- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY -

Diversity Barometer Education

In this report, (in Part 1) we first provided an **overview of the current scientific knowledge concerning disadvantage in education experienced by LGBT students, students with a migration background, with a functional disability or from families with a poorer socio-economic background**. According to this analysis of the literature, it appears that Flemish education ranks among the top internationally with regard to quality and performance. However, the Flemish (and likewise, the French-speaking) education system ranks among the lowest in Europe in terms of social justice.

Students with a migration background, with a functional disability or from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds more often have to repeat a year, are less prevalent in highly-valued forms of education, are more likely to leave school without a diploma, and are less inclined to pursue higher education.

It is clear that students with a *migration background* are in a highly vulnerable position, and they perform markedly poorly on various indicators for school success. This can be explained partially by the fact that these students must often contend with a combination of challenges, in which particularly their poorer socio-economic background has a strong impact. This interplay of indicators is a general observation in the analysis. For example, a disproportionate number of children in special-needs education have a migration background and/or poorer socio-economic background. It would therefore appear that focusing at the start of the school career on a high-quality care and remedial learning system could make a significant difference for these target groups.

Moreover, the Flemish schools are characterised by a high degree of *segregation*, whereby students with a functional disability, with a migration background or from families with a poorer socio-economic background are concentrated in certain schools.

The analysis also indicates that, from an international perspective, LGBT students appear to perform relatively well in Belgium in terms of school results, motivation and student-teacher interaction, for example. However, this impression should be treated with some caution given that LGBT students perform very poorly in terms of other indicators (such as mental well-being and suicide problems) and there has been little research on their school experiences to date.

Based on the *causal analysis*, it appears that, per target group, a number of specific challenges come into play at the *individual* level or in the *social background*, which can get in the way of a successful school career. Also, in the interactions with peers, we observe that there are bullying issues for each of these target groups. However, it is important to pay attention to **causes and explanations that have to do with the *processes that come into play at the level of the system or school***. Clearly, with regard to recommendations, these are precisely the levels at which policymakers have the potential to intervene.

Moreover, the international comparison reveals that significant causes at these levels can explain the poor position of the Flemish education system with regard to social equality. Thus, it appears that the segregation in education can to some extent be linked to problems with the current policy on enrolment, funding of education and lack of school infrastructure.

The literature review also reveals that tracking students into different forms of education at an early age, the current policy on issuing performance certificates, and the hierarchical structure of the educational system contribute to the social selection in secondary education.

In this study, we have attempted to gain further insight into this matter by focusing on the **orientation policy and practices** in secondary education (Part 3).

Secondary education in Flanders is characterised by a combination of orientation (tracking) at an early age, and an unequal social status of the forms of education. This combination can lead to a reproduction of social inequality through socio-economic differences in the programme of study chosen.

The orientation at an early age can in fact mean that such decisions are based not so much on the talents and interests of the students but rather based on the preferences of the parents, and the preferences and recommendations of the teachers and schools[1]. Social differences are thus reinforced by opting for less ambitious school tracks. For their part, teachers tend to base their recommendations on performance and attitude towards learning (in order to form homogenous subgroups) rather than on the basis of interest or talents. And since, at the age of 12, performance can also be strongly linked to the social background of students, the orientation towards those study tracks perceived as higher in status easily becomes influenced by a strong social selection process.

In the orientation of students, the school certificates play an important role. What is known as an A-certificate indicates that the student has passed and may graduate to the following year of school. Students receive a C-certificate if they have failed too many classes to justify admitting them to the following year of school, and they are required to repeat the year, even if they opt to follow a different programme of studies. Finally, a B-certificate gives students permission to move ahead to the next school year, but only if they choose a different programme of studies. This is primarily used to avoid keeping students forever stuck in a certain form of education. The B-certificate thus gives the student the choice to change their programme of study for the following year (whether or not this is in the same type of educational programme), or to repeat the year.

