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## **WORKING PAPER**

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

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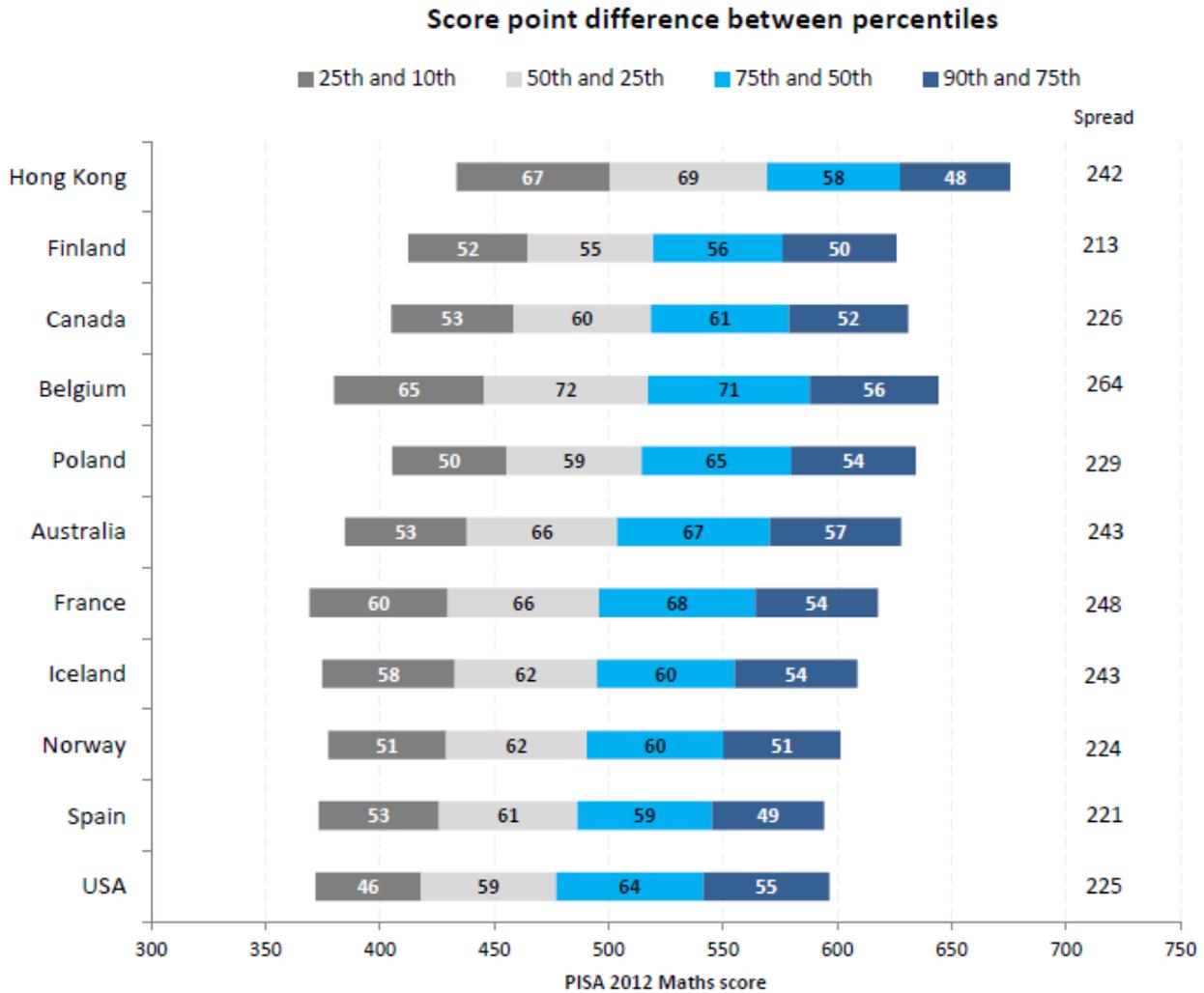
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Belgium occupies a distinct position in PISA 2012 scores (see Figure 1). First, the Belgian educational system belongs to the international top in terms of performance. The top students in Belgium score second highest of all ISCY countries on mathematics.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

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

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

**Figure 1— The position of Belgium in PISA 2012 mathematics**



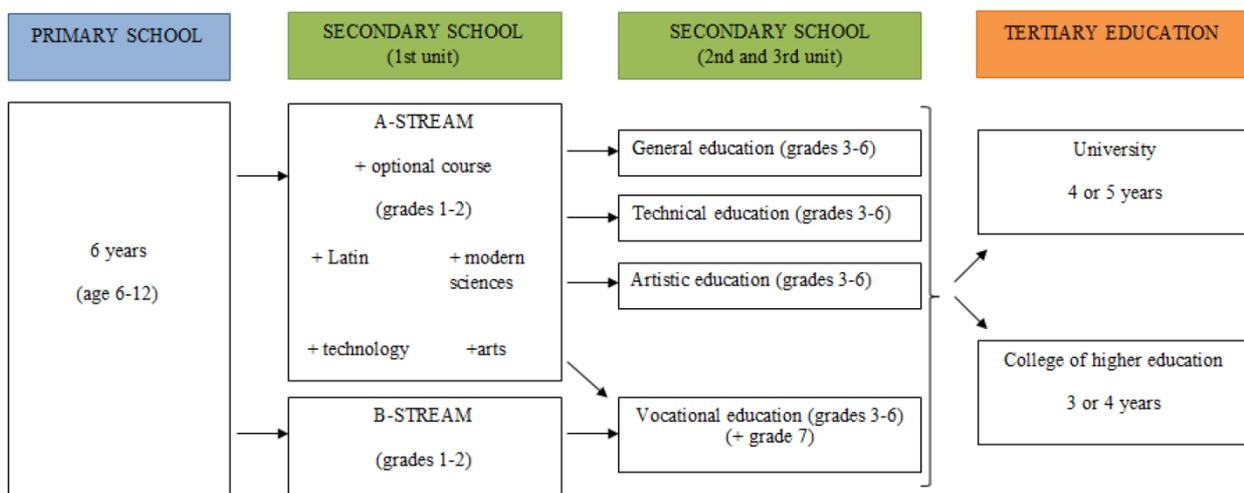
**The structure of the Flemish educational system**

