nations. Perhaps more importantly, charity situates the responsibility for poverty squarely on the shoulders of individuals and their families who are poor, and permits the structural causes to remain unchallenged. At the very least, charity and advocacy must go hand-in-hand – charity to address immediate needs of individuals and families, and advocacy to promote the truth: that poverty is structural violence that tears at the fabric of societies and is detrimental for everyone, rather than personal failure that is a "private trouble" for only poor people.

A Welfare State Divided Against Itself

Contrary to the principles of collectivism and social protection that were originally at the heart of social welfare, we see quite a different political ideology underpinning the way in which the education system functions in Flanders. The highest value is placed on individual choice and freedom for parents and schools, resulting in a competitive market-place of segregated schools. This is market logic, which is so pervasive and familiar that it is often considered common sense. But when the primary distribution of resources and secondary distribution of resources are directed by the same market logic, the nonsense of this common sense is exposed. Not only is the redistribution capacity of public spending diminished, government funds and efforts function to reinforce rather than ameliorate the inequality and dispossession that is baked into markets. Thus, the intended social and economic benefits of the welfare state are severely undermined. As a case in point, the OECD cautions that policies and practices that ensure the highly unfavourable integration of non-EU immigrant women, refugees and youth with migrant parents "risk

compromising the potential of the economy, the society, and of the individuals themselves" (OECD 2023).

Additionally, research shows that the marketized education system does not work well for anyone, native-born and migrants alike. For example, in Flanders, migrants make up 29% of those with a low education, no more than level two of secondary education. In other words, the vast majority – 71% – of those whom the education system has failed and are much more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty are Belgian-born. Making it clear that migrants cannot be blamed for low education and low employment, the employment rate for low-educated migrants at 57% exceeds that of natives at 53% in Flanders.

At the other end of the spectrum, researchers found that students enrolled in the academic track in Flemish secondary schools have higher depressive feelings than students in the vocational track. This corroborates other international research (Yi, Fan, & Chang 2013) that discovered that highly competitive environments that are structurally embedded in the educational system can cause significant levels of depression for students in the academic track (Maene et al. 2022). Highly competitive and exclusionary social systems are designed to provoke envy, discontent, and anxiety, particularly for those who sit precariously at or near the top and have the most to lose.

Our analysis shows that the "market-place" of segregated and highly stratified schools, and "freedom of education" as it is operationalized in Flanders – free choice for those whose choices are not constrained by economic and social disadvantage, and a decentralised system that maintains school autonomy – oppose the relatively generous and effective social welfare system. The education system is a curious contradiction in political ideology and values. The social welfare state is thus divided against itself, and money and effort are squandered. The effects for students are profound, to which we now turn our attention.

Poverty in Education

The global context

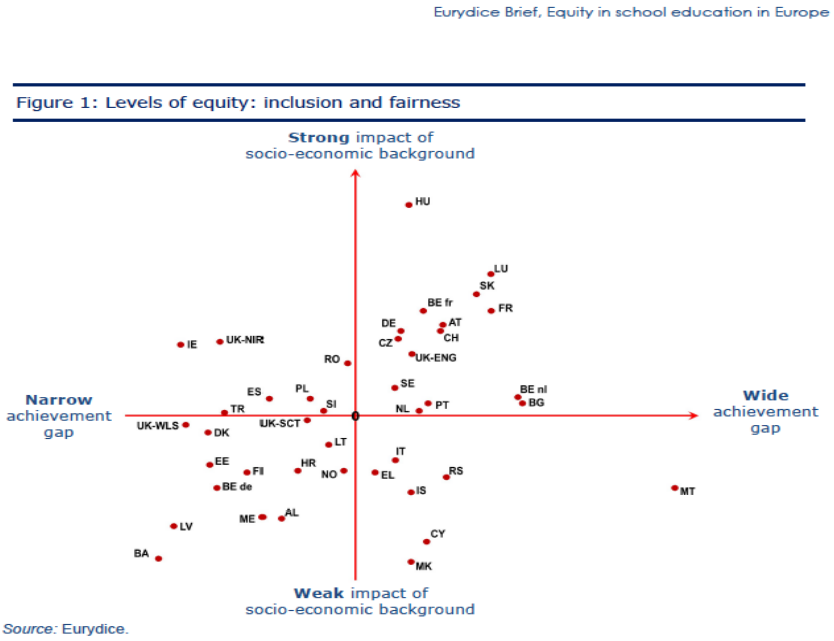
Inequality between the rich and poor in developed countries is at its highest level since the 1980s (OECD 2015). Oxfam (Riddell et al. 2024) reported that by the end of 2023, the wealth of the world's five richest billionaires has more than doubled since the start of this decade, while 60% (4.8 billion) of the people in the world have grown poorer. A toxic relationship between poverty and education failure persists across the globe despite the almost universal fantasy around meritocracy (the belief that educational outcome is a result of ability plus effort). There are now many decades of research into the negative impact of poverty on education. Pioneering studies from the United States (Mayer 1997) provided empirical evidence of an association between family income and children's outcomes (both during childhood and in adulthood). Other longitudinal evidence suggests that differences in family income early in a child's development affect educational and labour market outcomes across the life course (Carneiro & Heckman 2002; Gregg & Machin 2000). Furthermore, the impact of financial difficulties on children's cognitive and emotional functioning has also been shown to be one of the prominent risk factors persistent across childhood and early adolescence (Carozza et al. 2022). Examining the extent to which, at different stages of childhood and in later life, one's family income level interacts with educational prospects, international research shows us that:

- Being in poverty makes a difference in school readiness
- The poverty gap grows over the period of compulsory schooling
- Children who do badly at primary school are less likely to improve at secondary school if they are poor
- Young people growing up in poverty are less likely than others to go to university

International research makes clear the impact that poverty has throughout a child's schooling. But those in poverty are not a homogeneous group. The level and persistence of poverty has an influence on educational attainment. In addition, those who are young carers, along with those who have special educational needs, also do less well.

Flanders in comparative perspective

Figure 5: *Levels of equity in school education across Europe*



Although we need to be cautious in relation to measures of socio-economic categorisation used by the OECD, as discussed in an earlier section, in the Figure 5 above Flemish Belgium can be seen to have one of the widest achievement gaps in the OECD, and to have a relatively strong impact of social class (based on the PISA economic, social and cultural status, or ESCS, measure) on achievement unlike German-speaking Belgium. Research (Chmielewski 2019) which looked at achievement gaps in countries across the globe and mapped their development across a 50-year period found that Flanders had one of the largest increases in achievement gaps between those on low and high incomes, with a constantly rising trajectory over the period 1964 to 2015.

Figure 6: *League Table – Inequality Across Three Stages of Education*

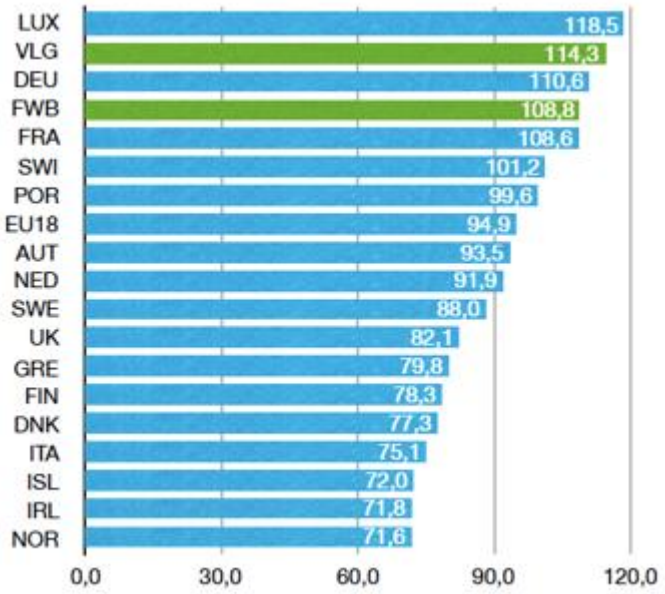
Rank	Country	Preschool (rank)	Primary School (rank)	Secondary School (rank)
1	Latvia	4=	2	1
2	Ireland	33	16	2
3	Spain	22	4	3
4	Denmark	17=	12	4
5	Estonia	31		5
6	Poland	4=	15	6
7	Croatia	24=		7
8	Japan	34		8
9	Canada	27	18	9
10	Slovenia	28	17	10
11	Finland	14	3	11
12	Portugal	8	8	12
13	Italy	15	6	13
14	Romania	39		14
15	Lithuania	1	13	15
16	United Kingdom	20	23	16
17	Republic of Korea	35		17
18	Switzerland	4=		18
19	Hungary	32	19	19
20	Norway	17=	7	20
21	Greece	29		21
22	Iceland	2=		22
23	Germany	23	20	23
24	United States	40	22	24
25	Sweden	16	11	25
26	Netherlands	10=	1	26
27	Czech Republic	38	10	27
28	Belgium	10=	9	28
29	Austria	10=	5	29
30	Australia	36	25	30
31	Cyprus	26		31
32	Slovakia	37	21	32
33	New Zealand	30	28	33
34	Luxembourg	13		34
35	France	2=	14	35
36	Israel	4=	27	36
37	Bulgaria	24=	26	37
38	Malta	17=	29	38
	Chile	21	24	
	Mexico	9		
	Turkey	41		

Note: A light blue background indicates a place in the top third of the ranking, medium blue denotes the middle third, and dark blue the bottom third.

In this OECD league table (figure 6) Belgium scores in the top third of the preschool and primary school rankings for countries doing well in relation to educational equality, but in the bottom third of the secondary school ranking. However, we need to question and investigate the extent to which this low ranking is connected to poverty, and whether it is linked to the way poverty is dealt within the Belgian educational system.

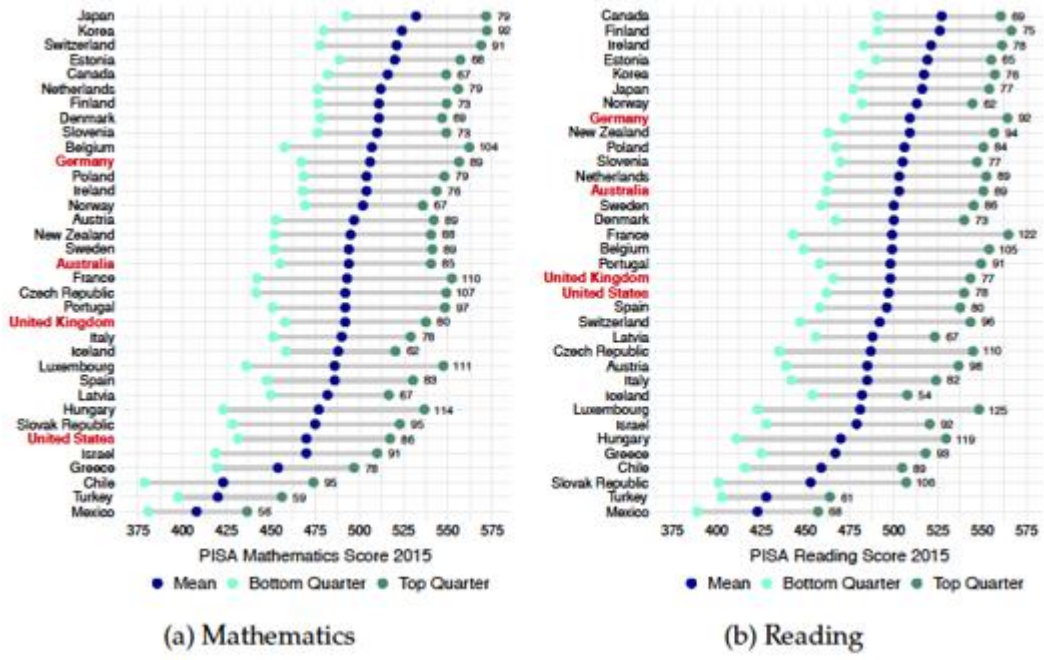
Figure 7 below from Hirtt (2020) based on the PISA 2018 results shows that Flanders is in the top 5 most unequal countries in terms of the gap in educational achievement between high and low SECS.

Figure 7: *Difference in PISA scores between top and bottom quartiles across OECD countries*



Relatedly, only 9% of Belgian students in the bottom income quartile (based on the HOMEPOS composite indicator) score in the top quarter of performance in reading, the fourth lowest share in the OECD (OECD 2019). Similarly, we can see from the figure 8 below, that while Belgium is doing comparatively well in terms of Maths and Reading scores, the attainment gaps between the bottom quartile and the top quartile are amongst the worst in OECD countries (Blanden et al. 2022: 8). The recent OECD (Schleicher 2023:19) report on PISA 2022 found that Flanders was one of 8 countries (out of 81) where the socio-economic attainment gap accounted for more than 20% of the variation in maths scores.

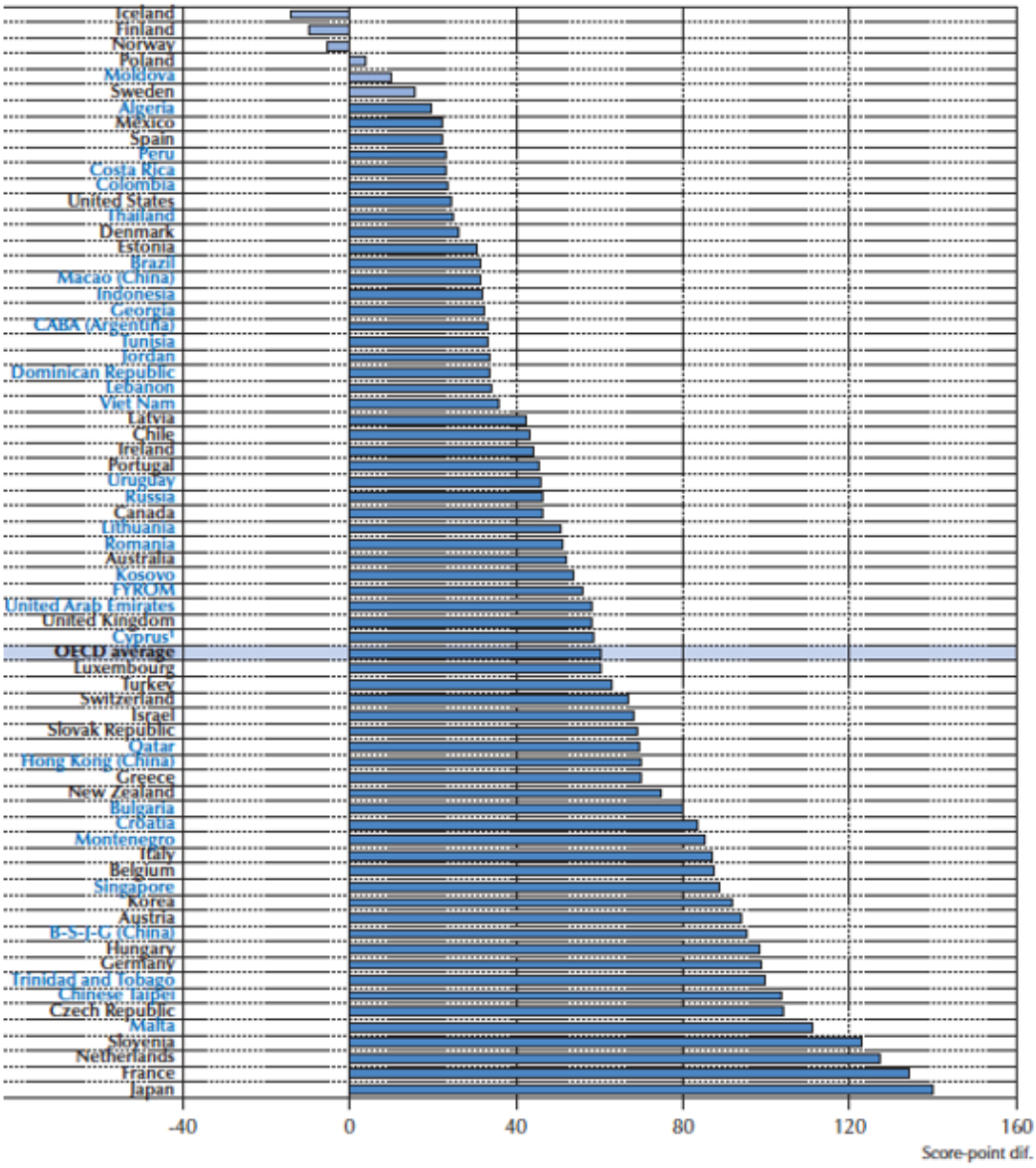
Figure 8: *PISA scores by country and socio-economic background*



(a) Mathematics (b) Reading

Blanden et al. (2022) conclude that children in the bottom income quartile are more than two years behind their peers in the top income quartile.

Figure 9: *Score-point difference in science among disadvantaged students associated with a one-unit increase in school socio-economic profile, after accounting for student socio-economic status*



1. See notes at the beginning of this chapter.

Note: Statistically significant score-point differences are shown in a darker tone.

Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of the change in performance associated with school socio-economic profile.

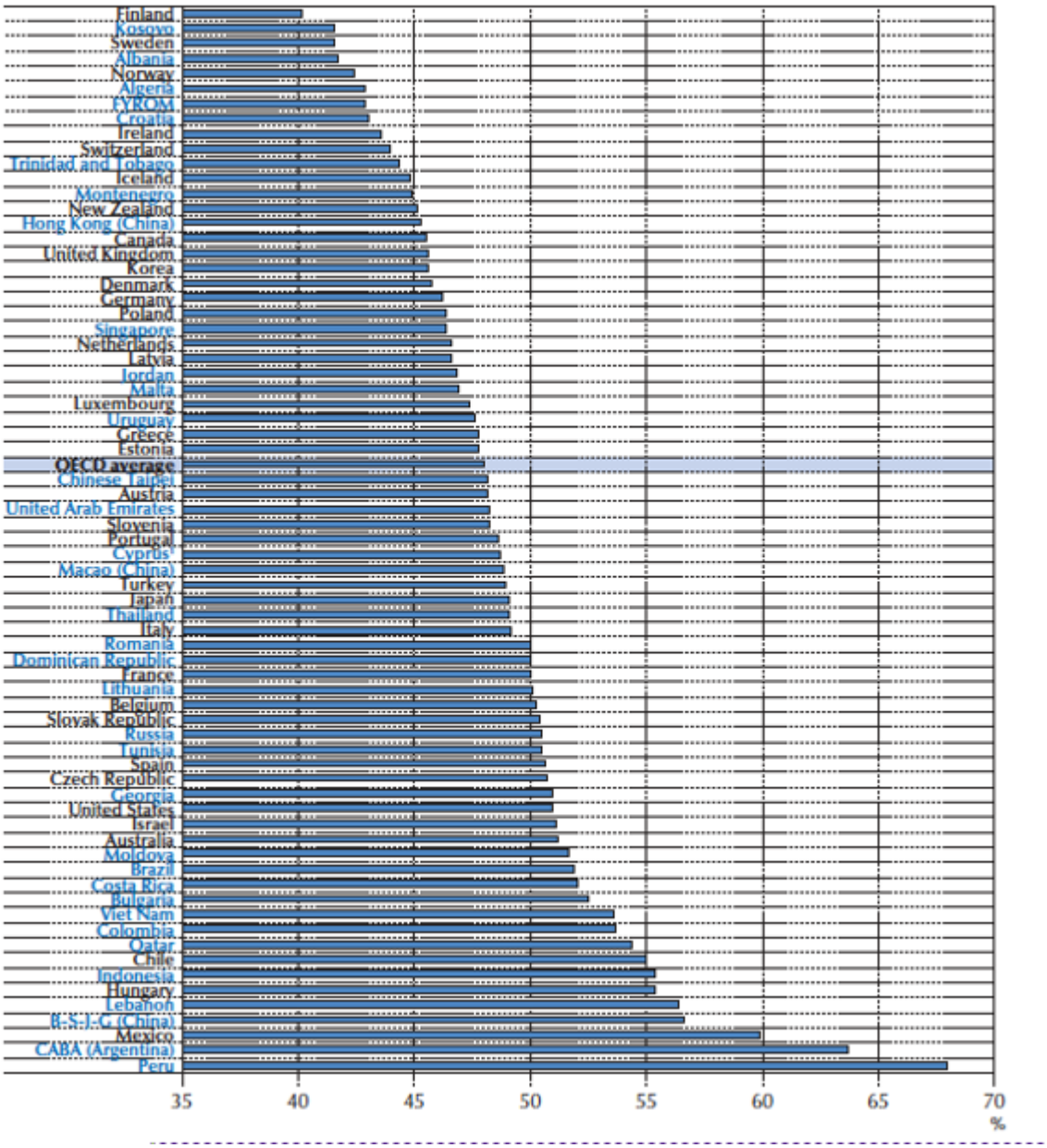
Source: OECD, PISA 2015 Database, Table 4.6b.