Although intended to prevent failure, in reality these B-certificates appear to reinforce inequality of opportunity. For example, based on survey data it has been demonstrated that the chances of entering higher education are chiefly reduced *when students switch to a different form of education after receiving a B-certificate*; whereas remaining within the same form of education but changing programme of study has no significant impact[2]. Our study based on population data[3] on the

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1 Monard Commission, 2009

2 Spruyt e.a., (2009)

3 Studies of administrative data and population data on students correlated to school characteristics are an important source of information. Further refinement of the available data would make it possible to more clearly differentiate the various groups in terms of grounds for discrimination, preferably based on a commonly applied definition. Certainly, in light of the 'M-decreet' (decree on inclusive education), access to more detailed data on functional disability would enable better monitoring of this target group. The same applies for origin, for which currently a proxy generally needs to be used based on nationality and the language spoken at home.

prevalence of the various certificates and the programmes of study chosen based on these certificates confirms that social background is a major determinant of the actual orientation following a B-certificate, whereby disadvantaged students more often switch forms of education and experience the 'waterfall' effect, while affluent students tend to repeat their year and/or switch programmes within the same form of education, in order to preserve their options for enrolment in higher education later.

It is therefore a matter of 'a double handicap': to begin with, students with a lower socio-economic position, in part based on their lower performance in school, more often receive a B-certificate than their schoolmates with a higher socio-economic position. But on top of that, the less ambitious choices that are made by this group following a B-certificate lead to more limited options and opportunities for further education.

Both at the end of the second year of secondary school and at the end of the fourth year of secondary school, both high and low-SES students (Socio-Economic Status) thus make different choices following a B-certificate. After receiving a B-certificate, high-SES students more often make choices that do not compromise their prospects of enrolling in higher education. High-SES students are generally able to preserve their later career opportunities by avoiding switching to a different form of education and repeating a year has less impact on their future. However, based on our analyses, it also appears that the choice of programme of study following a B-certificate is the result of complex interactions between individual characteristics, school characteristics and characteristics of the school composition.

Thus, an important additional observation is that the individual choices following a B-certificate are in part determined by the composition of the student body at school. The higher the proportion of high-SES students at a school, the more likely the high-SES students are to avoid switching to a different form of education following a B-certificate at the end of the second and fourth year of secondary school. This is not the case for low-SES students. Following a B-certificate at the end of the second year of secondary school, they are more likely to choose to switch forms of education, the higher the proportion of high-SES students is at their school.

These differences in the choices made following a B-certificate amplify the effect of the differences in certificates awarded. In 4ASO (fourth year general secondary education), 4KSO (fourth year arts secondary education) and 2A (the higher 'A' track of second year secondary education), high-SES students have a significantly higher chance of receiving an A-certificate and a significantly lower chance of receiving a B-certificate. Moreover, here again, a combined effect with the student body composition comes into play. In schools with higher proportions of high-SES students, the chances of receiving a B-certificate decrease for high SES-students and increase for low-SES students.

In this way, the certificates received and the programmes of study selected lead to a further homogenisation of the student population within the different forms of education. The high degree of segregation in secondary education[4] [5] is clearly not only the result of the initial choices made for schools and programmes of study at the beginning of secondary education. As the school career progresses, the certificates received, the choices made in response to these certificates and the existing segregation begin to interact and the result is a reinforcement of the social selection and

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4 Wouters T & Groenez S., 2014
5 Hindriks J. & Lamy G., 2014

segregation between schools. This also explains the observation that half of the socio-economic segregation in secondary education is found between the four different forms of education[6].

As mentioned above, in this study we also sought to **explain the differences in certificates received and the choice of programme of study**. In doing so, we have focused on elements that (in addition to other factors, including performance at school) may also play a role in the way in which certificates are awarded and programmes of study are chosen.