One specific feature of the three educational systems in Belgium is the constitutional right of freedom, which implies freedom to establish primary or secondary educational institutions. This has led to political discussions and impasses in Belgian history, whereby the Catholic party firmly opposed any intrusion of this freedom. As a result, there are public and private schools, with a large majority of private primary and secondary schools. However, also private schools receive conditional funding from the government for personnel and operating costs. These schools are mostly catholic. The funding for private schools is almost always lower than for public schools due to divergent allocation formulas. Even though private education has a certain pedagogical freedom, it needs to meet the attainment targets of the Flemish Community.

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

In Flanders, between-school tracking is most common, though within-school tracking exists. Thus, many schools offer one or two tracks, giving rise to academic schools, technical/vocational schools and a few vocational schools (Van Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2012). Besides these categorical schools, multilateral schools offer academic, technical and vocational tracks. Nonetheless, in multilateral schools groups are not heterogeneous, as these schools are also characterized by stringent tracking.

**Figure 2— Structure of the Flemish educational system**





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

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

Compulsory education ends at the age of 18. There is a possibility of part-time vocational secondary education at the age of 15, however, only 8867 students were enrolled in this type of education in 2012-2013 (Flemish Department of Education, 2013). It is enshrined in the Belgian Constitution that every child has the right to education, which ensures education without tuition fee during compulsory education. After six years of secondary education, students receive a high school diploma, granting unlimited access to higher education (with the exception of medicine, which requires an entrance exam). In the vocational track, however, an additional seventh grade is needed to obtain a high school diploma. A central exam does not exist, so the decision to award a diploma is the responsibility of the school. Educational institutes have a lot of autonomy in Flanders (Stevens, 2007). The government ensures high quality in compulsory education through attainment targets and development objectives, which are monitored through inspections. A high school diploma gives access to higher education, as for most programs in tertiary education the only precondition is a high school diploma. Thus, although academic education is intended to prepare for higher education, every student with a high school diploma is allowed to enter tertiary education. Nevertheless, the chances to succeed in tertiary education are higher for students that completed the academic track (Vanderheyden and Van Trier, 2008).

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

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

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

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

In spite of these good intentions, tracking seems to have adverse effects for students in certain tracks. In our present knowledge society, notwithstanding that there is a profound need for well-



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

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

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



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

Moreover, the tendency of the Flemish tracking system to increase the educational gap between high and low achievers is responsible for creating an achievement gap between students from the higher and lower social strata. Research showed, namely, that students' allocation within the various tracks is not only dependent upon academic credentials, it is also affected by social background. More specifically, students from a higher socio-economic background are not only more likely to choose for the A-stream in lower secondary education, they also more often opt for theoretical courses in that A-stream, for example by choosing Latin (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a). This observation may – in part – be explained by biased teacher recommendations: teachers are more likely to recommend a more theoretical curriculum for students of higher socio-economic backgrounds (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b). Eventually, these students are more likely to end up in the higher tracks than their equally-performing counterparts from lower social strata. However, this role of the teacher may only partly explain social differences in track allocation, as the decision whether to follow these recommendations lies with the parents. In line with the idea of relative risk aversion (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), parents want their children to be at least as successful as themselves. Therefore, parents from the higher social strata more readily limit the choices of their children to following the academic track, while parents from lower social strata allow for more choice options (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a). As such, for a child from a more disadvantaged background, it may suffice to follow technical or vocational education in order to attain the education level of their parents. For students from more affluent families, only the academic track suffices for that end. Moreover, due to a lack of valid information about the secondary educational system, many ethnic minority students actually aiming for higher education end up in the technical or vocational track (Van Praag et al. 2012). This seriously jeopardizes their postsecondary opportunities, a fact that these students eventually become aware of, when it is already too late to change tracks.

In summary, the strict tracking system in Flanders has given rise to a highly stratified and hierarchically ordered system. The students that perform excellently on PISA tests are enrolled in academic tracks – clearly, this system is well-suited to ensure educational growth in students. In Flanders, though, this comes at a large price. The hierarchical ordering of the various tracks leads to the perception among the many students in the lower tracks that they have failed the educational system, giving rise to an anti-school culture that jeopardizes future educational success. As selection into the various tracks is codependent upon social background factors, the



Flemish tracking system eventually exacerbates social inequality in opportunities. No wonder, then, that, while Flanders scores high on excellence in PISA tests, it also tends to score low on equity.

### The current study

To demonstrate the effects of the Flemish track system, we will present some results of the International Study of City Youth data on Ghent. First, we will consider the role of social background characteristics in track allocation. Second, we will investigate differential attitudes and behaviors across the tracks of the Flemish educational system. More specifically, we will investigate students' sense of futility - which concerns students' attitudes about whether putting effort in studying and gaining good grades is pointless -, and the level of school misconduct – which is minor rule-breaking behavior at school. Moreover, as students with antischool attitudes are likely to value part-time working as a way to demonstrate their adulthood (Willis 1977), we also investigate differences between tracks with regard to part-time working.

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