Here again, in figure 9, Belgium is shown to be performing poorly compared with the OECD average, with the performance of poor students being heavily dependent on the socio-economic profile of the school they attend.

Generally, across the OECD, child poverty and unequal educational opportunities are inextricably linked. Children's educational prospects reflect the disadvantages of their families. Those

whose parents have low qualifications and no or low-status jobs, who live in inadequate housing and in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, are less likely to gain good qualifications themselves at school. Furthermore, it appears from the data that Flanders is not particularly good at enabling children growing up in poverty to succeed educationally when compared to other OECD countries. In particular, Flanders has high concentrations of disadvantaged students in certain schools, as figure 10 below demonstrates, when research shows that social mix is crucial to enabling all students to succeed educationally.

Figure 10: *Percentage of disadvantaged pupils in disadvantaged schools across OECD countries*



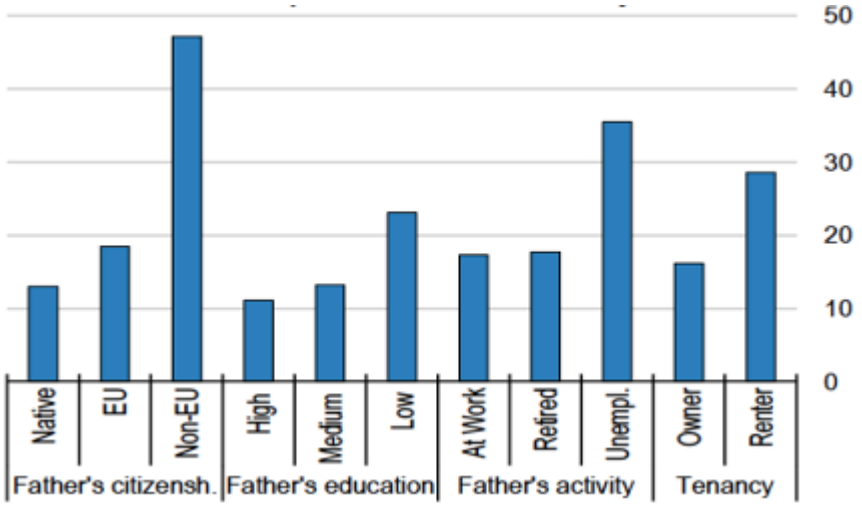
As previously discussed, an informed and concise understanding of the relationship between poverty and education is undermined by the range of terminology that is frequently used. Sometimes statistics refer to upper and lower socio-economic deciles or quintiles, at other times the term disadvantaged is used. There are however, considerable overlaps between disadvantaged and poor in the Flanders context. According to the Flemish decree on equal opportunities in education (Vlaams Parlement 2002, B.S.14-9-2002), since 2002, the criteria for considering a pupil as disadvantaged have been: the family has a low income and/or the mother has no degree of secondary education or equivalent and/or the child is residing outside the family and/or the parents belong to the itinerant population and/or the home language is not Dutch. It is important to note that the language criterion only counts in combination with one or more of the other criteria. The table above on the concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools reinforces the earlier table, showing that poor students are more likely to be in schools with other poor students than the OECD average. Part of the reason are the growing levels of residential segregation, particularly in the larger cities like Brussels, Antwerp and Liege (Costa & de Valk 2018). Behind the focus on poverty, this is also an issue of race, with low income migrants socially isolated in specific areas of cities.

The intersection of inequality and migration background

While 6% of Flemish children of European descent are at risk of poverty, the poverty risk rate among Flemish children of non-EU descent is as high as 36% (Kind en Gezin 2018). PISA results show that inequality between Flemish schools with regard to academic attainment is one of the highest in comparison to other OECD countries. Socio-economic and immigrant status continue to be strong predictors of students' achievement. In 2018, the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) explained 17% of Flemish students' performance in reading, compared to 12% on average across the OECD. Socio-economic status related even more strongly to students' mathematics or science outcomes. It explained more than 20% of variance in students' performance in these subjects in contrast to an OECD average of 14% in mathematics and 13% in science (OECD 2019). But in all subjects, migration background (a proxy for race) compounded the disadvantages of low socio-economic status. Flanders has one of the highest achievement gaps between ethnic minority and majority students compared with other OECD countries (Hagenaars et al. 2023).

As Kostet et al. (2021) argue, the achievement gap between native and non-native children among the OECD countries "is almost nowhere as strong as in Flanders" (p. 585). In 2017, 17.1% of the Flemish population were migrants of which 9.31% are from non-EU countries (Statistiek Vlaanderen). Suggesting racial patterns, in recent statistics from the OECD (2022a) (see figure 11 below), the poverty risk for a young person aged 14 was 47% if they had a father with non-EU citizenship as opposed to 13% for children of native Belgians. (The OECD defines poverty risk as the percentage chance a child has of their family falling below the poverty line of half the median household income of the total national population https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm).

Figure 11: *Poverty risk by household characteristics when respondent was around 14 years old*



(From OECD 2022a)

The Maghrebi and Sub-Saharan group are the two largest non-European migration groups to move to Belgium in the post-war period. It is these migrants from non-EU countries who are at the greatest risk of poverty. So, it is vital to have comprehensive statistics on their educational achievement but also their school experiences. This data suggests that race (and racism) is intertwined with poverty in Flemish schooling. The impact of discrimination was evident in a study by Baysu et al. (2018) who found there were significant achievement gaps in results in PISA standardized performance tests between Turkish first and second-generation immigrants and natives in Belgium, even after controlling for their family background. More recently, Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) found that:

> "In Flanders, students with a migration background are highly overrepresented in the lower-status vocational and technical tracks, experience more grade retention and school and track mobility and have a higher risk of leaving school early than their native peers" (p. 428).

Data from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2018) revealed that that 57% of those who do not have Dutch as their main home language have experienced at least one year of grade retention, whereas this drops to 26% among the students whose home language is Dutch. Similarly, 23.6% of the former leave school early compared to 7.7% of the latter.

This intersectionality of migration and inequality is also evident in the statistics on young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), although the percentage of NEETs in Belgium, and particularly in Flanders, is relatively low compared to other OECD countries. In 2021 the percentage of 18 to 24 year olds in the NEET category was 12% compared to an OECD average of 16% (OECD 2022b). Since then, the percentage has been dropping in Flanders. Recent research in Brussels (Andre & Crosby 2023: 8) found NEETS were predominantly ethnic minority, and overwhelmingly poor. They were also much more likely than young people who were not in the NEET category to feel they were not Belgian – that they did not belong to Belgian society and faced discrimination. Andre and Crosby concluded that mainstream Belgian society was "insidiously

hostile" to this group of poor young ethnic minority people. Their experiences indicate that they are dealing with racism in wider Belgian society.

Yet, despite the barriers they face, young people from a migration background are making striking improvements against the odds. As Nicaise et al. (2021: 9) conclude, "it is non-EU immigrants who have made the greatest progress". Between 2003 and 2018 their risk of early school leaving more than halved from 26% to 12.5%. But, since 2019 that risk has been increasing, particularly in the urban conurbations where most ethnic minorities live (communication with Brecht Demeulenaere 2023). Yet, over the same period their probability of entering higher education rose from just over 20% to just over 30%, as opposed to poor young people of native parentage, whose chances of going to higher education hardly increased at all over the same period (OECD 2023a). The possible explanations for such unexpected results could lie in a number of causes. First, as in other EU countries, different ethnic groups living in poverty have very different relationships to the educational system. Native white Flemish families often bring a collective memory of educational subordination and marginalisation to Flemish schooling going back over many generations. But also, although ethnic groups are often impoverished in Flanders, they may have resources of cultural and social capital inherited from their country of origin that native white Flemish families in poverty do not possess. This enables them to draw on family histories of educational achievement in their countries of origin, despite the economic impoverishment and downward mobility that migration often brings. They may lack economic capital but they are more likely than their white peers to have reserves of social and cultural capital. Other ethnic groups, despite a lack of educational credentials, bring a strong conviction that a fresh start in a new educational system will provide crucial opportunities for educational advancement that were denied to their parents.

It is also important to consider the impact of geography on the educational possibilities open to different ethnic groupings among the poor. Very high percentages of ethnic minorities live in either Brussels or Antwerp. Unlike their contemporaries in much of the rest of the country, young people in these two cities can see myriad economic opportunities all around them. Like all major cities across the globe, Brussels and Antwerp have a widening participation infrastructure, including partnerships between schools and the private and charity sectors, that exceeds networks and support found in other parts of the country. This sophisticated infrastructure, combined with the cities' high economic capital, enables systems of support intent on driving aspirations to universities and professional careers, that are relatively lacking in the rest of the country.

However, despite a degree of success, there is no space for complacency. Flanders remains an educational system with one of the highest achievement gaps between native students and students with a migration background (Jacobs & Danhier 2017; Unia 2018). This gap persists down the generations with Flemish born children of migrants also under-performing. We also need to consider how ethnic minority students experience Flemish education. D'hondt et al. (2015) found in their large-scale study that in secondary school, 27.5% of students experience ethnic discrimination by teachers and 25.5% by their peers, with students of Moroccan and Turkish descent, the largest non-Western immigrant groups in Flanders, experiencing the most discrimination (Vandezande et al. 2009).

Early years education

Commenting on the growth of child poverty, Noel Slangen, President of the Flemish Child Poverty Fund, stated that "A child growing up in poverty is already two months behind a child from a middle-class family on their first birthday. By the time the child is three years old, that lag could be as

much as ten months" (Walker 2023b).

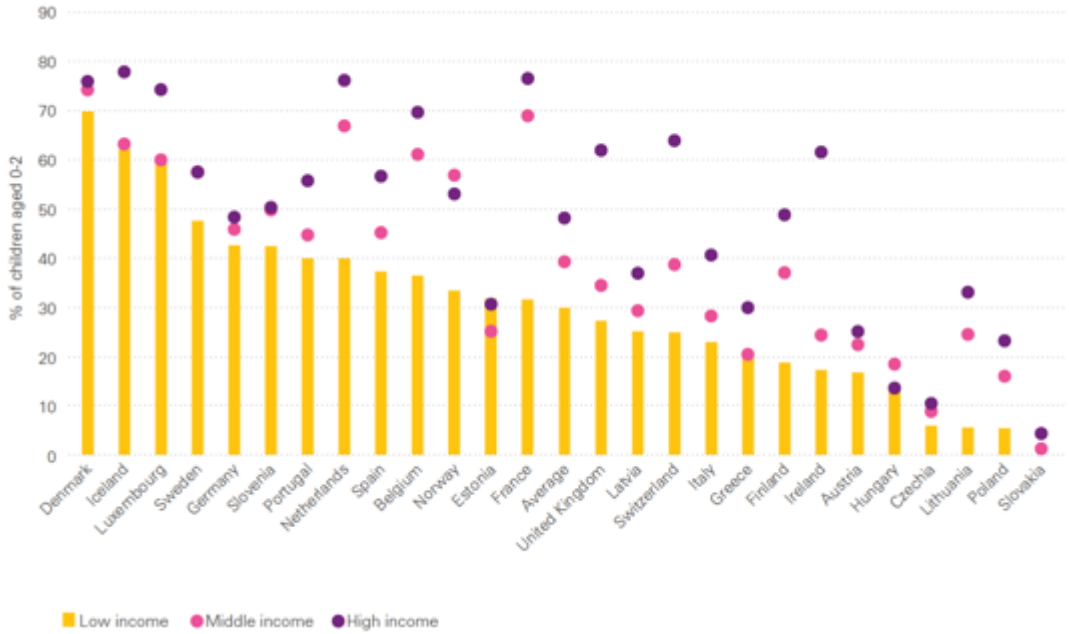
Early years education is generally viewed as providing powerful equalizing opportunities for children growing up in poverty. Belgium is one of only five rich nations, out of the 26 surveyed, that provide free access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education for children under 3 (Gromada & Richardson 2021). The United Nations Belgium Review (2017) reported almost universal participation in free pre-primary education. Research focusing specifically on Flanders (DOV 2016), that examined equity benefits related to immigrant status, found advantages of regular universal pre-school attendance for two-year-old children with a non-European Union (EU) nationality. Migrant children who attended early years education showed a decreased grade retention rate at age eight in comparison to EU or Flemish children. However, more recent research by Sierens et al. (2020) found little gain for children growing up in poverty, arguing that the 'schoolified' pedagogical approach of Flemish pre-school where children are taught in formalised learning environments (Van Laere 2017) and the relatively large groups in which they were taught both deterred any equity gains. The benefits of universal free early years education appear to be largely cancelled out by the inappropriate pedagogic approach, and the insufficient educational support for children in poverty. Suggesting that a more caring and less formal approach may be more effective, Sierens et al. (2020) conclude that "the relationship between 'schoolification' of pre-school education and striving for more educational equity is at odds" (p. 279).

However, research also shows that, as in a majority of other nations, take up is lower among the poor and in particular those from a migrant background, than among higher income groups (see figure 12 below). Children who attend pre-school less frequently often live in deprived urban neighbourhoods, frequently speak another language than Dutch at home or have a mother with limited education (Crevits 2016). According to Gromada and Richardson (2021), less than 40% of low income families are able to take advantage of the provision compared to over 70% of high income groups. The lack of available places in neighbourhoods where families in poverty live is one of the main barriers to access (Ionescu et al. 2023). Additionally, the Flemish childcare sector is comprised primarily of Dutch-speaking providers with staff and policies to support a foreign home language the exception rather than the rule (Janssen et al. 2021). It appears that Education ministers generally believe that social inequality in education is mainly caused by the alleged linguistic deficiencies of immigrant students (Crevits 2014) in the absence of substantial scientific evidence for such beliefs (Agirdag & Vanlaar 2018). Unsurprisingly, Flemish research (Peleman et al. 2020) has found that the home languages of immigrant children were not valued in early years settings. In contrast to the views of ministers, academic evidence (Cummins 2021) shows that 'a solid basis in a home language, even when this is spoken exclusively during the early years, provides an excellent (and sufficient) foundation for learning a later institutional language.

Flemish research (Peleman et al. 2020) that focused on the learning experiences of eight, ethnically diverse children in poverty entering pre-primary education in four different early years settings, and followed their progress for one year, paints a sobering picture. As the researchers describe: "the focal children were hardly addressed by the teacher, they had very few utterances towards the teacher, and they had even fewer verbal interactions with their peers" (p. 26). During circle time and snack time utterances to and from the focal children were even scarcer. Circle time was the activity with the least utterances (Peleman et al. 2020). The researchers also found that although seven of the eight focal children were multilingual, the language input of the teachers was almost exclusively Dutch, and that any feedback was directed at behaviour rather than educational learning.

They conclude that that mere attendance at preschool might reproduce or even increase existing inequalities.

Figure 12: *Participation rates in early childhood education and care of children under 3, by income level*



Source: OECD 2020

Parental choice

The combination of specific school admissions policies, the characteristics of residential segregation and the specific rationalities of educational demand are key to understanding questions such as how schools differentiate themselves from their 'competitors' and how families make their choices (Bonal & Motos 2023:2). Globally the impact of the introduction of parental choice of school has been to increase divisions between social class and ethnic groups (e.g., Botermann 2019). If given the choice a majority of the white, middle classes choose to send their children to schools with a majority of children like their own (Reay 2008; Reay et al. 2011). In addition, the unequal availability of the principle of school choice has detrimental consequences for students growing up in poverty. This negative impact has been particularly detrimental in the Flemish educational system which is characterised by a high degree of school choice (Franck & Nicaise 2018). The strong focus on the right to choose overlooks the extent to which different degrees of choice depend on levels of family resources – social, economic and cultural. As Verhoeven et al. (2022) point out, an upper tier of elite schools has emerged within local education markets in Flanders, producing a hierarchical, highly complex system that is opaque and difficult to decipher, especially for parents such as those dealing with poverty who lack dominant cultural capital. Furthermore, beneath the rhetorical right to choose any school are hidden barriers which filter out, in particular, poor families because certain schools impose charges for school materials, services and activities (Tourne et al. 2021). The costs of sending a child to the more privileged schools is often an obstacle for families in poverty (OECD 2023b).

Also in the Flemish context, choice too often becomes a way of choosing against those who are different to oneself. As a consequence, Flanders, along with Hungary, has the worst levels of school polarisation, between different income groups, in Europe (Hirtt et al. 2013). Such polarisation penalises students growing up in poverty, with the OECD (2023) pointing out that 'the penalty extends to nearly two years of schooling for pupils in the highest quartile of poverty concentration, the highest gap in the OECD. While 25% of this penalty can be attributed to language spoken at home together with mothers' levels of education, according to the OECD 75% is caused by poverty. The OECD report (2023) concludes that, in Flanders, unlike many other rich nations, it is the overall concentration of pupils growing up in poverty that matters, rather than the individual characteristics of pupils, such as the language they speak at home or their mother's level of education.

Perversely, policies originally enacted to enable equal educational opportunities, and prevent schools from selecting their pupils, have resulted in growing levels of school segregation (Nicaise et al. 2021). The GOK-decree of 2002, which introduced the right to enrol, was later reinforced in 2012 by an enrolment decree which attempted to promote social mix in schools through governmental oversight of school choice processes. However, school choice remains largely unregulated (Gonne 2022). Under both policies, despite their good intentions, white, middle-class preferences to send their children to white middle-class schools have not been deterred, but rather gained in momentum. Instead of strengthening the position of poor and immigrant parents so that schools could no longer discriminate against them, as Nicaise et al. (2021) point out, "disadvantaged parents are less well informed about their rights, about enrolment procedures, and about quality differences between schools" (p. 4). UK research (Gewirtz et al. 1995; Reay et al. 2011) also shows that the poorest students (in the UK context, those who qualify for free school meals) are less likely than their privileged peers to engage in choice processes, valuing having a local 'good' school for their children over having a choice of schools.

Free school choice has had a particularly damaging impact on children growing up in poverty in the Flemish context. Yet, the most recent policy initiative will see the removal of a double quota system in secondary schools which placed a responsibility on schools to take in a specified proportion of disadvantaged students. The double quota allocation system was introduced in 2012 to improve the social mix in schools (OECD 2023a). The objective was to ensure that schools' social mix reflected that of the neighbourhood. Two groups of pupils qualified for the double quota: pupils disadvantaged on the grounds of their mother's education and those qualifying for disadvantaged school allowance on the basis of family income. A percentage of school places had to be kept available for these two categories of pupils. However, in 2022 the Flemish Government introduced the new *Enrolment Act.* The double quota system was abolished on the basis that it undermined the principle of freedom of school choice. The new Act still provides for the possibility of keeping up to 20% of the available places in schools free for "underrepresented groups" but allows local authorities to decide whether and how to implement. The new system, set to start in 2023/4, will allow schools to set their own criteria for enrolling disadvantaged students, and is likely to adversely affect the diversity of the social mix in schools.

Based on experience in the UK, and the on-going work of Burgess et al. (2023), this is unlikely to work. Their research found that although English schools are allowed to prioritise students growing up in poverty, only 5% do so, and most of those 5% are grammar schools that impose an entry exam. Without regulation, the most disadvantaged groups in society, including those in poverty and/or ethnic minority students, are left with the choices the advantaged do not want. Relatedly, it is crucial to maintain socially mixed schools as it both improves poor students' educational outcomes and provides

the best environment to develop all students into democratic and tolerant citizens. The OECD (2010) found that increasing the social mix within schools boosts the performance of students from low income families without any apparent negative effect on overall performance, while recent Norwegian research (Cattan et al. 2023b) found that mixing with children from more affluent families improves the life chances of lower income children.