Thus, we initially examined the *orientation policy applied and the orientation practices* at the level of the school. Based on these exploratory findings, we observed that the orientation process, and the practices concerning deliberation and formal advice by the teachers adjudicating as a committee (the *klassenraad*) can vary between schools. There are also indications of differences in the degree to which the orientation advice takes other elements into account in addition to the school performance. Thus, a bit over half of the respondents agreed with the statement that 'The effort, attitudes and social skills of students can also be decisive criteria during deliberation'. Effort, attitudes and social skills are more often taken into account in small schools rather than larger schools. In addition, respondents from schools with a high proportion of female students were more likely to agree with this statement. Finally, it was clear that in schools with an imbalanced (either very high or very low) social mix (in terms of SES) or degree of diversity in background, factors such as effort, attitudes and social skills were less frequently taken into account in deliberation.

In addition, we can cautiously assert that respondents from schools with a high percentage of high-SES students or low diversity in terms of background appear more likely to take into account aspects such as the situation at home, psychological well-being or attitudes towards learning in the deliberation.

It is therefore clear that the orientation of students is anything but an exact science based on an objective toolbox, which means, in other words, that it *leaves room for a customised approach for individuals but at the same time, for the influence of stereotyping as well.*

A major cause of the differences in certificates received and the subsequent choices of programme of study are the differences in school performance between these groups. But in order to be able to formulate more conclusive statements about whether the differences in the certificates received is strictly a matter of differences in school performance, or whether prejudices or stereotyping also play a role, it is important to be able to *control for the school performance of students*. That is why, in questioning the teachers, only standardised **case descriptions** were included (vignettes) which make it possible to answer the question of whether students with the same school performance but different background characteristics would also receive **different certificates /advice**. For this reason, we included the school results for the case situations that led to the different certificates being received ('tough cases'). This also addresses the question of whether potential differences in certificates received are also associated with differences in the **arguments** used to justify the certificate. This makes it possible to clarify *the role of possible prejudice or stereotypes*.

If we look at the **certificates** issued by teachers, then we see clear differences in terms of educational position and discrimination grounds. These differences are greater for the grounds of

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6 Wouters T & Groenez S., 2014

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ethnic origin and SES, while for gender, they are smaller. For the discrimination ground of physical disability, we do not see any systematic differences in the certificates awarded.

In terms of *ethnic origin*, we see that the student profiles with a Belgian background are more often awarded an A-certificate (in the event of hesitation between passing (A-certificate) or reorientation (B-certificate)) or a C-certificate (in the event of hesitation between repeating the year (C-certificate) or reorientation (B-certificate)). Students of foreign origin more frequently receive a B-certificate. This is particularly noticeable in years 2A and 4ASO (general high school programme) and 4TSO (technical programme).

In terms of *socio-economic status,* we see that students from families with a higher SES more frequently receive an A-certificate (in the case of hesitation between passing or reorientation) or a C-certificate (in the case of hesitation between repeating the year or reorientation). Students from families with a low SES more frequently receive a B-certificate. This is particularly pronounced in 2A and 4ASO and 4TSO.

In terms of *gender,* less significant differences were observed. Teachers have a tendency to give girls an A-certificate more often than boys, while a B-certificate is more often awarded to boys than to girls.

For the question about the **justification** of the decision to award a particular certificate or advice, reasons concerning the school results were most frequently given, followed by reasons concerning the student's further career. Reasons concerning the behaviour of the students occur the least frequently. Based on the differences in the reasons applied according to the ethnic origin and socio-economic status of the student, there are clear signs of a stereotypical image that reinforces the social selection in our educational system. This is most pronounced for the reasons underpinning the certificates awarded based on the student's further career prospects, command of the Dutch language and the support at home or the parental preferences.

Based on our analyses, it appears that the reasons for awarding certificates to students with a *high SES or of Belgian origin* more frequently support the claim that the poor performance of these students is the result of a momentary lapse and that switching to a different form of education should be avoided for these students. This is expressed in the arguments given of "keeping the student in this form of education for as long as possible" and "keeping the option to transition to higher education intact". In other words, the aim is to keep the students for as long as possible on an educational track that does not compromise the later transition to higher education. This is further justified by the parental preferences and the stereotypical image of a strong level of parental support for the student.