Having an emphasis on parental choice as an underpinning tenet of the Flemish educational system has clearly not worked for those who are most disadvantaged in Flemish society, while the removal of the double quota system will inevitably worsen the educational experiences and choices of those who are poor.

The advantaged in society will always actively work to ensure that their own children's opportunities are qualitatively superior to other children's, even turning so called socially just reforms to their advantage. However, more generally there needs to be a focus on the relational nature of poverty – to move beyond the prevailing view that poverty is the responsibility of the poor and recognise that the behaviour and attitudes of the privileged, including their preferred choices, have a bearing. As Merry (2023) concludes:

> "the scale of our current challenges vis-à-vis educational inequity is likely more insurmountable than many of us may want to believe. Indeed, the difficulties are so intractable that to oppose educational inequity in principle does not absolve equity-minded parents from colluding in its reproduction in practice" (p. 17).

Educational segregation and polarization

The promotion of school choice as a preferred policy has implications for levels of segregation in educational systems, and is compounded by early tracking. Europe-wide research (Gutiérrez et al. 2020) has demonstrated how between-school segregation varies significantly across countries, with high levels of segregation occurring in central European nations that 'track' children into different schools, and much lower levels in Scandinavia. Thus, school choice, together with tracking, has resulted in the growing concentration of poverty in specific schools in Flanders, and other rich countries, such as the US. The problem of educational segregation is likely to be exacerbated in Flanders. From 2000 to 2014, the aim of mixing and countering segregation (particularly of pupils with different mother tongues) was a policy initiative. However, more recently, the Flemish government announced plans to discontinue its anti-segregation measures in primary and secondary education (Westerveen et al. 2022).

The OECD (2018) found that disadvantaged students who attended schools with predominantly low income pupils were almost two years behind their disadvantaged peers who attended predominantly middle-class schools. Academic research in Flanders is already analysing the educational system in terms of rich and poor schools in regard to the economic levels of school catchment areas (Poesen-Vandeputte & Nicaise 2014). However, it is more difficult to ascertain the extent to which a resource divide is opening up between predominantly rich schools and those that are predominantly poor. What is clear is that the high concentration of poor students in poor schools in Flanders has resulted in unacceptable levels of educational polarization and segregation. Havermans et al. (2018) found the educational landscape in Flanders remains very segregated compared to similar educational systems. Segregation by wealth and income level is compounded by ethnicity and migrant status. In 2021-22, nearly 40% of the students with a home language other than Dutch were concentrated in just 10% of the secondary schools (OECD 2023a).

Bourabain et al. (2020) argue that some of the increasing segregation is caused by the gate-keeping behaviour of principals, leading to systemic ethnic and class discrimination in the enrolment procedure. They argue that it is essential to make the enrolment procedure more transparent.

However, we also need to look behind the assumptions and motivations that mean in the Flemish context parental choice results in educational segregation. Key is the often unarticulated belief that some children are 'brighter' than others. The damaging, differential treatment of children in Flemish schools is, in part, due to the popular judgments of more powerful others, that they are stupid or dull. Most parents and teachers believe, to varying degrees, that intelligence is innate and influenced by perceived social class and race, and judge children accordingly. The doctrine of innate intelligence may be powerfully challenged within scientific circles (Betthauser et al. 2020) but it still holds sway in the minds of the majority. So, for example, it has an impact on whether Flemish pupils are guided towards the A or B track on entry to secondary school (Nicaise 2019). The complex pathways of development of different children in different economic circumstances are ignored, buried under the expectation that children should meet the same developmental targets at the same time, but often without the support and resources that would make that possible. It is essential to move beyond narrow class and racial binaries in how intelligence is perceived in children to a recognition that all children, and in particular ethnically diverse children growing up in poverty, can achieve more if the Flemish educational system would enable them to flourish. This would entail a school admissions policy that does not allow parents to choose against the ethnic and poor 'other', but values and promotes social mix.

The negative impact of tracking

The same pernicious view on intelligence, that positions poor children as undesirable classmates clustered in undesirable schools, also underpins attitudes to ability grouping, and the perpetuation of tracking in Flemish secondary schooling. Flanders has traditionally had a system of two-stage tracking. The first stage of tracking occurs at age 12 when students are tracked into two separate instructional programmes (Gonne 2022). The second set of tracking happens at age 14 when students are tracked into one of four different pathways. However, current reforms have been instituted with the aim of both delaying tracking and reducing the number of tracks. Yet as Gonne (2022) argues, despite the reforms, the risk of tracking at age 12 remains.

Figure 13: *Between-school tracking status according to age and grade across OECD countries*

Country	Tracking age	Tracking grade	Tracked	Country	Tracking age	Tracking grade	Tracked
Abu Dhabi, ARE	15	9		Kuwait	18	12	
Alberta, CAN	18	12		Latvia	16	9	
Algeria	15.5	9		Lithuania	15	8	
Argentina	15	9		Luxembourg	12	6	Yes
Armenia	15	9		Macedonia	15	8	
Australia	16	10		Malta	16	11	
Austria	10	4	Yes	Moldova	15	10	
Bahrain	15	9		Mongolia	16	8	
Flanders, BEL	12	6	Yes	Morocco	15	9	
Brit. Col., CAN	18	12		Netherlands	12	6	Yes
B. Aires, ARG	12	6	Yes	New Zealand	16	11	
Bulgaria	14	7	Yes	Norway	16	10	
Canada	18	12		Oman	16	10	
Chile	16	10		Ontario, CAN	18	12	
Colombia	15	9		Philippines	16	10	
Croatia	15	8		Poland	15	9	
Cyprus	15	9		Portugal	15	9	
Czech Republic	11	5	Yes	Qatar	15	9	
Denmark	16	10		Quebec, CAN	18	12	
Dubai, UAE	15	9		Romania	14	8	Yes[a]
El Salvador	16	9		Russian Fed.	15	9	
England	16	11		Saudi Arabia	15	9	
Finland	16	9		Scotland	16	11	
France	15	9		Serbia	15	8	
Georgia	15	9		Singapore	12	6	Yes
Germany	10	4	Yes	Slovakia	10	4	Yes
Greece	15	9		Slovenia	15	9	
Hong Kong	16	11		Spain	15	9	
Hungary	10	4	Yes	Sweden	16	9	
Iceland	16	10		Taiwan	15	9	
Indonesia	16	9		Thailand	15	9	
Iran	15	9		Trinidad & Tob.	11	5	Yes
Ireland	12	6	Yes	Tunisia	16	10	
Israel	15	10		Turkey	14	8	Yes[a]
Italy	14	8	Yes[a]	Ukraine	15.5	9	
Japan	15	9		Un. Arab Emir.	15	9	
Kazakhstan	15	9		United States	18	12	
Korea	14	9	Yes[a]				

[a] *Note.* A Country is considered a tracked secondary school system in PISA analyses but an untracked system in TIMSS Pop. B analyses. Tracking age reflects the modus age in the grade after tracking takes place. Tracking grade depicts the grade after which the first between-school differentiation takes place in each country or region (i.e., the last year in which students are still in an untracked system). Source: Strello et al. (2021).

As we can see in the table above, in Flanders, children are tracked at an earlier age than in most other countries, and it is poor children, in particular, who are disproportionately allocated to vocational tracks. Yet, international research shows that students growing up in poverty benefit from having advantaged schoolmates (Benito, Alegre, & Gonz`alez-Balletb`o 2014), while early tracking has been shown to increase achievement gaps between social groups (Strello et al. 2022; Lavrijsen & Nicaise 2015; van de Werfhorst & Mijs 2010; van de Werfhorst 2018).

Drawing on PISA 2012 data including 128,110 15-year-olds in 24 countries, and using schools' socio-economic status as a measure of economic inequality, Mijs (2016) showed that the children in the lowest income groups were the most likely to infer that achievement is driven primarily by effort and ability. Compared to children in a mixed-ability track, children in a vocational or academic track were more likely to blame their failure on their low ability rather than external factors. This effect was most pronounced in countries like Flanders with rigid between-school tracking where children are sorted from a young age into hierarchically ordered schools or classrooms for their full curriculum.

Work by Van Houtte and colleagues (2008; 2010; 2015) in the Flanders context has consistently shown that tracking contributes to social reproduction, discriminates against poor students, and

amplifies class inequalities. Recent research by Dockx (2018) confirms findings from these earlier studies, and shows that lower track students have higher unemployment in the long-term and thus a higher risk of poverty. In theory, students (along with their parents) are free to choose their track. However research shows (Boone & Van Houtte 2013; Unia 2018) that in reality teachers guide students growing up in poverty, and those with migrant parents to the lower tracks. Moreover, movement is nearly always downward, with the Flemish system renowned for its frequent down-streaming and the absence of upstreaming students (OECD 2023a).

Tracking also impacts learner identity and sense of well-being. As well as creating hierarchies of worth among children, dividing them into winners and losers on the basis of perceived ability, tracking also leads to the children in the lower tracks internalising a sense that they have little educational value. Further research by Boone and Van Houtte (2013) found that 69% of the 390 teachers surveyed based their judgments on spurious criteria such as student behaviour and attitudes when forming track recommendations.

Research is increasingly uncovering the emotional impact of school practices that ability group in the way tracking does in the Flemish context (Francis et al. 2017; McGillicuddy 2021; Quick 2022). Recent research (Bradbury 2021; Hargreaves et al. 2022; Quick 2022) reveals the hard emotional work children growing up in poverty have to engage in to feel they are acceptable as learners. Alice Bradbury's (2021: 45) research found that children seen to be 'high ability' were asked more challenging questions, and allowed greater flexibility in terms of conduct and behaviour, while children seen to be 'lower ability' were criticised for their lack of effort, and allowed to focus on just one activity for a long period of time. Quick's (2022: 308) research, with four working class, ethnically diverse primary aged children, uncovered the shame and cruelty they were subject to as children seen to be low attainers. She writes about the intensity and enormous scale of the emotional work they were doing on themselves in order to feel valued and valuable. Quick (2022) concluded that allocation to lower sets and tracks result in a sense of academic failure with serious implications for students' well-being. Such students "feel stigmatised, and this stigmatisation is painful". Similar feelings of shame and worthlessness are strong risks in the Flanders context where social stigma is attached to vocational tracks which are generally viewed as academically inferior (Spruyt et al. 2015).

The associated stigma is evident in Van Caudenberg et al.'s (2020:437) qualitative study of what they call "the socio-ethnically segregated educational landscape" of Flemish secondary schooling. Their sample of migrant families all had lower-educated parents who mostly held low-income jobs or were unemployed. They quote the poignant words of Youssef:

> "I think if you, if you, like, have no money, you can't do anything there in that humaniora [old name for academic track, commonly associated with prestigious schools]. Really, take it from me. I went there, you can't do anything there. (. . .) Honestly in the humaniora, there were rich babies. They come to school with €100, €200 pocket money. (. . .) For them, we're way too low of course" (Van Caudenberg et al. 2020: 437).

Yussef was positioned as an excluded outsider in the humaniora, unable to develop any sense of belonging. He commented "I didn't feel at home there". As a consequence, after one year, Youssef returned to his working class neighbourhood and started his second year of secondary education in a less prestigious school in the technical track, before finding himself in the fourth year of secondary education, entering the vocational track. Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) conclude that "his positive

disposition to education and eagerness to learn, however, remained largely unrecognised in the different schools he attended and did not translate into meaningful relationships with his teachers or the schools" (p. 237). Youssef ended up with a strong sense of isolation and alienation in formal schooling, and resorted to more informal means of learning through community based organisations, and succeeded in passing his exams and moving on to higher education – an indictment of the formal schooling sector. Youssef clearly had high educational aspirations but lacked sufficient support in his secondary schools to help him realize them.

The experiences of Lorena, a further young person in the study, mirrored those of Youssef. She talked about the academic track in the predominantly white, middle class school "as a place for rich people, not people like me" (Van Caudenberg et al. 2020: 438). She went on to explain:

> "That literally wasn't a school for me. The people there were rich, and I was like 'I really can't do this!' It was a school where people wear uniforms so that supposedly everybody is equal. But really, I saw that no one is equal" (Van Caudenberg 2020: 439).

Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) conclude that "high educational aspirations are not a protection against early school leaving if schools fail to be places where students feel they can belong" (p. 441).

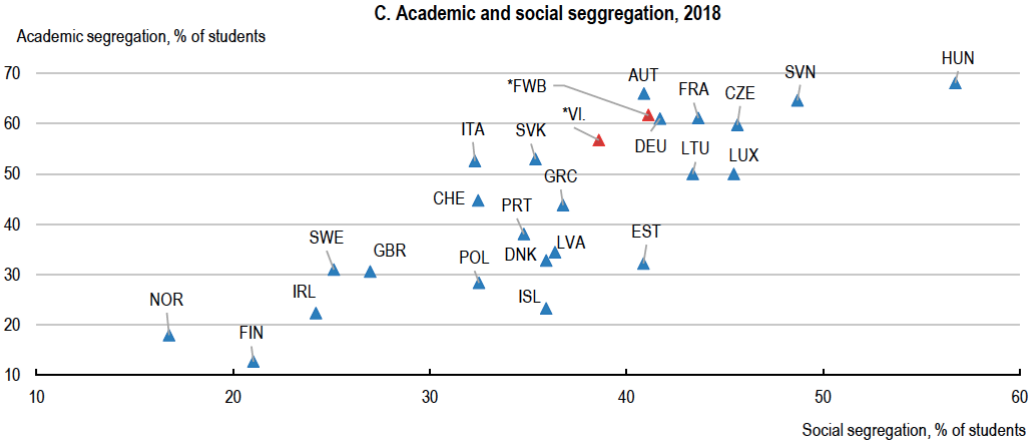
A further reason for feeling 'out-of-place' is evident in more recent research which looked at how Turkish students were treated in Flemish schools:

> "Flemish students used the word "Turk" to swear at one another in secondary school. It was used to insult. When you know that it is a joke you will laugh at it, but some of them really meant it. Teachers also used the word "Turken" [Turks] in the same pejorative way. They are not very considerate" (Zehra in Colak et al. 2023: 629).

Furthermore, recent Swiss research has shown that the processes of selecting students for tracks is also prejudicial. Batruch and her colleagues (2019) found that poor students, regardless of their actual achievement, were considered more suited to lower tracks than their more advantaged peers with the same grades (p. 486). An earlier study by Batruch and her colleagues found, in relation to assessing academic work, that teacher evaluation of high achieving working class students was unduly harsh (Batruch et al. 2017). They argue that "high achieving low SES students threaten the social hierarchy, prompting teachers to restore order by marking them down" (Doyle et al. 2023: 93). More recently, UK research by Doyle et al. (2023) found that teachers judged working class students to be inferior to middle class students across a range of indicators. They judged an identical piece of work as being of poorer quality if it was presented as written by a working class student as opposed to a middle class one. The teachers also rated the working class students as having significantly inferior ability and potential, which had a serious impact on their set allocation. This clearly has implications for the integrity of the tracking process in Flemish schools. It seems unlikely that Flemish teachers are entirely free of the class biases evident in the British and Swiss teachers. In fact, research that examined tracking recommendations in Flanders (Batruch et al. 2023) found that Flemish teachers gave lower tracking recommendations for children from poorer backgrounds compared to equally performing children from more affluent backgrounds.

As the table below indicates, Flanders's policies of entrenched tracking from an early age have led to one of the highest levels of academic segregation in the OECD (Gonne 2022).

Figure 14: *Levels of academic and social segregation across European countries*



Note: In the table FWB and VL stands for the French and Flemish communities in Belgium.
Source: Gonne 2022

While tracking is the subject of extensive research, less considered is the impact of grouping into reception education for newly arrived migrant students (NAMS). Reception education is provided to facilitate the transition of NAMS into mainstream education. As Emery et al. (2021) point out, when a large number of NAMS are enrolled in a school, they are frequently grouped into different reception classes based on Dutch language aptitude, in a process by which the acquisition of Dutch becomes conflated with students' general academic ability (Pulinx et al. 2017). In their research in Flemish schools, they found that the reasons for moving NAMS into higher ability groups included positive involvement in class activities, requesting assistance when asked, asking questions, and being mastery orientated. This creates a situation of grouping before tracking "based on questionable assessment of the potential to learn the language of education and influenced by coincidental factors and middle-class norms" (Emery et al. 2020: 17). Teachers were interpreting a strong sense of entitlement typically linked to a middle class background as motivated and engaged behaviour (Emery et al. 2020).

However, some research shows that teachers who are themselves from low income backgrounds are less likely to make biased judgments of low income children's achievement, and less likely to provide them with biased feedback (Schoneveld & Brummelmann 2023). While teachers from middle class and more privileged backgrounds were biased in their attribution of ability and the way they delivered praise, teachers who were themselves from low income backgrounds were not. Schoneveld and Brummelmann (2023) conclude that "one solution could therefore be to recruit more teachers from low-SES backgrounds" (p. 4).

Grade repetition

Compounding the ill-effects of tracking, Flanders is one of the few European countries to have high levels of grade repetition. While grade retention is not universally used across the OECD, in Flanders many upper secondary students are repeating a grade (OECD 2022), despite research that shows any benefits are slight and short-lived (OECD 2012). Furthermore, grade repetition disproportionately affects young people growing up in poverty. To be poor in Flemish schools often means being in the lowest tracks and confronting the high risk of having to repeat a grade. In 2018,

23% of 15 year old students reported that they had repeated a grade at least once, compared to 15% on average for other OECD countries (OECD 2023a). However, in 2022 the percentage had risen in Flanders whereas it had decreased across the OECD as a whole – 26.5% compared to an OECD average of 9.4% (OECD 2023c:34). As Franck and Nicaise (2019: 22) conclude, grade repetition has negative financial, social and academic effects. The implications for the individual student do not appear to be taken into account, with the exclusionary implications of retaining learners rarely considered, although Van Canegem et al.'s (2022) quantitative study of 25 countries found grade retention resulted in a low sense of belonging and feelings of alienation among retained pupils. Yet, US research shows that grade repetition results in shame, humiliation and abjection. Repeating a year is relatively common in the USA, where the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) recommended that students be required to demonstrate a set standard of achievement before progressing to the next grade level. What the US research found was that requiring pupils to repeat a year had a negative impact on their learning (Griffith 2010; Jimerson 2007; Roderick 2005). Negative effects are rare for educational interventions, so the extent to which pupils who are made to repeat a year make less progress is striking. The EEF (2021a) in its review of 71 studies of grade repetition across the globe found that pupils who repeat a year make an average of three months less academic progress over the course of a year than pupils who move on. Even more concerning, the negative consequences were found to be greater for students growing up in poverty and those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

It is also important to recognise the negative social and psychological repercussions of retention alongside the detrimental academic impact. UK based research reveals that the stigma attached to being retained in a grade compounds the stigma poor children already experience as a result of their poverty, and can result in young people having difficulties in all aspects of school life (Rose & Shevlin 2004). Hadebe and Moosa (2022) found in their South African study that grade retention was emotionally distressing for students who were held back. Most of their participants seemed to be embarrassed about being retained. Learners were bullied and teased by peers because they were repeating a grade, and this made them struggle emotionally.

As a UNESCO report (2006:15) concluded, repeating the grade may enable retained students to do better on tests of materials they are studying for the second time, but it fails to produce advances in cognition that would enable them to make more progress in subsequent grades. Studies that make same-age comparisons show that involuntary repetition is not merely ineffective but is actually counterproductive to students' long-term academic progress. Rather, retained students tend to fall further and further behind promoted students with very similar achievement profiles in the year prior to grade repetition. It appears that grade repetition is reinforcing the disadvantages that stem from poverty rather than alleviating them, with students who must repeat grades reporting impaired peer relationships, reduced self-esteem, behavioural problems, and negative attitudes to school (Anderson Jimerson & Whipple 2005; Hong & Raudenbush 2005).

The chances of grade repetition are greatly increased if students are from a migrant background. According to the OECD, the gap in the retention rate between students with and without migrant parents is nowhere as large as in Flanders (OECD 2023a). In 2018, the rate of grade repetition experienced by children and young people with migrant parents was twice as high as that of children and young people with native parents (OECD 2023a).

A combination of the promotion of school choice, tracking from an early age, and grade repetition have resulted in an educational environment where poverty in Flemish schools is punished rather than relieved. This is a minority ethnic student recounting their experience of grade repetition:

> "In the last year of secondary school, they did not allow me to graduate and I had to repeat the final year. Other [ethnic majority] students were allowed to graduate despite having lower grades than me. I tried so hard to get them to change their views. I was psychologically destroyed. You know, I was already one year behind, and it became two years. In primary school, they made me repeat one year because I was so introverted. I was afraid that people would make fun of me [for failing two years]" (Colak et al. 2023:8).

Early school leaving

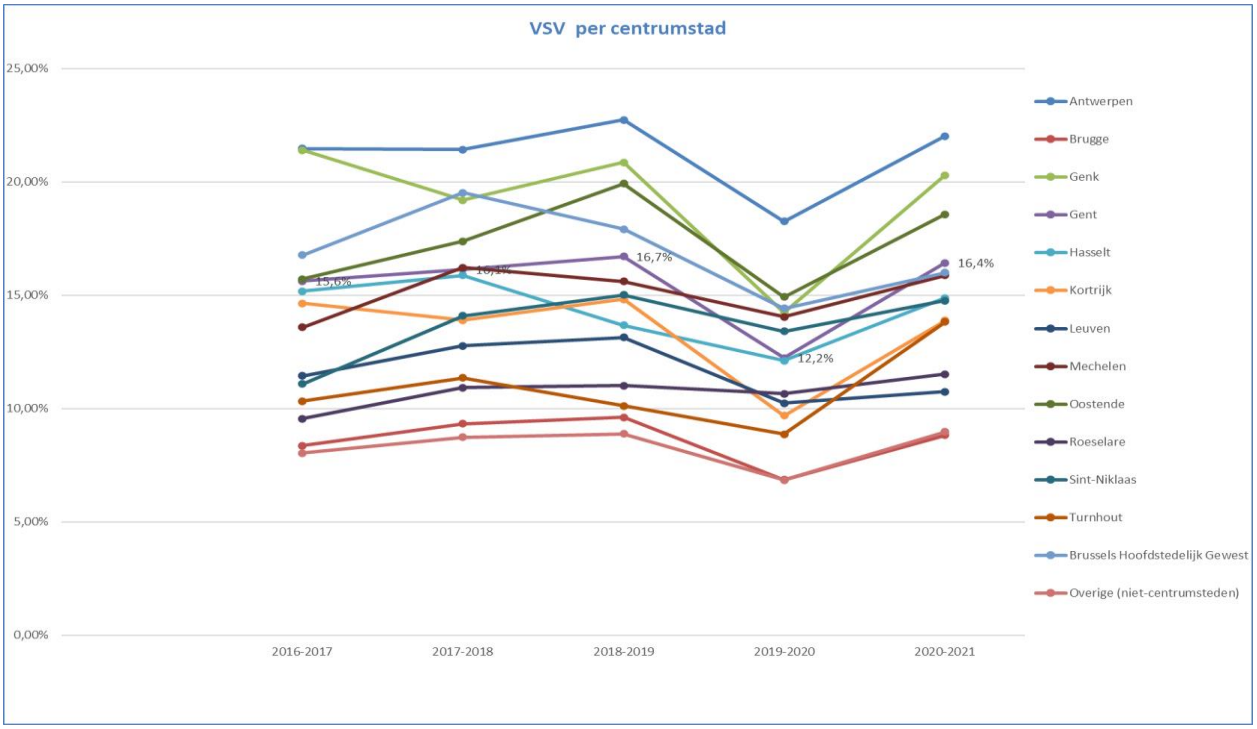
Grade repetition can also push young people into leaving school early. Students who repeat a grade are much more likely to drop out from school early and achieve lower levels of formal education. While less than 1% of students who never repeated a grade drop out of school, 11% of those who repeated once, 32% of those that repeated twice and 46% of students who repeated more than twice drop out (Statistics Flanders 2022). Also those who repeat a grade are less likely to go on to higher education. While three in five adults who never repeated a grade went on to higher education, only 27% of those who repeated a grade did (FPS Employment and Unia 2022).

Flemish research (Lavrijsen & Nicaise 2015) indicates that the poverty rate is the strongest determinant of early school leaving. They argue that 'the proportion of people living in materially inadequate circumstances seems intensely associated with a high dropout rate among disadvantaged respondents (p. 305). In line with UK and US research, they conclude that there is a strong effect of the poverty rate on social inequalities in early school leaving with children living in poverty being far more likely to drop out when poverty rates are high. Young people growing up in poverty are facing a constant struggle between opting for work experience and obtaining an educational qualification.

In Van Praag et al.'s (2020) qualitative study, they give the example of a young man, in a low income family, whose educational choices "appear to be made out of a series of seemingly illogical decisions, involving frequent changes of schools and study careers" (p. 538), culminating in the young man being thrown out of the last school he attended. But, more generally, the financial strains, and the insecure and unstable financial and economic conditions in which many of their sample found themselves meant they often opted for immediate labour market entry. An absence of resources, useful networks, and lack of guidance from teachers and pupil counsellors, combined with financial insecurity, had a powerful impact on decision-making (Van Praag et al. 2020: 541). Growing up in poverty frequently resulted in young people with little choice other than to find an option which allowed them to earn money. They spoke of a pressing need for financial resources, arguing that they need specific work experience to be able to access these financial resources. Young people growing up in poverty frequently had the added stress of needing to provide for themselves and their families, often making leaving education without an educational qualification a rational and positive decision. The researchers concluded that for participants in precarious personal and family circumstances, the need to secure a stable position in the labour market remains paramount.

This effect is underlined by statistics showing rising levels of early school leaving in Flemish cities over the last four years:

Figure 15: *Early school leaving, Flemish cities*



Source: Brecht Demeulenaere (personal communication 2023)

As is evident in figure 15, since 2019 early school leaving has been rising across all Flemish cities but particularly in Antwerp and Brussels.

Social mobility

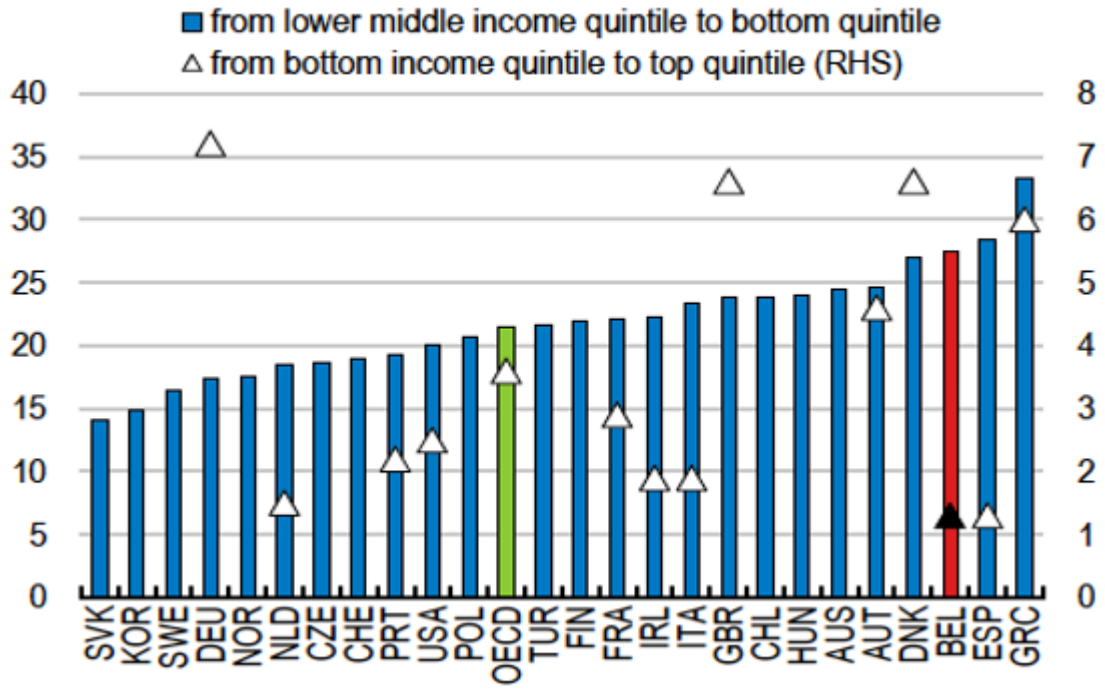
Social mobility in Belgium (and hence in Flanders) was one of the lowest in Europe over the 2000s (Pfeffer 2008), with social mobility hardly increasing over time (Groenez 2010). More recent research from the OECD (2018) indicates that social mobility is still fairly static. In relation to the Belgium educational system, Verhoeven et al. (2021) paint a confusing and contradictory picture. In relation to all three countries they studied, including Belgium, they argued that:

> "It would be difficult to overstate the importance of meritocratic discourse in regard to the cultural dimension of the conception of social justice, and the legitimisation of inequalities and elite formations. This discourse remains very much present, yet is increasingly being questioned – especially in response to sociological work on the reproduction of both social inequalities and elite education" (Verhoeven et al. 2021: 314).

Yet, they also argued that Belgium has moved on from policies based on a belief in meritocracy to "the pursuit of ever-more-ambitious forms of equality – in terms of access, of treatment, and ultimately of achievement – even of results" (p. 315). Other specifically Flemish research (Clycq et al. 2014; Kostet et al. 2021) highlights the continuing dominance of meritocratic views, with Kostet et al. (2021: 583) arguing "in the Flemish education system, meritocracy is broadly endorsed by pupils, parents, and educators", while Nicaise (2008) concludes that it appears "that Flemish education is still, more than other Western systems, imbued with meritocratic ideology" (p. 109). The testimonies of our

expert witnesses trouble dominant views of meritocracy. One slide in the presentation from a Flemish not-for-profit organization displayed the term 'the myth of meritocracy', while another expert witness asserted that social mobility is static in Flanders. Yet Nicaise (2008) argues that Flemish society is permeated with meritocratic beliefs that have resulted "in a disguised reproduction of existing inequalities" (p. 109), what he has termed 'pseudo-meritocracy' (Nicaise 2023). Certainly, when international comparisons are made, Flanders is performing relatively poorly compared to other OECD countries. Recent research shows that upward income mobility is very low for low-income groups in Flanders and, at the same time, lower-middle income households are at a relatively high risk of sliding down to the bottom. It appears that the poor in Flanders are more trapped by their poverty than the poor in many other European countries (see figure 16 below):

Figure 16: *Likelihood of downward and upward income mobility for low-income groups*



Source: OECD 2018

Belgian schools offer the fifth lowest level of social mobility at school among the 27 OECD countries that have participated in PISA since 2003 (Gonne 2022).

The dominance of meritocratic ideology in Flanders stands in contrast to countries like Japan and Finland. Both are more successfully educationally, and have a much smaller educational achievement gap (OECD 2023b). One key difference with Flanders is a prevalent view in both countries that ability is malleable instead of fixed, rather the most important factors for educational attainment are effort and support (Parmenter 2016; Thrupp et al. 2023). In both countries, unlike Flanders, a struggling child would not be put in a low-ability track, or made to repeat a year, but instead provided with extra teaching resources to enable them to keep up with their peers.

Yet, even those few Flemish young people from poor backgrounds who were educationally successful had to confront an array of micro-aggressions from their more privileged peers. The hostile

environment often faced by low income ethnic minority young people who succeeded in being placed in academic tracks, and the more academic schools, was evident in Colak et al.'s (2023) research. Yasemin talked about feeling a loser when she was the only ethnic minority student in her class:

> "I kind of felt like a loser when I was around rich kids. Also, I was really embarrassed to say that we were five kids [siblings in the family] because they would always react as if this was really strange" (Colak et al. 2023:10).

She and other Turkish-Belgian students talked about being bullied and made fun of because of the clothes they wore, and their working class background. This is Ali:

> "Of course, there are bad memories, like in the class there were those who did not like Turks. It did not matter how nice you were; it was very obvious that they did not like you. You don't understand it much before high school because you are still young. As you grow older you see it better. They probably learn it [disliking Turks] from home, on the street, from media, their families, etc. Also, some teachers would help Flemish students more. And of course, the [differing] financial situation between Turks and Flemish affected things. The girls from rich families would make fun of our clothes" (Colak et al. 2023:10).

The feeling these Turkish-Belgian young people conveyed was of being given the impression by their more privileged peers that they did not belong in the higher status schools and tracks because of their ethnicity and working class background:

> "I went to a Catholic school. There were children from very elite families at the school. (. . .) Those children who were rather spoiled by their families, they kind of looked at Turks as workers. (. . .) They are surprised to see that you are getting an education. (. . .) On the one hand, they claim that Turks are backward. On the other hand, they think you don't deserve to be there [in such a good school], to have a chance at achieving something, to be in a position [of upward mobility]" (Canan in Colak et al. 2023:11).

The consequences of meritocratic ideology for the relationship between poverty and education

As Littler (2018) asserts, meritocracy connects powerfully to "competitiveness in general and within education in particular" p. 24). The ideology of meritocracy has profound consequences for the way in which the losers in the hyper-competitive game, education has become, both view themselves and deal with their inferior status. In the *Rise of the Meritocracy*, Michael Young (1958) wrote of the educational losers: "They are tested again and again … If they have been labelled 'dunce' repeatedly they cannot any longer pretend; their image of themselves is more nearly a true, unflattering reflection" (p. 107).

As Born (2023) makes clear in his recent research in Germany, social mobility takes its toll on meritocracy's losers as, "individuals who move socially upward can load those remaining at the bottom of the class structure with demoralizing and humiliating symbolic baggage as a result (Born 2023:14), resulting in family members feeling they lack value and are being 'left behind'.

Although, it has been argued that meritocracy as a widespread belief has 'faded' in the Flemish context, it still appears to over-shadow the educational system. Batruch et al. (2019) describe the belief in meritocracy and the ways it works to reproduce educational hierarchies as 'the darker side of

educational institutions'. In their more recent work, Batruch et al. (2023) conclude that a meritocratic discourse that reinforces the maintenance of social and economic inequalities is reinforced and perpetuated by teachers and schools staff. However, Brummelman and Sedikides (2023: 6) argue that teachers are not to blame. Rather, their attitudes and practices, like those of many citizens in highly economically unequal societies, are shaped by 'pervasive institutional and cultural ideas and values' they have no control over. Regardless of who is to blame, what is evident is that meritocratic beliefs are most pronounced in countries with rigid between-school tracking such as Flanders (Brummelman & Sedikides 2023).

Belief in 'pseudo-meritocracy' (Nicaise 2023) is one of the main reasons why there still seems to be an undue emphasis on the educational system as the main means to deliver greater economic and social equality. John Marsh (2011) asserts that "when our notion of social and economic justice starts and stops with education,…..it displaces other tools needed to secure economic justice" (p. 80). There is a risk that education is being used instrumentally to preserve a moral justification for non-redistribution, through the meritocratic discourse (Souto-Otero 2010). More recent research (Mijs 2019) found that the more unequal societies were the more likely their citizens were to invest in a belief in meritocracy. He concluded that citizens' consent to inequality was fuelled by their conviction that poverty and wealth are the outcomes of a fair meritocratic process. Such a conviction is still widely held in Flanders.

Recent research into Flemish children's attitudes towards aspirations, expectations of the future, and social inequality found that children from all social backgrounds generally believed that anything was possible if you worked hard towards your goals (Kostet et al. 2021:595):

> Researcher: But you also believe that you have to prove yourself more than others do. Why is that?
> Doha: Because I uhm, have another nationality. That's, that's just the way the world works.
> Researcher: Do you have the feeling that others expect less . . .
> Doha: (interrupts) Yes. It's fun to show them, you see. They expect little of you but then you can show them you can do so much, and then they'll be disappointed and that's nice to see.
> Researcher: They'll be disappointed?
> Doha: Yes. It's nice to see that.
> Researcher: Why?
> Doha: Because they don't expect it from someone like that [an ethnic minority]. (. . .)
> Researcher: And how are you going to prove yourself? In which way?
> Doha: Work really hard, really show them what I'm able to, despite the fact they say I don't.
> – [13 years, self-identifies as Moroccan]

In this quote we can see how children growing up in poverty are striving to hold on to high expectations for themselves, whilst managing a wider culture of low expectations. As Kostet et al. (2021) state, some of the aspirations of the children growing up in poverty "reach far beyond what structural conditions will allow" (p. 598). The vast majority of children in their sample believed that children generally have equal chances in life, irrespective of socio-economic and ethnic background, emphasising the ability to escape from poverty through hard work. This is very similar to Anglo-Saxon beliefs about meritocracy, exemplified in England and the US. However, while English and American attitudes tend to blame the poor for their own poverty, this was not the case in Flanders. Kostet et al.

(2021) conclude that while Flemish children "build on meritocratic repertoires to express their faith in upwards mobility, they do not lapse into individual blame when success is not achieved" (p. 597).

Teacher retention and its relationship to school segregation

The most recent PISA results (OECD 2023c) provide concerning information about the state of the teaching force in Flanders. 80.1% of Headteachers reported that teaching in their school was impeded by a lack of teachers, while 50.7% complained of inadequate or poorly trained teachers. These figures are both the highest across the OECD and almost twice the OECD average.

However, those figures will be even worse in schools serving ethnically diverse children growing up in poverty. International research shows that school composition, especially high levels of migrant and low income students, influences both teacher attrition and mobility (Haushek 2004; Hanushek et al. 2015; Scafidi 2007), and schools with mostly ethnically diverse students living in poverty showing much higher attrition rates than schools with more privileged students. A study by the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training showed that up to 44% of teachers quit within the first five years. Research that looked at teacher attrition (Amitai & Van Houtte 2022) found that novice teachers felt they were insufficiently prepared for the full reality of their workplace, especially if they were dealing with more difficult classroom situations. In particular, they did not feel adequately trained in the teacher education programme, which did not provide them with sufficient ways to deal with diversity in their schools. Especially illuminating were the words of Samantha, a new teacher teaching for the OKAN programme (Onthaalklas voor anderstalige nieuwkomers, or reception class for foreign-speaking newcomers) in a vocational and technical track school. She pointed out:

> "Many teachers were good students in secondary school themselves and then studied to be a teacher. […] It creates a situation where teachers, who often were good students and were in the academic track themselves, may not have as much understanding for students who have to translate stuff for their parents or for whom schools is not as important as earning money, when that's more important than getting good grades. You need to be strong to be able to handle all these stories and realities. You are barely prepared to enter into such a school context" (Amitai & Van Houtte 2022: 8).

But all the novice teachers thought that their education programme had mainly taught them to teach in the academic track, leaving them unprepared to teach in vocational and technical tracks, and more specifically, in dealing with young people in poverty. However, this appears to be a pervasive problem, not one that is just specific to new teachers. Johannes, another novice teacher, commented that there seems to be a widespread deficit perspective among teachers generally who, he felt, did not try to understand their students (Amitai & Van Houtte 2022). There is clearly a problem both with the content of teacher education courses, which do not provide sufficient knowledge and skills to deal with poverty, and with the level of support provided to teachers working in high poverty level schools. Teachers in Flanders appear to be under qualified compared to teachers in other European countries. The OECD (2023) report on the results of PISA 2018 found that the percentage of Flemish teachers with a Masters qualification was only 30% in schools with high levels of poverty, compared to countries such as Finland and Poland where the percentage was over 90%. Teacher education needs to help trainee teachers understand what it means to live in poverty and the implicit, as well as the explicit, barriers that poverty poses for families. This support should extend to the professional development of teachers once they are in post. As Van Eycken et al. (2022) conclude, teachers should

be supported to deal with the so-called mismatch between students and teachers, especially by providing them with the tools to deal with students who live in poverty.

The everyday experiences of poverty in Flemish schools

According to Nicaise et al. (2021) "hardly anything was known about the position of the most disadvantaged pupils in Belgian education until the beginning of the 21st century" (p. 1). What we learn from recent qualitative research in other rich countries, including the UK (Reay 2017), is that high levels of segregation have implications for the school experiences of poor children, and students' knowledge and understanding of diversity and those who are different to themselves. A major problem in the Flemish context is that since 2000, there is relatively little research examining the experiences of the poor in education. We know little about how growing up in poverty affects Flemish children's relationships with school friends and with teachers or 'the problems of social inclusion facing poor children themselves', although we do know that internationally the more economically disadvantaged children are the lower their levels of subjective well-being in relation to their schooling (Brummelman & Sedikides 2023). Yet, many aspects of children and young people's physiological, psychological social and cognitive development are influenced by experiences of growing up in poverty. Recent research from the UK demonstrated that children who had experienced poverty were more likely to have problems with relationships, including an increased likelihood of being bullied, and were more likely to be solitary in schools (Newson 2016).

Research from across the globe shows that poverty shapes educational processes, experiences and outcomes, with poverty, poor housing and other kinds of disadvantages impacting on young people's ability to learn and to engage in the classroom. Epidemiological research (Marmot et al. 2020) illustrates how it influences not only how long we live, but what percentages of our lives will be spent in good or poor health. Psychological research shows how it shapes what sort of emotions we tend to feel, and the strength of those emotions, with American research demonstrating that higher levels of resources mean that the affluent do not have to face the same exposure to threats to their well-being (financial insecurity, higher levels of crime, poorly funded schools) that the poor face (Piff et al. 2019). As a result, contentment, and a general sense of well-being are more common in the affluent (Piff & Moskowitz 2018). The poor, in contrast, display emotions that are in keeping with the insecurities and threats that characterise their social environments – anxiety, fear, shame, but also higher levels of compassion and awe (Piff 2014).

Internationally, research shows that young people growing up in poverty are coping with a whole array of challenges. If you are coming into school and you are hungry, if you do not know where you are going to be living from one day to the next, if you are caring perhaps for very sick parents, if you are being threatened by a violent local gang in the area, or more mundanely but also damaging, coping with the distress that emanates from witnessing parents who are constantly worried about money, struggling with two or three low income casualised jobs, ground down by stress and/or depression—all these issues—are going to impact seriously on teaching and learning in classrooms. What research on working class experiences in English schools shows is that rather than the stress and anxiety that emanates from poverty being alleviated in schools, it is compounded (Hargreaves et al. 2024; Quick 2022). Schooling for English children in poverty has become an extremely miserable experience. Similar research is more difficult to find in relation to Flanders, although there are key studies like that of van Caudenberg and colleagues (2020) who examine the impact of being in either a vocational or an academic track for young people's well-being, learner identities, and sense of belonging. Spruyt et al. (2015) found that there was a strong direct relationship between perceived contempt and feelings of

futility for Flemish pupils. They concluded that feelings of futility amongst pupils in vocational and technical tracks could be seen to be a stigma consciousness caused by the demeaning impact of the negative stereotypes associated with those tracks. Research in the UK (Holt-White et al. 2022) also showed that the Covid-19 pandemic had exacerbated feelings of distress among the poor. It found that over two-thirds (67%) of young people who reported that their household had experienced difficulties paying for food (or had used a food bank) reported high levels of psychological distress over the period of the pandemic. Recent quantitative survey work in Flanders (Rogenhofer et al. 2023) found that the poor in their sample had similar high levels of ontological insecurity and powerlessness.

UK research (Walker 2014) shows that poverty induces shame, while Reay's research on children eligible for free school meals in English schools showed that their educational experiences were blighted with feelings of anxiety, fear, despondency and humiliation (Reay & Wiliam 1999; Reay 2005; 2017). Reinforcing the view of poverty as essentially traumatic, Walker et al. (2013), in their research on the impact of poverty in 7 countries across the globe, found that: "Though socially and culturally nuanced, shame was found to be associated with poverty in each location, variably leading to pretence, withdrawal, self-loathing, 'othering', despair, depression, thoughts of suicide, and generally to reductions in self-efficacy" (p. 216).

Walker et al.'s research is reinforced by that of Ali et al. (2018) in the US which shows that living in poverty triggers painful emotional responses, including shame, anger, guilt, and frustration. Feelings of shame linked to poverty are personally experienced but externally imposed and shaped by social institutions, also referred to as external stigma. This external stigma takes the form of social control, deterrence, and even punishment and is deliberately imposed by the institutions and the people who represent them. One of the social institutions Ali et al are referring to is the school.

The competition found in Flemish classrooms, set to increase when the new assessment policy comes into force in 2024, has severe repercussions, especially for children from poor backgrounds. It has been shown to induce shame and lower self-esteem (Gürel et al. 2022). Inevitably, for a majority of children and young people growing up in poverty, education is about failure rather than success. Social norms and inequalities, including those that permeate the educational system are internalised and "take shape psychically" for children and young people (Reay 2008: 1073). Mechanisms, such as tracking, grade repetition, and competitive pressures, predominate in Flemish schooling, and exert their most oppressive force on poor, ethnically diverse children and young people.

More recent research (Vuckovic Juros 2022), based in Croatia, also underlined the negative emotions associated with growing up in poverty, and how the experience generated feelings of shame and low self-esteem. As one of the young people in the study poignantly noted, "I have always thought that, if I am poor, I'm supposed to study poorly" (Vuckovic Juros 2022: 71). What all three sets of research show is that poverty is not just an economic condition it is also an embodied state that generates feelings such as self-doubt, despondency, and fear of failure. That is why the recent global focus on managing poverty, rather than eradicating it, is essentially reactionary, a failure to address the human rights and needs of those on low incomes.

All these studies also highlight the importance of relationality in understanding poverty. There is an important dynamic between the actions of those with power and relative wealth in society, and consequences for the poor. In the Flemish context, this is made visible in the research of Jacquet et al. (2021) that demonstrates how the stigmatising attitudes of social work professionals powerfully

impact on families in poverty, generating humiliation and stereotyping. Although the research focussed on the social work profession, it is likely that the teaching profession has undergone a similar shift in value orientation.

The impact of educational experiences on children growing up in poverty is enormous. As Croizet et al. (2017) argue, classrooms are "spaces where children learn whether they are smart, motivated, meritorious and deserving…or not" (p. 105). What European educational research does show is that teachers' belief in school meritocracy (the belief that educational credentials are a reliable indicator of individual merit) legitimates the social class hierarchy it actually produces, and perpetuates educational and social inequalities (Batruch et al. 2023). For the most part, children from low income backgrounds are learning they are not smart, do not have merit, and are undeserving. Those negative self-perceptions originate, in part, from negative stereotypes expressed through interactions with their teachers and articulated through low expectations, low track recommendations and adverse feedback (Brummelman & Sedikides 2023). The consequences are summarised in the following quote:

> "From preschool onward, children from low-SES backgrounds are structurally exposed to harsh messages about their intellectual ability, even when their abilities and achievements are equal to those of their peers. These messages convey to children from low-SES backgrounds that they are less intelligent, less able to nurture their intelligence, less entitled, and less worthy, independent of their actual abilities and achievements. These self-views, in turn, harm academic achievement. Such consequences are exacerbated by institutional and cultural values that reflect a belief in meritocracy" (Brummelman & Sedikides 2023:13).

The impact of wider society and neoliberal orthodoxies

Educational inequality is inevitable in a neoliberal capitalist economy. Schools embody the contradictions between the logic of capitalism (which requires inequality to thrive) and the logic of democracy (which rests on the principles of political and social equality). It will always be those with less resources, and the poor have the least resources, who lose out in the competitive race that Flemish education is increasingly becoming. As Warren Buffett, the American billionaire said, we increasingly have socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor.

We have tended, under neoliberalism, to lose sight of poverty as a social ill that directly harms people, preferring to view it as a life choice. Underpinning the failure to recognise poverty as a condition that is harmful, is the meritocratic orthodoxy, discussed earlier, that if individuals tried harder and/or worked more assiduously, poverty is avoidable, but if they fail, they are simply not clever enough to succeed. Such an approach converts poverty into a problem that is the responsibility of the individual rather than a problem that concerns the whole of society.

It is clear that Flanders has embraced neoliberalism along with other OECD countries. Recent research, based in Flanders (De Keere 2020), found that a strong belief in entrepreneurialism, with an emphasis on self-responsibility, and institutionalism, and underpinned by a therapeutic view of individual development, are endemic among the upper and middle classes in Flanders. Such a worldview, stressing the self-responsibility of the poor for their own poverty, abdicates middle and upper class responsibility and ignores official procedures and everyday practices in institutions, corporations, and communities reproduce class structures and contribute substantially to problems of poverty.

The progressive policies implemented since 2002 in Flanders (GOK, Equity funding, etc.) have had minimal impact of the educational success of the poor (Nicaise et al. 2021). While more recent policy developments, such as the reduced focus on the diversification of the teaching staff, the 2018 reform of the Flemish enrolment decree (which abolished anti-segregation measures) as well as the growing contestation of the weighting system, indicate that neoliberalism is becoming more entrenched in Flanders and its education system (Westereveen et al. 2022).

The problem of resilience

A significant part of the armory in the neoliberal attack on the poor is the ideology of resilience. We have seen governments in the UK and the US supporting the growth of individual resilience as an acceptable solution to poverty, and it is regularly cited by the OECD (see Schleicher 2018) as a means of tackling the educational underachievement of children growing up in poverty. The last decade has seen the OECD devote increasing amounts of energy to promoting the notion of academic resilience among those growing up in poverty (Volante & Klinger 2022). It has become the means through which poor children are expected to take responsibility for their own poverty –the mechanism through which they are to overcome the negative outcomes of poverty and prevent its transfer within families, households and communities. The discourse is particularly prevalent in the UK and US context, and prohibits more socially just responses that focus on providing sufficient external resources, rather than seeing the 'poor child' as needing to develop their own internal resources.

However, in relation to poverty and the potential use of resilience as a normative concept in the domain of human development, a closer look reveals that there is no relation between poverty alleviation and resilience building. Resilience is poor-neutral; in other words, it is not a pro-poor concept; nothing in it makes it specifically linked to the poor (except perhaps that the poor are often presented/assumed to be more vulnerable, or less resilient, than others). And this last assumption is exactly where the concept of resilience starts falling apart. Indeed, contrary to common belief, households can be very poor and very resilient. In fact, many empirical social and anthropological studies suggest that to be poor and to survive, you almost certainly have to be resilient, but that resilience is very unlikely to get you out of poverty.

As Bene and his colleagues (2012) argue: "The whole discourse about how it is important to build resilience as a tool for poverty alleviation is flawed: there is no direct and obvious way out of poverty through resilience. Ultimately, development should therefore remain about poverty alleviation and well-being, not about resilience building" (Bene et al. 2012: np). Rather, resilience is an integral part of neoliberal rhetoric that works to blame the individual living in poverty for their own educational failure.

The relationship between well-being and poverty in Flemish schools

Tourne et al. (2021) conclude that well-being is an afterthought in the Flemish educational context. A study conducted across 35 OECD countries by Govorova et al. (2020) found that socioeconomic background was a good predictor of student well-being, with further UK based research demonstrating that well-being decreases at lower income levels, with children living in poverty having the lowest levels of well-being in relation to their schooling (The Children's Society, 2022). Weinberg et al. (2021) also found children's well-being decreased at lower levels of income, and that the incline was steeper in more unequal societies. There appear to be very few studies that specifically examine the well-being of poor students in Flemish schools. One of the few (Innocenti

2023) found that over 30% of Flemish eight-year-olds, 20% of 10-year-olds, but only 10% of 12-year-olds were often or always worrying about money. However, one alarming study of well-being in refugee and immigrant primary school children in Flanders (Kevers et al. 2022:947) found that 70% of the children judged their classroom climate as unsafe and relatively conflictual. The percentages of very low and low ratings were much higher than the ones found in population-based standardization research, where only 35% of Flemish children rated the climate in the class as very low to below average.

Recent Flemish policy initiatives to tackle inequalities

Since 2002, the Flemish government has been pursuing a policy of equal opportunities in education by granting additional resources to schools that have disadvantaged children among their pupils. In elementary education the share of the pre-set budget based on pupil characteristics amounted to 14% in 2008 and increased to 15.5% in 2019. In secondary education the 2008 share amounted to 10% and only slowly increased to 11% in 2019. So, raising questions about the efficacy of this additional funding seems timely. In particular, what impact have those additional resources had on social segregation between schools? These are important questions in the light of similar targeted additional funding in the English context (Burgess et al. 2023). In April 2011, the UK government introduced Pupil Premium funding for schools in England. The money was allocated annually to all state-funded schools, in proportion to their intake of disadvantaged pupils (FSM and looked after children) (Roberts et al. 2021). By 2020, the funding levels per disadvantaged pupils were £1,345 per primary pupil and £955 for secondary pupils. However, Burgess et al. (2023) found that, in relation to impact on social segregation, the extra funding had a negligible impact, with only around 5% of schools (out of 3,250) explicitly prioritising the admission of pupils eligible for the pupil premium. They conclude that the financial returns do not outweigh other key considerations for schools such as league table position, disciplinary climate, attractiveness to parents, and exam results, arguing that "neither the additional funding allocated to schools for each eligible student nor any school's social goal of improving diversity appears to be sufficient for schools to explicitly prioritise the admission of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium." (p. 10).

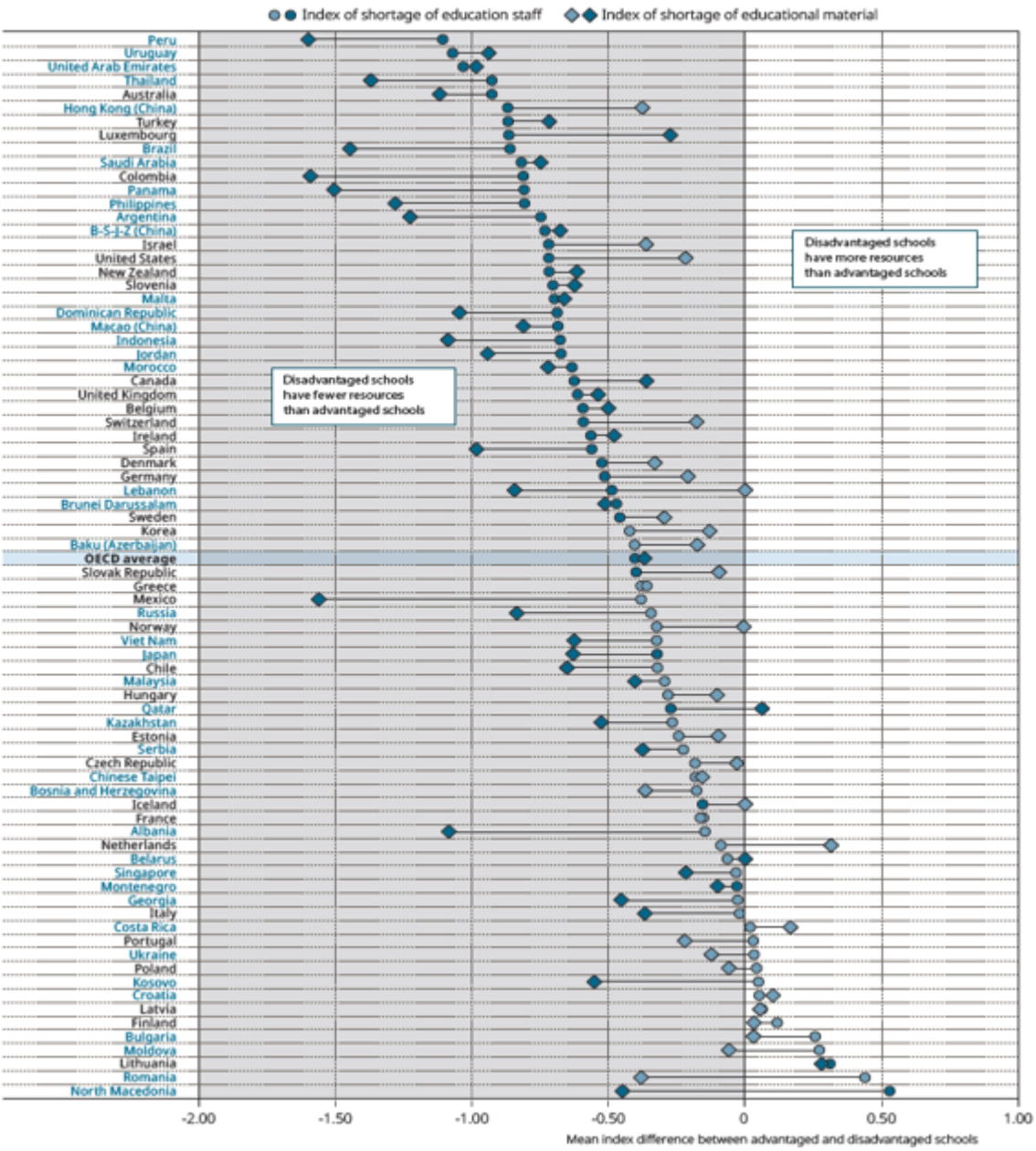
Research by Poesen-Vandeputte and Nicaise (2014; 2015) helps to partially answer questions around effective levels of funding to address poverty in the Flemish context. Their research highlights a situation of chronic underfunding in 'poor' Flemish primary schools. They found that compared to the other groups of schools, low-resource schools (those with the highest percentage of disadvantaged students) have the highest risk (16%) of having a negative profile in terms of the basic conditions (hygiene, security, etc.) for a quality school building. They have also the highest probability (31%) of being located in a metropolitan area (Brussels, Ghent or Antwerp). These low-resource schools also had a team of teachers that was on average five years younger and less experienced than teams in medium-resource schools. The 'gap' with high-resource schools was even greater at ten years. They suggested the most probable reason was a higher turnover among teachers in low-resource schools. This presumption was confirmed by the fact that they employed mainly temporary teachers. In addition, the school principals of low-resource schools had the least management experience: a difference compared with high-resource schools of almost three years. Additionally, school principals in low-resource schools were least qualified in their professional development. As Poesen-Vandeputte and Nicaise (2014: 24) conclude "these schools were labelled low-resource schools because in this group deficits of economic, cultural as well as social capital tend to reinforce each other" (p. 104). It appears that rather than combatting the poverty and deprivation in their catchment areas, low resource schools, or what Poesen-Vandeputte and Nicaise (2014) call 'poor' schools, have been invaded by the

poverty of the surrounding area that state financial support has failed to alleviate.

Poesen-Vandeputte and Nicaise's findings are supported by more recent research Clycq and colleagues (2022) found that the least experienced and youngest teachers were clustered in the more urban, poorer Flemish schools while their older and more experienced peers were more likely to be found in affluent schools. They also found growing levels of teacher shortages and large dropout rates in urban schools that had high proportions of disadvantaged students. Material resources were also seen to be lacking, with headteachers of disadvantaged schools more likely to report teaching was impaired by either a lack or inadequacy of educational materials (OECD 2019). The conclusion is that in Flanders, schools serving ethnically diverse poor catchments often employ large numbers of recently qualified and inexperienced teachers compared to schools with less diverse and more affluent intakes (Clycq et al. 2022). Furthermore, despite these schools often receiving more government funding, Clycq et al. (2022) found that teachers believe the resources made available to them are not sufficient.

Figure 17 below from PISA 2018 reinforce the concerns of Poesen-Vandeputte and Nicaise (2014) and Clycq et al. (2022), revealing the disparity in resourcing between disadvantaged and advantaged schools in Flanders. There is evidently a pressing need to redistribute resources across the Flemish educational system in order to tackle the problem of poverty in Flemish schools.

Figure 17: *Difference in shortage of educational material and staff, by schools' socio-economic profile, based on principals' reports*



A further controversial policy reform is the introduction of full cohort standardised student assessments in Dutch language and mathematics for primary and secondary education. Students will take the assessments in Grades 4 and 6 at the primary level and in Grades 8 and 12 at the secondary level starting in 2024. This looks like a move in the direction of English education policy where primary level pupils are now taking 9 formal assessments over the period of their primary schooling (Wyse et al. 2022) Also like England (Leckie & Goldstein 2017), Flanders intends to use the standardised results to measure learning gains at the system-, school-, and student-level (Flemish Government 2022; 2021). All the unintended consequences of standardised assessment that the OECD

(2023b) flag in their appraisal of the Flemish initiative, such as narrowing of the curriculum, test preparation and malpractice, are evident in the English educational system. Also, the consequences for those growing up in poverty are evident in the English educational context, as children from poorer backgrounds are more subject to test preparation, experience a narrower curriculum, and what has been labelled 'a poverty pedagogy' (Hempel-Jorgensen 2019).

Figure 18: *2022 PISA education achievement results for Flanders*

Mean performance	Mathematics	Reading	Science
PISA 2000		507*	
PISA 2003	529*	507*	
PISA 2006	520*	501*	510*
PISA 2009	515*	506*	507*
PISA 2012	515*	509*	505*
PISA 2015	507*	499*	502*
PISA 2018	508*	493*	499*
PISA 2022	489	479	491
Average 10-year trend in mean performance (2012 to 2022)	-23.0*	-29.3*	-14.2*
Short-term change in mean performance (2018 to 2022)	-18.6*	-14.0*	-8.2*
Proficiency levels: Change between 2012 and 2022			
Percentage-point change in the share of top-performing students (Level 5 or 6)	-8.1*	-4.4*	-1.9
Percentage-point change in the share of low-performing students (below Level 2)	+6.0*	+9.2*	+4.7*
Variation in performance: Change between 2018 and 2022			
Average change among high-achieving students (90th percentile)	-14.7*	-13.0*	-5.4
Average change among low-achieving students (10th percentile)	-17.0*	-15.6*	-10.4
Gap in learning outcomes between high- and low-achieving students	stable gap	stable gap	stable gap
Trends by quarter of socio-economic status (ESCS): 2018-22 / average 10-year trend			
Performance among advantaged students (top quarter of ESCS)	-17.9* / -19.6*	-11.7* / -24.2*	-6.1 / -10.2*
Performance among disadvantaged students (bottom quarter of ESCS)	-18.8* / -24.4*	-15.1* / -30.9*	-10.3* / -17.4*
Performance gap (top – bottom quarter)	stable / stable	stable / stable	stable / stable

Note: * indicates statistically significant trends and changes or mean-performance estimates that are significantly above or below PISA 2022 estimates.
Source: PISA 2022 Database, Tables I.B1.5.1-12, I.B1.5.19, I.B1.5.20 and I.B1.5.21.

Source: OECD 2023b: 402

As figure 18 above shows, Flanders has been on a steady downward trajectory in terms of educational achievement over the period 2000 to 2022. However, equally concerning the achievement of the poorest students has dropped more than the achievement of the richest students over the last four years (OECD 2023b). Furthermore, while the sense of belonging in schools of the poorest children fell between 2018 and 2022, that of their more affluent peers increased marginally (OECD 2023c).

The inadequacy of recent and current policy is evident in the headline from a Belgian newspaper in December 2023: "Entitled 'Ship is sinking': school performance levels of Belgian pupils slipping dramatically" (Walker 2023a). The article announced that performance levels in Flanders were falling much faster than in almost all other countries, concluding:

> "There are only four countries – the Netherlands, Finland, Iceland and Greece – where long-term levels for reading and science fell faster than they did in these schools in Brussels and Flanders. For maths, only two countries performed worse".

But a concern remains that even if the proposed reforms pull up Flemish performance levels, it could be at the cost of the learning experiences of children growing up in poverty. What the evidence from 20 years of PISA results tell us is that educational systems that segregate students into rich and

poor schools, and then provide poor schools with fewer and lower quality resources, educational support, and the least experienced and qualified teachers, are inevitably going to have a long tail of underachievement that reduces overall attainment levels.

The role of charities and NGOs

Poverty in education is increasingly addressed in the Flemish context through a process of out-sourcing to charities and not-for-profit organisations. The private sector in Flanders is quite active in tackling poverty. More specifically, according to the Social Map, 66 Flemish social non-government organizations focus on poverty and education. The daily activities of most groups are directed toward addressing immediate, practical needs of poor students, such as paying school bills, providing food, and offering homework guidance and tutoring.

Charity work is paradoxical at best, as well-intentioned individualized and selective interventions – or "people-change measures" – aim to "help" yet function to reinforce uneven and unjust structures and processes, while propping up both neoliberal and neo-conservative political ideology and governments. While non-profit anti-poverty organisations do important work that makes a difference in the daily lives of those they serve – we met with some incredibly dedicated and committed individuals – this growing "industry" inadvertently supports government withdrawal and an abdication of public responsibility, trends adopted by both conservative and (increasingly) progressive governments in wealthy countries across the globe. The necessarily conserving consequences of the trend toward privatization (both for-profit and not-for-profit) of education and social welfare replaces a commitment to universalism and social care with exclusive and competitive access to public goods and human rights, and ultimately reproduces social and economic divides between and within individuals, communities, and nations. Perhaps more importantly, charity situates the responsibility for poverty squarely on the shoulders of individuals and their families who are poor, and permits the structural causes to remain unchallenged.

Furthermore, in contradiction of stated aims, bringing private individuals and private agencies in to run aspects of the educational system has failed to alleviate the problem of poverty in schools in both the UK and the US (Golann 2021). It is also problematic in terms of the educational entitlement of the poor in a move that shifts the rights of the poor to a good education provided by the state to the vagaries of private provision often funded through charitable donations, and dependent on the good will of individuals who, in countries in the global north, are predominantly rich white, upper class men. This could be seen as a regressive rather than a progressive step. It is often driven by the desire to cut state funding on education, and retreat from universalism towards selective provision that differentiates between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Increasingly, both the UK and the US have moved to a process of compulsory competitive tendering to provide a variety of public services, including education (MacDonald 2022; Rees et al. 2017), which sets charities and NGOs in competition with each other, and works against solidarity and collaboration.

There are excellent charities and NGOs in Flanders doing sterling work. We received evidence from a number of these organisations, all powerfully committed to tackling poverty, and staffed by dedicated founders and employees. However, any policies regarding voluntary sector involvement in public services need to avoid the built-in assumption that that voluntary sector will deliver "on the cheap". Rather, charitable donations and funding should be supplemented by stable, unreserved Government funding to ensure organisations have sufficient funding to undertake the scale of work required. It is vital to avoid the situation in England (Butler 2023) where 'charities are on the brink of

insolvency after subsidising heavily underfunded local authority and social welfare contracts to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds donated to them by the public'.

At the very least, charity and advocacy must go hand-in-hand – charity to address immediate needs of individuals and families, and advocacy to promote the truth: that poverty is structural violence that tears at the fabric of societies and is detrimental for everyone, rather than personal failure that is a "private trouble" for only poor people.

Summary of Analysis – What We (Don't) Know and Why It Matters

Before turning to our Recommendations, we take stock of what our analysis reveals about poverty in education in Flanders, what is missing, and why it is important.

What we cannot see and what we get wrong

We return to the limitations of the concepts and data in education research, as it is important to draw attention to that which routinely remains obscured from view. The majority of education research that informs policy and practice in Flemish education lacks valid and reliable measures for race and ethnicity, poverty (as a direct material indicator for income and wealth), and immigration status. The absence of data on race or ethnicity in Flanders, and in the EU more generally, prevents precise analysis of differential outcomes based on systemic or interpersonal racial bias (Farkas 2017). Common proxies for race and ethnicity are language, place of birth (of parents) and migration background. These markers are often subsumed into an indicator for low SES. The common conflation of racial/ethnic minority status, migration background, and low SES into a single category dismisses the official procedures and everyday practices that precisely make and organize groups by perceived difference – in skin colour, accent, name – from the dominant group. As categories of and for individuals, diverse groups of people are thus homogenized, covering over distinctions that are critical to educational trajectories and outcomes. Specifically, for example:

- Not all immigrants and refugees are poor or low SES. To the contrary, many migrants hold significant cultural and social capital, but are unable to convert these symbolic assets into material capital in the social fields (institutions and communities) of the host country in which they must engage (e.g., Good Gingrich, Banerjee, & Lightman 2023). Research in Canada, for example, shows that immigrants and refugees are, on average, more highly educated than Canadian-born, yet have overall lower wages and income in the Canadian labour market (Lamb & Banerjee 2023; Lamb, Banerjee, & Verma 2021).
- Race matters. The education and labour market experiences and outcomes for racialized immigrants are empirically different than white immigrants in most countries in the Global North. Rolfe and Yang Hansen (2022) argue "While in homogenous societies race and migration status are highly intertwined, in our increasingly globalized world ... it is essential to separate the two constructs" (p. 1479). The racial or ethnic markers by which individuals and groups are classified and valuated are peculiar to the social and historical context, requiring empirical investigation. Such analysis is not possible without relevant race/ethnicity data.
- Differences within may matter more than (or as much as) differences between. Strietholt and Strello (2022) assert "By definition this measure [SES gap] quantifies differences between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, although it ignores any other differences. If the performance gap between socioeconomic groups is small, there may still be other gaps, such as between gender, race, and so on" (p. 205). As an example, Powers and Pivovarova (2017) found that immigration status is responsible for an achievement gap of 27 points in PISA scores in the United States. However, this gap was substantially mitigated when race, wealth, and gender were accounted for, becoming nonsignificant. They argue that immigration gaps in the American education system appear to be race and wealth gaps, which is likely a legacy of longstanding systemic inequalities in education provision.

Even more consequential, the conflation and misrepresentation of poverty and migration background into a single classificatory scheme reduces discrete and dynamic social processes to a personal and stable attribute, like brown eyes or short stature. The overwhelming reliance in education research and policy on self-reported SES indicators to examine the social forces of poverty and inequality in education has led to contradictory conclusions and policy recommendations. Of note is wide variation in the estimated effects of individual and aggregate SES and migration status on individual, cohort, and school achievement scores. Rolfe and Yang Hansen (2022), in their systematic review of research examining the effect of family socioeconomic and migration background on different educational outcomes in international assessment, point to methodological weaknesses, claiming that this variation is "caused by the unobserved heterogeneity in the sample and confounding of the aggregated-level context with the individual characteristics" (p. 1479). As a result, the source and responsibility for uneven outcomes are (once again) relegated to the individual, and context-specific factors remain hidden. Without reliable and valid measures for student race/ethnicity or administrative data on family income and wealth, we cannot see the ways in which the education system functions differently for racialized or economically poor children. Furthermore, we cannot investigate or change the institutional determinates that moderate the association between minority race/ethnicity status and achievement, or household income and school trajectories.

Data omissions, misrepresentations, and conflations define what we can see and know – and thus change. A shift in focus from the individual to systems and how they function for various cohorts of students sheds light on effective policy and practice directions.

What we can see and know

In Flemish schools, popular education concepts and measures work as a collection of structuring structures, or cognitive structures, as each indicator has a social genesis and is also an expression of the order of places, of social structures, thus constructing social reality as much as expressing it (Bourdieu 1989: 21-22). Concepts and measures of SES and "migration background" are given an official status in education research and policy, thus imposing an official point of view, or common sense. Analysis of the ideas – as *ideas* – and the social reality of poverty in education allows us to trace the official procedures in education systems and everyday practices in schools and classrooms that work to make and keep children and their families poor.

Through this posture of reflexivity, we conclude that the misapprehension of social structures as individual innate attributes leads to the uneven distribution of resources in Flemish schools. Students are classified by school officials into distinct social categories that are endowed with a differentiated social value, and are subsequently separated in physical space. Spaces – or schools – to which devalued and dispossessed classifications are relegated are similarly devalued and dispossessed, producing stigmatized sites. Students are separated between curricula, between schools, and within schools by SES scores, academic achievement (frequently equated with cognitive ability or 'talent'), and immigration or ethnic background (Demeuse & Friant 2011; Rjosk 2022). These "measures" or scores derived from questionnaires on standardized tests are operationalized as innate student features or attributes, and are put to work as official classificatory schemes of perception and appreciation.

Kuypers and Marx (2019) observe, “There is, however, a critical problem with using material deprivation measures [such as the HOMEPOS indicator] for allocating public resources. Lacking certain goods may not be a result of lacking resources, it may just be a matter of preferences or spending patterns (Kus et al. 2016). From the perspective of effective and just redistribution this matters” (p. 132). Measures of SES or class using ESCS, HER/HRL or OKI are often used to segregate students and organize schools. This results in the reification of schemes of perception, as if they are real. This is the mechanism through which the words, the names we use, construct social reality as much as they express it, and “we have a world of common sense, a world that seems self-evident” (Bourdieu 1989: 19). “[T]his power of constitutive naming, which by naming things brings them into being” (Bourdieu 1990: 55), is symbolic power. Through symbolic power, “social fictions become reality insofar as they rest on shared categories and common beliefs that ground consonant action” (Wacquant & Akçaoğlu 2017: 39). Bourdieu (1989: 22) identifies such “world-making” as symbolic violence, as it renders other types of violence – economic and physical – inevitable, even necessary. Symbolic violence is the making of subordinate classifications of people “that are divested of legitimate means of accumulating all forms of capital [material and non-material] from the dominated social positions to which they are consigned” (Good Gingrich 2010: 164-5), and avenues for upward mobility in social space are cut off.

Two recent studies operationalise poverty as a measure of economic or material conditions (i.e., employment, or income and wealth) to study education outcomes, providing data specific to poverty in/and education in Flanders. First, Nicaise, Franck, and Cincinnato (2021) examined whether inequality in education and employment outcomes between disadvantaged and advantaged young people had decreased since the GOK policy took effect in 2002. Utilising the Labour Force Survey (EAK) coupled with Demobel by STATBEL, they investigated longer-term employment and career effects after secondary education by SES and migration background. Through a difference-in-differences approach, found that young people with a migrant background “are making spectacular progress on all the indicators” (p. 8), and the non-EU immigrants have made the greatest progress. A concerning finding exposed through the difference-in-difference approach is that “disadvantaged young people of native parentage are lagging behind” (p. 9).

Second, Chmielewski and Reardon (2016) made use of data from a parent survey that included a self-reported household income item administered by PISA in a limited set of countries in the years 2001, 2006, 2009, and 2012. They compare the magnitude of income achievement gaps (distinct from the more common SES achievement gap) across participating countries, and examine differences by national social and education characteristics, including rates of poverty and inequality, social welfare spending, educational differentiation (i.e., within- and between-school tracking, and curricular standardization (i.e., use of standardized testing). Flanders is among the highest in income-achievement gaps, despite low poverty and inequality overall and a relatively generous social welfare spending. Not surprisingly, Flanders has one of the highest educational differentiation index scores and a corresponding high income achievement gap. They also note that income achievement gaps may be substantively different from SES gaps. Particularly relevant for the Flemish education system, Chmielewski and Reardon (2016) found that “Differentiation was positively associated with income achievement gaps, regardless of what other variables were in the model, suggesting that tracking regimes and private school enrollment may operate to exacerbate income achievement disparities.... Thus, if

tracking results in a disproportionate share of low-income students being placed in lower-quality schooling, it may exacerbate achievement gaps between low-income students and their middle- and high-income peers" (p. 17).

Why should we care?

Education in Flanders functions to reproduce precise inequality and socioeconomic disadvantage. More specifically, the competitive, marketized, and costly education system is structured to reinforce social and economic divides, stigmatize communities, entrench segregation, and promote downward mobility for more and more students. From the common-sense perspective of meritocracy – that people get what they deserve – why should we care? What makes inequality and poverty in education a public concern rather than merely a private trouble?

Many education scholars promote a moral case for addressing poverty and inequality in education. With an emphasis on uneven opportunities for learning, a social justice imperative calls for *equity* with respect to students' access to educational resources and learning environments toward *equality* in educational outcomes for all student groups. Strietholt and Strello (2022) add a social contract perspective, noting three main rules for the distribution of public goods: equality, adequacy, and social inequality. "The key differences between equality and adequacy", they state, "is that the latter concept introduces the distinction between unjust and just inequalities in some public goods" (p. 203). In other words, the moral standard from this perspective is that individual variation in educational outcomes is problematic only if there are systematic differences by gender or race. The distributive rule of adequacy is more familiar as it pertains to poverty than education outcomes. For example, a standard measure to quantify poverty is the proportion of people who do not reach a minimum or median income. A guaranteed minimum income, as provided in Belgium, is concerned more with adequacy than equality. Some question whether the typical focus on SES gaps in educational outcomes, or inequality, is the main problem. For instance, Brighouse et al. (2018) assert "What is really at stake may be the low achievement of members of the low-performing group rather than the size of the gap between the average achievement of the two groups. Here the relevant distributive value may be adequacy" (p. 57). Regardless of the redistributive value that is invoked, the political and social purchase of a moral case is likely minimal given the social currency (on the political left and right) of meritocratic ideology and the associated shift from redistribution to social investment policies that focus on welfare through work, individual rather than collective responsibility, and reciprocity and deservedness rather than social protection (Cantillon & Van Lancker 2012).

Perhaps more compelling in the current social and political context in Flanders is the economic case. Education is widely considered a driver for financial success and economic, political, and social stability. For instance, as reported by McCreary et al. (2015), "the positive effects of education on economic growth include the adoption of new technologies, health literacy, higher wage levels, and better human capital in industry" (p. 59). However, evidence points to both high cost and lost revenue resulting from student segregation and school polarisation in the Flemish education system, indicating that the economic potential of public investment in education remains largely untapped. Specifically, for example, the high income-achievement gap observed in the Flemish education system, despite low levels of income inequality in Flanders overall, suggests that upward mobility for individuals – and thus economic

growth for the region – through education is thwarted (Chmielewski & Reardon 2016). The type and quality of policies and programmes matter more than the size of government spending or programme generosity (Sakamoto 2021). In multiple international comparisons, the Flemish education system is among the most expensive yet most unequal in the OECD. Public money is wasted on a segregated education system that is relatively expensive per student and yet perpetuates and reinforces poverty and inequality.

Given the critical function of education for economic strength and growth in Flanders, education and schools are necessarily a concern for government ministries dealing with poverty, employment, and immigration. Flanders is facing a shrinking working-age population, along with skills shortages and imbalances in a wide range of professional, technical and scientific occupations (e.g., science, technology, engineering and mathematics, health services, education) (OECD 2019). Specifically, for example, of the approximately 140,000 job vacancies in Belgium at the end of 2019, nearly 70% were in Flanders, and just over 10% in the Brussels-Capital Region, and nearly 20% in Wallonia. Further, "a much larger share of job vacancies in Flanders are in industry, construction, and retail and wholesale trade" (OECD 2020: 74). The problem of skills imbalances in Flanders, defined as a misalignment between the demand and supply of skills, are costly for individuals, firms and the economy. The OECD observed that the Flemish government "recently introduced several reforms and policies in the field of skills and education, many of which are steps in the right direction" to address these challenges (OECD 2019: 30). We note, however, that only one initiative is focused on primary or secondary education, and most of the recommendations and strategies from the OECD are geared toward developing skills, improving supports, and cultivating a learning culture for adults. A strong learning culture, to ensure that "individuals are ready to upgrade their existing skills or acquire new skills to adapt to new challenges and opportunities," is cited to be "imperative if a country wishes to thrive in an increasingly complex world" (OECD 2019: 32). Conversely, a shared value of learning must be nurtured before adulthood. The Flemish secondary school system, especially vocational education and training, could do much more to instill in young people the value of lifelong learning, as addressed in several of our recommendations. To start, teachers must be recognized as professional educators who are essential to nurturing a learning culture in Flanders rather than simply imparting a skill. Furthermore, it is critical to improve the quality and relevance of education in Flemish vocational schools to be more responsive to changing skills demands and to include "transversal skills that are likely to be needed across occupations in a rapidly changing economy, including literacy and numeracy, complex problem solving, and reasoning abilities" (OECD 2019: 35).

Working against the pressure for more youth to develop high levels of skills for productivity and economic growth in Flanders, core social and economic integration outcomes for immigrants in Flanders remain poor in international comparison. Gonne (2022) observes that Belgium's relatively good overall performance regarding income distribution and intergenerational mobility hides an uneven distribution of economic opportunities, noting considerable disparities across groups according to parental background and the country of origin. Specifically, for example, the children of non-EU citizens in Belgium face an approximately four-fold risk of poverty. In 2023, the OECD reported that "The highly unfavourable integration of non-EU immigrant women, refugees and youth with migrant parents merit particular attention. These groups are facing challenges that, if left unaddressed, risk

compromising the potential of the economy, the society, and of the individuals themselves" (OECD 2023: 3).

We know that unemployment hits those with low education attainment first and the hardest, and that young people in Flanders with a migration background are more likely to leave school early, leaving them without a secondary education. We also know that "unemployment has affected the efficiency of European economies, wasting human capital and depressing aggregate demand, whilst exacerbating inequality and poverty levels" (Calero & Choi 2017: 358). A contradiction or 'catch-22' for minors without legal status in Flanders is that they are subject to compulsory education, as are all children between the ages of five and 18, but they are not eligible to be legally employed upon school completion (Thomas et al. 2022). For these young people, education is a dead end. The systematic exclusion of young people with skills from the labour market is costly to the Flemish government and society in economic and social terms.

The social and pedagogical case for framing poverty and inequality in education as a public concern is closely tied to the economics of the matter. McCreary, Edwards and Marchant (2015) compare the relationship between country level economic variables (GDP and the GINI Index) and student PISA reading, math, and science scores with the relationship between individual SES, country SES mean, and country SES inequality and educational outcomes. They conclude that poor achievement may result in higher country-level SES inequality, rather than the more widely-held assumption that country SES inequality leads to lower achievement (p. 62). And we know that wide social and economic gaps in societies are associated with more social tension in communities, more crime, higher morbidity and early mortality rates, and low social trust and feelings of well-being.

The question as to whether "social mixing" in schools can reduce social inequality in education attainment has preoccupied scholars since the 1960s. More recently, the social mix debate was highly publicized in Flanders. Academics, politicians, journalists, school leaders, and parents have expressed their opinion on the desirability of mixed schools and mixing initiatives (Goossens 2019). Van Houtte (2024) notes that "The question as to whether or not a school's socioeconomic composition impacts student achievement still cannot be answered unequivocally" (p. 590). Some researchers urge the Flemish education system to increase social mix as a strategy to attenuate the negative consequences of free school choice (Gonne 2022). We argue that given the rapidly changing sociodemographic features of student populations, the "social mix" debate is neither here nor there, as social mix in Flemish schools and communities is already a reality. The only meaningful debate is whether Flanders wishes to invest evermore money and resources to maintain segregated schools and communities, reinforcing economic and social divides; or whether Flemish schools and communities will find ways to actively embrace cultural, racial and linguistic diversity and value difference.

Flemish education is organized to protect choice for select "consumers" such that there are discernible patterns in outcomes. An abundance of evidence shows systematic differences in students well served by the education system, and those for whom education fails. This is how economic, social, and subjective divides are (re)produced. Overall, poverty and inequality reinforced by the Flemish education system are costly to the government and people of Flanders in terms that are moral, economic, and social. The high cost and lost revenue of poverty and inequality in education are self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing, as summarised by Van Lancker

and Van den Heede (2021): “Rising inequalities require more redistribution to particular groups at risk of being out of a job which might negatively affect popular support for redistribution, in turn leading to less effective redistribution policies (Alt & Iversen 2017). On top of that, rising inequalities are associated with slower economic growth, curtailing the fiscal capacity to carry out stronger redistributive policies” (p. 223). Moreover, it is important to recognize that the social character of Flanders is changing, as is true for all wealthy nations and regions in the global north. Migration from the global south will continue, as climate change and environmental devastation wipe out livelihoods, as rising poverty and hunger lead to conflict and violence, as tyrannical autocrats wage war on neighbouring nations, and so on. Those at risk of poverty are increasing in Flanders. As the sociodemographic characteristics of Flemish students shows a growing proportion of students with migration background, more from low SES families, a higher number of single parent households, and more students living in poverty, data indicate that the education system, already relatively expensive per student, will become even more expensive to maintain over time, and will ultimately increase social and economic costs to Flemish society.

Recommendations for Educational Policy and Practice

> "*The shaming of those who fail educationally is a structurally generated effect, even though it is felt as an individual failure*" (Sayer 2005: 154).

In order to have an educational system that facilitates, rather than gets in the way of, democratic processes, and realises the potential of all children, in particular, those growing up in poverty, Flemish education policies need to target all levels of the system. They would address macro concerns around structure, meso concerns around institutional organisation, micro issues of teaching and learning in classrooms, as well as questions around the purpose of education, and the values that underpin it. We agree with Nicholas Gonne, an economist at the OECD, when he wrote:

> "To prevent the transmission of disadvantages across generations, social segregation in compulsory education should be addressed, in particular through better-designed school choice policies, higher mobility between general and vocational tracks, and stronger incentives and training for teachers" (Gonne 2022: 3).

But at the same time, it is important to recognise the limits of educational policies for addressing poverty. Poverty may be better tackled if the focus is not just on schools and families, but combined with policies to combat inequalities in housing, health, and employment. There also needs to be a stronger interrogation of the purposes of education, and the principles that best enshrine a just educational system.

The purpose of education and the values that underpin it

The white Western bourgeois child masquerading as universal child is key to reproducing our current hierarchical order by inciting the violence of continual measurement, evaluation and ranking, thereby legitimizing and depoliticizing the "achievement gap", and condemning Black, brown and poor children (Kromidas 2019: 65).

Making education fairer for all children is not just a question of the right policies and adequate resources, it is also an issue of how we envision both the child and education; a question of values and valuing. We need a more humane and less instrumental image of the child in education, an image informed by listening to children, and paying attention to the processes of their learning. Not just in Flanders, but more globally, educators are at risk of 'losing sight of the fact that children and young people are human beings who face the challenge of living their own life, and of trying to live it well' (Biesta 2021: 3). Recognising the right of all children to live their lives well would focus public and policy attention on poverty alleviation. It would also require a vision that views diversity as richness, recognised as a strength in society, not a weakness in need of remediation. The current prevailing norm of the competitive, academic, white middle class child excludes many children within the middle classes. However, it pushes many more working class, ethnically diverse children and young people beyond the edge of normality, leaving them to internalise a sense of educational failure, and feelings that education is not for them. In contrast, paying attention to all children enables a view of them as "unique individuals with differing experiences, ways of learning, rates of development, interests, talents and abilities" (Lewis 2021: 332) that society collectively has a responsibility to nurture. A vision that pushes back the too narrow boundaries of our perception of the child, allowing more space

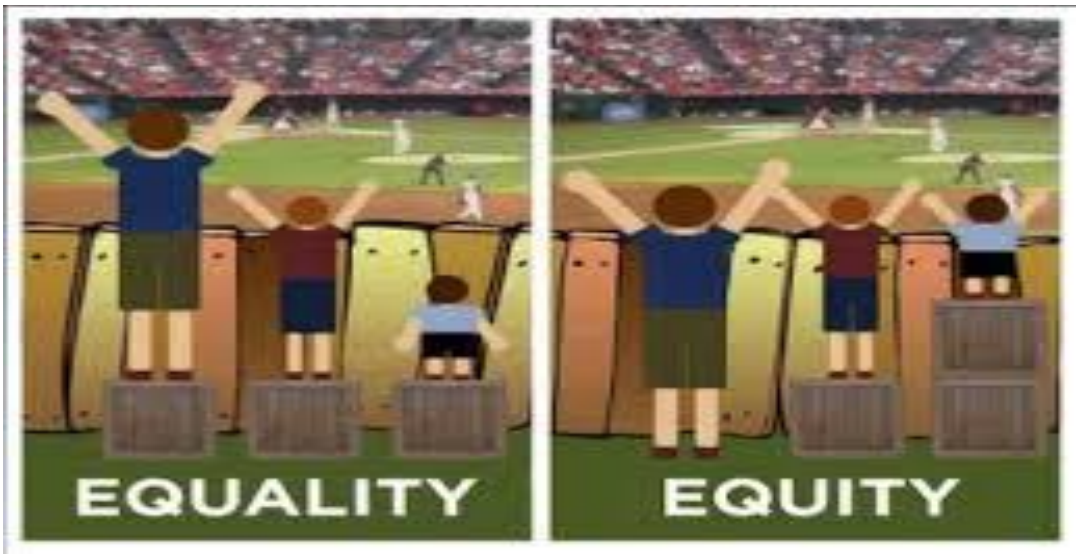
for agency, diversity, difference and creative possibilities is urgently required. As Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach to education, argued powerfully in a lecture in 1993:

> "Children have the right to imagine. We need to give them full rights of citizenship in life and in society. It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold" (Malaguzzi 1993).

Thirty years on, as inequalities in Flemish society increase, it is more important than ever that we strive to extend this image of the child to all children within the Flemish educational system.

Recommendation 1. Ensure a more equitable distribution and utilization of educational spending

A survey that looked at public opinion across Germany, Italy and the UK found that education was the most popular social investment policy. The average level of support for education was about 8.0, implying that around 88% of the respondents agreed that the government should increase spending on education (Bremer & Burgisser 2023). Recent European research also shows that countries with greater educational expenditure have less persistence of poverty across generations (Gregg & Macmilan 2020). Flanders already spends above the OECD average but the allocation of funding to different types of students within those schools requires more consideration. For too long, in Flanders, but also many other countries across the globe, the emphasis has been on equal opportunities in education.



The emphasis on equality, and equal opportunities has clearly failed. In a society with growing economic and geographical segregation the traditional egalitarian and 'same level for all' approach no longer works. It is time to move on from policies that have allowed stark educational divides to become a permanent fixture of Flemish society to ones that recognize the need for affirmative, equity-based reforms. Equity is about providing sufficient extra support to ethnically diverse children and young people growing up in poverty who need it in order to flourish in school. To-date that extra

support has not been sufficient. And those policies that have focused on providing extra resources have often been inefficient and undermined by policies such as school choice and tracking that have elitist outcomes. A bolder policy approach would entail more funding directed at schools seen to be 'poor' but one that ensured the extra funding and support met the target group. For example, what can Flanders, and Flemish policy makers do to make staying on at school, rather than leaving education without an educational qualification, the rational and positive decision for children growing up in poverty?

Past experience of allowing schools in both England (Burgess et al. 2023) and Flanders (Vandevoort et al. 2015) discretion in how they spend extra funding for disadvantaged pupils found that the money was put to general school use rather than improving the classroom teaching and learning for students growing up in poverty. More generally, the OECD (2017) found inefficient use of equity funding across European countries. Due to the Flemish interpretation of "freedom of education" and school autonomy, there is a lack of oversight on how school subsidies are spent (OECD 2023). Yet, a growing body of research from across the globe shows that focusing additional resources on schools facing higher levels of deprivation could be an important tool in narrowing the achievement gap between children from rich and poor families (Gibbons, McNally & Viarengo 2018; Jackson 2020; Jackson, Johnson & Persico 2016).

One policy scenario worth considering is the multi-disciplinary child welfare team in Finnish schools. One key ingredient of equity in Finland is the broad variety of additional supports delivered inclusively within schools under the mandatory Learning and Schooling Support system. Most schools have a school psychologist, school social worker, study counsellor, school doctor, school nurse, family counsellor and school speech therapist all working together within a school hub. Those schools with larger percentages of migrants and children growing up in poverty have larger welfare teams to meet the greater need. The purpose of the pupils' multiprofessional care team in Finnish schools is to create a healthy inclusive ethos for learning, protect mental health, prevent social exclusion and promote the well-being of the school community. Children's well-being is seen as just as important as academic achievement.

Recommendation 2. Widen the curriculum to enhance inclusion

> "You know, I think it would be great if there was a course on immigration. We don't even know what the first-generation immigrants went through. Last year, there was a guest lecturer who talked about it, that Belgium wanted immigrants, and that they [immigrants] saved the economy by working here. If they [Belgian descent students] also attend these lectures, they will understand better why we are here. They need to see these things a bit. Otherwise, the only thing they see is that you are a foreigner" (Colak et al. 2023: 635).

This student was talking about university level teaching, but we suggest such courses need to be provided much earlier in Flemish young people's education. Andreas Schleicher argues that teachers need to use 'methods of instruction that allow students from all backgrounds to learn in the ways that are most suitable and effective for them' (Schleicher 2018: 39). As the research by Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) demonstrates, current practices of teaching and learning make children growing up in poverty, and particularly those from migrant groups, feel alienated, isolated, and as if they do not belong in Flemish education. In addition to delaying the age of tracking and getting rid of grade repetition, there needs to be a stronger focus on inclusive education. It is important to ensure that socially and economically valuable working class and ethnic minority cultures are not ignored by the

curriculum; that texts from other cultures, linguistic forms, humour, film, TV, graphic art and leisure activities are acknowledged and encouraged. Similarly, all sorts of aspects of longer-established, working class, regional and local cultures need to be recognized within the curriculum. In addition to critical thinking skills and a much stronger focus on creativity, the curriculum needs to include political, social, environmental and diversity awareness, with pedagogic approaches focused on cooperation rather than competition. The recent report by the OECD (2023c: 51), on the results of the 2018 PISA global assessment of educational systems, found that "co-operation amongst students, independent of good relations with teachers, is also associated with higher performance – and with students' well-being: in every participating school system, students were more likely to feel they belong at school when their peers were more co-operative".

But it is children and young people growing up in poverty whose well-being, and sense of belonging, is enhanced the most. The emphasis should be on a 21st century curriculum that enables children to become questioning, engaged citizens with the knowledge and the skills to respond creatively to a rapidly changing world, but just as importantly for all Flemish children to develop the knowledge and ability to make the world a better, fairer, safer place.

Exemplar A: A glimmer of hope from England
Providing children growing up in poverty with care and compassion

A nurture-based pilot scheme carried out in one London primary school over 3 years has produced a dramatic improvement in Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) results in 2023. The Nurture programme, which supports children growing up in poverty facing multiple adversities in their lives, has been running in a school in London with 50% of pupils on Free School Meals. Not only SATs results, but also attendance and attention improved. Steve Chalke, the CEO of the school, which is part of the Oasis Academy Trust, said there had been a 40-percentage point increase in key stage 2 Sats results for 10- and 11-year-olds. Because of its success, the programme will be rolled out to 5 other Oasis primary schools in the next academic year.

Based on a child–centred philosophy, the Nurture programme is aimed at supporting children who, because of challenging situations in their lives, find school hard to relate to. Rather than taking a disciplinary approach to behaviour, the nurture programme enables children to build trust within school by linking them with a trusted adult – someone other than a teacher – who provides a safe space for children to express themselves. Then, using art, play and music, children are helped to explore and communicate their anxiety in order to understand themselves and make better connections with others (Weale 2024).

One parent at the school, Claire, with two children at the school, said she had seen first-hand the positive impact of the programme. “I have to say it genuinely has made an enormous difference to my kids as individuals, but also to the whole feel of the school,” she said. “It’s basically therapy, but the kids don’t realise. Both of mine have been miles more happy. It doesn’t sound like it would make a massive difference, but it really has.”

Speaking of the dramatic improvement for children, Steve Chalke said. “Not only did the school’s key stage 2 Sats results for 2023 increase by more than 40 percentage points, but it became the highest-ranking Oasis primary academy school, with combined reading, writing and maths outcomes far above the national rate of 59%, at 82%.” He described the work carried out through the Nurture programme as ‘the future of education”.

Although this is just one school out of over 16,000 in England, it provides a much needed glimmer of hope that much maligned child-centred approaches to children’s learning will finally be recognised as more effective than approaches that focus on discipline and controlling behaviour. The project succeeded not only in improving children’s well-being and sense of belonging in schools, but also their attainment. However, it is children from low income families who have the lowest sense of well-being in schools who benefit the most from the care, compassion and support provided by such programmes.

Recommendation 3. Design fairer school enrolment and admission policies

International research (Strello et al. 2022) shows that higher levels of segregation between and within schools lower educational achievement overall, and increases the social class achievement gap. The strong focus on parental choice in Flanders has exacerbated educational segregation and polarization, with children from similar social class and ethnic backgrounds clustered in the same schools. In Flanders choice seems to be valorized without recognizing that

choices come with resources that remain very unequally distributed. One consequence of a choice-based system is that the working classes, ethnic minorities and those living in poverty have largely ended up with the educational 'choices' that the middle and upper classes do not want to make. As research cited earlier shows, increasingly research talks in terms of rich and poor schools when it describes the Flemish educational system because the educational system is increasingly segregated by levels of parental income. It is vital therefore to change the current status quo which gives priority to upper and middle class parental choice and produces a grossly unfair system that has become a means of getting ahead of others, of stealing a competitive edge. Educational segregation is damaging for all social groups, it reduces social trust and tolerance of those who are different to oneself but it is particularly damaging for children, growing up in poverty, who end up in schools seen to be undesirable places to learn.

Flanders needs to introduce policies that develop a more inclusive social mix within schools. So far, as Nicaise et al. (2021) conclude, there have only been timid attempts at desegregation. A bolder policy approach would entail more funding directed at schools seen to be 'poor' but it would also necessitate a different approach to school admissions. Municipal and provincial authorities would be given control of admissions with the brief to establish legally enforceable fair admission policies that prioritise social mix over affluent parents' choice. And they would be adequately funded to take on this task. One option is to introduce a form of Banding - where the school admits an equal share of pupils from different attainment bands. This has a long fairly successful history in London when it was under the control of the Inner London Education Authority. Research is unanimous that banding is associated with lower school-level segregation when implemented at the local authority level (Burgess et al. 2023). It also has the added value of improving social mix in schools, which is known to be beneficial particularly for children from low income families (Cattan et al. 2023a). A recent innovation has been introduced by Brighton and Hove local authority in England. Education policy in the authority will give priority to children on free school meals over pupils from the catchment area when it comes to secondary school choice. The aim is to mix up school populations and give poor pupils access to sought after schools (The Guardian 2024).

Recommendation 4. Teachers and teaching that tackles poverty rather than managing it

In 'How to build a 21st-century school system' (2018) Andreas Schleicher asserts that successfully tackling poverty requires educational policies that attract the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms and the most capable school leaders to the most disadvantaged schools, and provide their educators with whatever support they need to succeed. Yet, the most experienced Flemish teachers are primarily to be found in the most advantaged schools. Flanders is one of a number of OECD countries where experienced teachers are more likely to work in schools with a low concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged students (less than 10% of the student body) than in schools where disadvantaged students constitute more than 30% of the student body. But the difference between these two types of schools in the share of experienced teachers is particularly large in Flanders where it stands at 13% (OECD 2022). Flanders is also one of a small minority of OECD countries where the best and most comprehensively educated teachers are overly represented in advantaged schools. It appears that socio-economically disadvantaged students in Flanders are receiving an inferior education to their more privileged peers.

Incentive schemes which pay teachers a premium for working in disadvantaged schools is one way forward. A further strategy is to ensure additional support for teachers who work in disadvantaged schools. The support should focus on in-service training as well as mentoring and induction activities

for those who are either new to the profession or have just moved to a new school.

A problem in relation to the teaching quality is the short duration of initial teacher education for pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education, which stands in contrast with the requirements of a master's level qualification for teachers at the upper secondary level (Nusche et al. 2015). School systems that combine high achievement with high levels of equity, such as Finland, ensure that all their teachers have extensive teacher education. The answer appears to lie in moving towards a highly qualified teaching force with the aim that a majority of teachers are educated to Masters level. Such courses would also need to provide time for reflection and consideration of the sort of conscious and unconscious bias that Boone and Van Houtte (2013), and Batruch et al. (2023) found among Flemish teachers. Far from shortening teacher training courses, the aim should be to lengthen them to ensure trainee teachers learn about the impact of poverty on students' learning, and are guided in ways to combat that impact.

People who have grown up in poverty, including migrants, are under-represented in the Flemish teaching force. The work force needs to be much more diverse with incentives such as bursaries/grants to encourage under-represented groups to become teachers.

However, as the discussion groups at our December symposium made clear, it is vital to recognize that tackling poverty requires wider economic and social policies beyond the educational system. Education cannot solve poverty. The problem of poverty should not be left 'on the shoulders' of public sector workers including teachers, but designated as the responsibility of the whole of Flemish society.

Exemplar B: From Japan
Embedding equity through curriculum and pedagogy

In the 2022 PISA assessment (OECD 2023b) Japan was one of only two countries with improved academic performance. Furthermore, that performance had also improved for students in the most disadvantaged socio-economic quartile. The gap in achievement between the top and bottom 25% in terms of income level is now one of the lowest in the OECD. Japanese students are performing even better in collaborative problem solving than their already strong performance in science, reading and mathematics would suggest (OECD 2018).

Part of the reason why the overall achievement has improved and the socio-economic gap has reduced is the strong focus on collaboration in Japanese staffrooms and classrooms. Collaborative planning – jugyou kenkyuu – where teachers meet regularly to collaborate on the design and implementation of lessons gives teachers autonomy over pedagogy but is also a means of constantly reviewing and improving practice (Gordon Győri 2019). As Elliott (2019:180) states, in the Japanese context, teachers have participated in a long tradition of improving the curriculum by adopting a research stance towards their teaching. Teachers work together designing lesson plans, then one teacher will teach the lesson while others observe and provide feedback. The result is a very strong culture of teacher accountability towards one's colleagues, but also high standards of teaching across all schools, including those in high poverty areas.

The emphasis on collaboration extends to student learning in classrooms. Excessively competitive examinations, and a 'cramming-style' of education, together with what was seen to be an unnecessary focus on facts, were recognised as a problem at the beginning of the 21st century (Yamanaka and Suzuki 2020). The National Curriculum Standards (Nakayasu 2016) developed in the 2000s stated that children needed to acquire a 'zest for life' (ikiru chikara). Developing that zest for life was seen to require the development of skills to think, make judgments, and express oneself through project-based, cross curricular learning. It was also viewed as requiring "a sense of true humanity that encompasses self-discipline, the ability to cooperate with others, the empathy and emotional health to let external events touch their hearts' (Takayama 2021). There is a focus on trying, failing, adapting, and evolving, that many other educational systems lack. Andreas Schleicher (2018: 101) writes of:

"observing many classes in Japan where there was little lecturing by teachers, but where teachers developed a class discussion that focused on conceptual understanding and the underlying concepts involved in problem solving, in a way that reached both the quickest and the slowest students in the class. In this way, Japanese teachers maximise their contact time with each student in the class."

A relatively large share of instruction time at primary and lower secondary level is devoted to subjects other than reading writing and arithmetic including the Period for Integrated Studies and student-led activities (tokkatsu). The child-centred collaborative approach to learning at both elementary and junior high school levels has resulted in Japanese students having one of the highest levels of belonging in schools internationally (OECD 2019). But, importantly, this sense of belonging extends to children in low-income groups, as well as their more affluent peers.

Recommendation 5. Ensure access to flexible, affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care for the most vulnerable

According to the OECD, the evidence is clear that early years education for children below the age of four has a positive impact on the life chances of children growing up in poverty. Children in poverty receive particular benefit from attending pre-school education, especially when they are learning alongside children from different social backgrounds. Yet in most rich nations, children growing up in poverty spend significantly less time in pre-school education than their more affluent peers. Flanders is doing well in relation to early years provision, providing free access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education for children under 3. However, like in a majority of nations, take up is lower among the poor than among higher income groups. According to Gromada and Richardson, in 2020 less than 40% of low income families took advantage of the provision compared to over 70% of high income groups. Additionally, the Flemish childcare sector is comprised primarily of Dutch-speaking providers with staff and policies to support a foreign home language the exception rather than the rule. The failure to attract low income families is partly a consequence of the monolingualism of the provision, but as well as employing mother tongue teachers, Flemish early years education requires a strong out-reach programme that enables a productive relationship with families in poverty who may be reluctant to send their children to nursery. One possible model is the Sure Start programme in UK under the Labour Government It provided free nursery education in community hubs that joined up education with health and welfare services for families living in poverty. Teachers also need to be empowered as professionals. This would require sufficient child-free hours to facilitate group reflection. Early years professionals require opportunities for consultation, and the time to observe and critically reflect upon each other's practice and build strong relationships with the community and the parents.

Early years provision also needs a teacher-pupil ratio that allows for regular, formative interaction between teacher and child. Research (Peleman et al. 2020) suggests that numbers of children per teacher are too large to facilitate sufficient educative interaction, particularly for children growing up in poverty.

Exemplar C: From Flanders
'Lekkers Op School' – Fighting poverty with free school meals for preschoolers

Since September 2021, preschoolers from eight Ghent schools have been receiving free or virtually free meals at school. 'Lekker(s) Op School' is a project of the City of Ghent that will continue to run until June 2025 in eight kindergartens. In two of the eight schools, all children receive free or very cheap hot meals; in three other schools, all preschoolers receive a '10 hour' snack or their lunch boxes are replenished; and in three other schools, children from low-income families receive a discount on hot meals.

A preliminary evaluation released in December 2023 by the research team from HOGENT and KULeuven reported that the project helps in the fight against poverty. While the research showed that all three programs have a positive impact on the children's education and health, offering a free hot meal daily to all preschoolers has the largest effect, improving achievement, overall well-being, eating patterns, school attendance, and language.

Rudy Coddens, Alderman for Poverty Alleviation and Health, commented "*Nothing is worse than child poverty. Free meals at school ensure that children do not go to school hungry. This gives children maximum opportunities at school, and they learn to be more aware of healthy food. We would like to continue this project and expand it to other schools. We call on the Flemish government to support us in thi*s."

The results reveal the impact of the educational meal on the development of children: by eating together and working on nutrition together, preschoolers make clear learning gains. A focus on the eating experience, guidance during meals, sensitizing parents and developing an eating and learning climate is also important.

In the absence of public investment in addressing the problem of increasing poverty of school children, schools and municipalities undertake a wide range of actions and initiatives, often with little or no support from the Flemish government. Project-based funding, which many schools and organisations routinely apply for to try to run anti-poverty initiatives for children, is short-term, often inadequate, and does not allow for longer-term sustained programming across all school boards to show appreciable return on investment.

Research consistently shows that food and learning are necessary partners, and effective teaching is not possible when children's basic needs are not met. School-based meals improve educational outcomes. The research team recommended a universal offer for all children. Furthermore, they asserted that collaboration between policy domains and levels of authority is important for an effective programme.

Recommendation 6. Sort learning opportunities, not students

a) Delay tracking
b) Permit mixing and matching to student interests and strengths
c) Facilitate upward mobility
d) Promote integration of OKAN students

The early sorting and "waterfall" tracking system limits– even cuts off – educational upward mobility. Boone and Van Houtte (2013) report that students' "perception of their choice process is powerfully framed by deep-rooted conceptions about the educational alternatives available to them" (p. 549). Research shows that in an education system that limits learning opportunities to highly stratified (even polarized) tracks, students come to know their place. The result is social segregation that "remains crushing" (Nicaise, Franck, & Cincinnato 2021), reinforcing residential and labour market segregation (Franck & Nicaise 2022: 506).

The transition from primary to secondary school is significant for students, and students need time to adjust. First, delaying tracking is critical to give students time to mature and get to know their learning style and needs. Early tracking, with only the possibility of moving downward, denies students the opportunity to improve their skills and performance.

Additionally, we recommend to smooth the tracks – to decrease the disparity between tracks, to facilitate movement between tracks, to permit multi-tracking by offering a variety of learning opportunities from which students can choose, and to make pathways for upward mobility. An example that illustrates what we have in mind comes from Canada. The Ontario curriculum is "de-streamed" until grade 10 (or year two of level two of the Flemish secondary system). Then, core courses – such as Maths, Sciences, English (writing, literature), History, Geography – and many elective courses – such as Business and Computer courses – offer multiple streams from which students can choose: University, College (or applied), and Workplace (or essential). Most Arts and Physical Education courses, for example, are open. Students can choose courses that fit with their strengths and interests. For example, a student who is strong in History and English may choose University level for these courses, but if they are weak in Maths, they might choose College or even Workplace level for these courses. In this way, students are not tracked or streamed, but can customize their learning opportunities to fit their abilities and aspirations. Schools are comprehensive, in that all levels of courses are offered in schools to a wide mix of students. Some schools offer specialized programs (e.g., Fast Forward) to prepare students for the workplace or College after secondary school. These students attend school alongside university-bound students.

Currently, OKAN students are segregated in Flemish schools for at least one year and have limited interaction with their Dutch-speaking peers. The Dutch language is taught out of context, separate from the required curriculum. Children are denied informal (yet effective) opportunities to learn the language from and with their peers. Furthermore, immigrant and refugee children may have experienced gaps in their education as a result of displacement or migration. The exclusive focus on language classes further sets students behind, making it difficult for them to ever catch up with their peers. Scholars and practitioners promote a transition from a monolingual toward a multilingual approach regarding home languages in education. Sometimes referred to as "functional multilingual learning," this approach not only promotes earlier integration of OKAN students, "home languages are proactively used as resources for learning language and academic

content in the classroom" (Foster, Van Avermaet, & Auger 2023: 247) rather than viewed as a deficit. Non-profit organisations, such as Foyer, offer advice and support regarding multilingualism in education for teachers and schools.

Recommendation 7. Replace grade repetition with alternative learning and student support programs

The relatively common practice in Flanders of requiring students to repeat a grade – sometimes two or three grades – brings to mind the familiar quote, often attributed to Einstein, that "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." The assumption underlying grade repetition is that the student has failed, rather than the system has failed the student. We know that conventional education does not meet the diverse learning styles and cultural norms of students. This is especially true of the reportedly conventional and inflexible education system in Flanders. This year, the OECD reported that "the gap in the retention rate between students with and without migrant parents is nowhere as large as in Flanders. Although grade repetition is intended to offer students additional time to catch up with their peers, in reality, there is no evidence that it results in reducing the educational gap between the two groups" (OECD 2023). Furthermore, grade repetition decisions are often left to individual discretion, and are thus vulnerable to individual bias and prejudice, reinforcing the systemic bias that is built into the education system.

The negative consequences of grade repetition are severe. All young people who repeated a grade are less likely to be employed, and are therefore much more likely to live in poverty. Even Flemish-born youth who repeated a grade have lower employment rates than their peers who did not repeat a grade, irrespective of their parents' place of birth (FPS Employment and Unia 2022). Furthermore, we know that those who repeated a grade are more likely to drop out from school early and achieve lower levels of formal education. The failure of the Flemish education system to meet the needs of students with a migration background is clear, and the social and economic costs are high and long-term.

Several of our recommendations are geared toward providing students – all students – with high quality education in a supportive learning environment: to reflect the diverse realities of students in the curriculum, as in recommendation #2; provide supports for students (and teachers) from multi-disciplinary teams in schools, as in recommendation #4; offer movement between tracks and a variety of learning opportunities and styles, as in recommendation #6. In addition, researchers and some migrant support organizations, such as Foyer in Brussels, promote the importance of a transition from a monolingual toward a multilingual approach regarding home languages in education. Such initiatives, it has been suggested, "will be most successful when initiated by teachers at school and classroom level based on school and classroom experiences" (Pulinx, Van Avermaet, & Agirdag 2017).

The Flemish Government's learning support decree, initiated in September 2022, holds some promise for the development and resourcing of alternative education programs. In this decree, a new model for supporting pupils with specific educational needs in mainstream education is defined: the learning support model. The aim is to strengthen ordinary education, learning support and special education. The Flemish Government aspires to create: a strong primary care and increased care in mainstream education; a sustainable learning support model

with appropriate employment conditions for support staff; a fully-fledged place and a strengthening of the quality of special education" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022). The operationalization and implementation of such an initiative is critical. Teachers and school administrators can hold the government to account.

Recommendation 8. Lift and level the education playing field

a) Target resources to vocational schools
b) Create more comprehensive schools
c) Invest in teachers and teaching

The polarized market-place of schools, along with the principle of free choice and school autonomy, creates a self-perpetuating two-tiered education system that is designed to benefit the elite few and keep people in place. Overall, the quality of education necessarily declines, as the system is conserving and conservative, inflexible, and resistant to innovation and change in a rapidly changing social, environmental and technological context.

To improve the quality of the Flemish education system overall, the long-standing under-resourcing of technical and vocational schools must be corrected. It is illogical for schools with a concentration of high-needs students to make do with less funding and less qualified teachers. A targeted universalism approach, whereby a universal goal is achieved by targeting resources where the need is greatest, has been shown to be effective.

Comprehensive schools can provide more variety in learning opportunities and styles for all students, facilitate movement between tracks and upward mobility (as described in recommendation #6). Comprehensive schools also combats competition between schools and can facilitate cooperation and collaboration.

Practical teachers in vocation schools are often graduates of vocational schools themselves, with little or no post-secondary or teacher education. The devaluation and under-resourcing of the vocational secondary education system is stark. Teachers are not prepared for teaching in the multicultural settings of technical and vocational schools, and they often receive little or no ongoing professional development. The OECD reports that "nearly 50% of lower secondary school teachers in Flanders work in classrooms where more than 10% of the students have a home language other than Dutch (OECD 2019). Only Sweden and Austria record higher shares in this respect" (OECD 2023). Yet, teachers in general receive less training and education and support than in other jurisdictions. This juxtaposition is consequential for students and teachers alike. To lift and level the educational playing field, investments are needed in teacher education and ongoing teacher training to increase the status, engagement, and value of teachers and the teaching profession.

In Japan, for example, teachers with more experience are expected to teach in more needy schools. The distribution of teachers is organized through a targeted process that aims for the universal goal of increasing the capacity of schools and teachers. As is more common in non-Western cultures, there is a keen awareness of our interconnectedness and interdependence.

A second model for change comes from the Teachers Programme in the Netherlands. The programme, developed in close deliberation with teachers, principals, school boards and teacher

educators, builds on good practices to strengthen the professional body, expand coaching for new teachers, create alliances between teacher training institutions and schools, and develop a peer evaluation system (Rouw et al. 2016).

Recommendation 9. Expand and strengthen education networks to ensure optimal learning conditions for all students

a) Develop sustainable capacity for schools to provide school meals and other basic necessities
b) Build coalitions of stakeholders to advocate for governments to partner with schools to tackle poverty

The research is unequivocal: adequate learning conditions is most important for student achievement. We know that schools are the most readily available support resources for children and youth, but this is not guaranteed. As the example of Flanders shows us, schools can also augment and cement existing societal marginalization and inequalities (Liebenberg 2023).

We heard from teachers and school staff that they are confronted with the realities of poverty in their students and families every day – realities that impact the learning environment for all students. Students come to school hungry or with empty lunch bags, or without warm clothing on cold winter days. Reports show that food insecurity has dramatically increased since the pandemic, even for working families. Moreover, the resources available to teachers to effectively address these needs are limited or even non-existent, resulting for some in a sense of despair. Some school administrators put a lot of time and energy into securing special project funding to offer school meals or clothing, a solution that is short-term and unsustainable. And we know that while such emergency measures are necessary to limit the severe consequences of malnutrition and under-nutrition, especially for children, the structural sources of poverty remain unchallenged.

We recommend cultivating and strengthening inter-school and cross-sector cooperation to cultivate "communities of care" (Scherman & Liebenberg 2023) with "schools as nodes of care" (Liebenberg 2023) to tackle poverty in schools together. This inter-agency collaboration, or "the 'extended school' approach" (Nicaise, Vandevoort, & Verelst forthcoming), already exists in many communities in Flanders. Education networks might conduct local needs and resources assessments related to poverty in schools. Specifically, for example, teachers and school staff must be consulted, to be invited to share their daily experiences in the classroom. Listening to teachers and respecting their expertise is critical for teacher retention. A second important step is a resources assessment, or compiling a local inventory of NGOs, welfare agencies, universities, public libraries, politicians and other key individuals that might be invited to collaborate toward a common goal.

Education networks can be expanded and strengthened for a two-pronged approach: first, to generate sustainable programs and funding to meet immediate, basic needs of students in schools; and second, for long-term change, to build capacity to advocate for governments to situate the Flemish education system and schools at the core of its social welfare system and anti-poverty strategy – to recognize and harness the social and economic benefits of targeted public spending on education. Communities of care can insist on a shift in the discourse and the current "common sense." Policies that conceive of poverty as a private trouble, or individual failure, are largely

ineffective, as people-change measures require participation in systems and structures that are designed to exclude them. A re-orientation of "common sense" recognizes poverty as structural violence, as *conflict* that is at once interpersonal and systemic, manifesting itself in fractured relationships between individuals, groups, communities, societies, and nations. Effective responses to poverty challenge the ideas as well as the social systems that generate and regenerate social and economic divides.

Recommendation 10. Address gaps in data to support evidence-based policy and practice

We can't know what we don't measure. Even more, we don't know what we don't know. We identify three key issues for future research in education in Flanders – and all of Europe.

a) Explore methods to link education data to population-based administrative data. Research shows that common measures of SES in education research "may be insufficient to fully characterize socioeconomic disparities in school performance. More and better international data on household income are essential for cross-national research on educational inequality" (Chmielewski & Reardon 2016: 18). To date, we know little about the relationship between education achievement and trajectories and poverty or economic exclusion outcome measures. This gap in knowledge is in large part because measures of income and wealth and employment indicators such as wages, precarious employment, under- and unemployment, etc., are rarely available in cross-national education studies. We also note the need for administrative or registered data to compare with self-reported income and wealth-related measures. Concerns regarding privacy are well-founded, although researchers are developing strategies and methods for preserving privacy and addressing other linkage challenges (e.g., Harron et al. 2017; McFarland et al. 2021; Robson & Malette 2023; Zachrisson et al. 2023).
b) Standardise the collection of sociodemographic data on race and ethnicity in population surveys that can be linked to education data. To develop policy and practice that can effectively transform multiple structures of inequality, it is imperative to have data to investigate intersecting social relations of power. Toward tracing and addressing social and economic outcomes by racial and ethnic differentiation (in areas such as living standards, access to employment and labour market outcomes, housing, education, health), Farkas (2017: 49) recommends that the European Commission (Eurostat) include data collection on racial and ethnic origin in the European Statistical Programme and a module on racial and ethnic origin in the EU-SILC. In education research, valid data on racial, ethnic and geographic origin would facilitate, for example, examination of distinctive impacts of school features, such as tracking and anti-school cultures, by gender, SES, family income, and race/ethnicity, as well as the intersections of these axes of differentiation (Van Houtte & Stevens 2016: 394).
c) Establish methodological standardisation of research into the experiences of discrimination and racism for the purposes of designing targeted equality policies and institutional equity practices. Standardised subjective data on discrimination experiences would enable comparative examination of school cultures and practices across school boards, regions and nations.

Strategies for System Change

To conclude, it seems clear that the Flemish education system and policies are producing the desired results – maintaining social segregation and protecting the status and privilege of the few in Flemish communities, the labour market, and society as a whole. Diversity of language, ethnicity, culture, and religion is often not seen as strength and opportunity. Rather, diversity tends to be devalued, even held in contempt, to be managed and kept at a distance. The well-documented inequities between and within schools, and the social stratification of students, are not unintended consequences. The Minister of Education recently made this clear in his declaration that it is up to individual families to ensure children have enough to eat, proper clothing, a place to live, even language skills. This disavowal of public responsibility is, of course, not unique to Flanders, and is nothing new. Scolding – even punishing – the poor is a well-worn yet ineffective intervention. Maintaining highly stratified and segregated schools and communities has a high – and rising – price tag, as migration cannot be stopped, and structured poverty and inequality are self-reinforcing.

A counter-narrative is critical, to shift the overall worldview, the taken-for-granted assumptions, in the design and delivery of education. In many ways, education policy is economic policy. To condemn lower class, poor, and migrant children to a life of un- and under-employment, poor health and well-being, social and material deprivation is foolish and costly. Education that gives every student the best chance at a productive, engaged and healthy life is simply good social and economic policy.

The endeavour of envisioning a more equitable education system that effectively tackles poverty emerges from and returns to *social* ideals: a commitment to social rights and shared responsibility through public dialogue and collective action. Such social goals are necessarily rooted in a deep awareness of our common fate: that we all live the conflict and violence wrought by poverty and inequality; that, in time, the protections afforded through large volumes of capital will prove to be less and less effective and meaningful in the everyday realities of life.

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