For students with equivalent results but with a *low SES or foreign origin,* the results are not framed as a momentary lapse in performance or switching to a different form of education is seen as appropriate to the capacities of the student (students of foreign origin). For these students, a school career is anticipated whereby it is not so much a question of preserving the options to transition to higher education, but rather of avoiding falling behind in school progress and obtaining a diploma for secondary education is the priority. Here, as well, this is further justified based on the stereotypical image of a lack of parental support for the student. Finally, the argument that the student may not have sufficient command of the Dutch language is also given more importance as a justification for a B-certificate for students of foreign origin.

For the orientation of *female students*, there is a stereotypical image as well. Thus, for female students, teachers more frequently indicate that 'it is important to orient students towards a clear professional profile so that they can rapidly find a place on the job market' and 'that it is important to orient the student in such a way as to guarantee that he/she can obtain a diploma'. Moreover, for the profile of female students, it is considered more likely that a B-certificate is given based on the student's *preference*.

The observation that stereotypical images create a social bias in the orientation recommendations given by teachers towards the various target groups is also supported by the study that we carried out on **diversity policies and diversity practices** in schools (Part 2).

This in fact led to the conclusion that there is also a bias in the effort and involvement that teachers display towards different target groups. Thus, it would appear that schools could primarily stand to make great improvements with regard to students with a functional disability, since teachers score themselves the lowest in terms of attitudes and competencies in dealing with students with a functional disability and consider it not very feasible to include certain types of students in the class. These issues are also reflected in the policy of schools, in which there does not appear to be a consistent approach to handling functional disability and only a minority of schools make efforts targeted at the inclusion of students with a functional disability. Teachers also mentioned challenges in terms of dealing with students with a migration background. Contending with multilingual students and religious matters seems to raise many questions. On the other hand, school personnel seemed to have a sense that they have generally made great progress in the area of the SES-issues. Thus, of all the diversity topics investigated, they give themselves the highest score for the diversity policy on this topic, they score fairly positively on attitudes towards disadvantage in education and they feel competent in their ability to deal with disadvantage in the classroom. These findings are striking, given the great social inequality in Belgian education, as demonstrated by both the literature study (Part 1) and the study of orientation practices (Part 3). Also in the approach to gender and LGBT students, we see a duality between attitudes and practices. Thus, the school personnel have a very positive view of the LGBT and gender issue, but at the same time, in practical terms, they indicate that they have little idea of how to approach this topic.

In general, we also observed that *the knowledge and competency of teachers for dealing with diversity in the classroom often falls short*. Thus, our survey of Flemish teachers reveals that many of them consider themselves to be not very competent in dealing with multilingual students, religious matters, functional disabilities or gender related topics. Furthermore, over one fifth of the teachers in primary school and 15% of the teachers in secondary school indicated that they do not consider themselves competent enough to open diversity issues up for discussion in the classroom. At the same time, 30% and over 40% of the respondents from, respectively, primary and secondary education claim that their school does not reinforce the competencies of teachers for dealing with diverse students. The collaboration within the school team, as well, for example, in the form of team-teaching or even shared lessons, was marked by 30% of the respondents in primary school and nearly 45% of the respondents in secondary school as an action that has not been taken. It should therefore be clear from the above discussion that there is *a need for further professionalisation with regard to diversity in the classroom, which is not currently being sufficiently met* in the education sector in Flanders.

This finding is relevant, as the study on diversity policy and practices shows that in addition to the structural and compositional characteristics of a school, *it is above all the competencies and attitudes of the school personnel that play a decisive role in how schools deal with diverse students*. On this basis, it can also

be concluded that a number of *major adjustments in the support and training of teachers, as well as in the general educational policy, could have an important impact on the educational prospects of these target groups.*

This need is not only acknowledged by the school personnel themselves, but also in the focus groups conducted with support staff in education and representatives of civil society. Although the findings of the Diversity Barometer met with little surprise, the participants expressed great concern about these results and the focus groups explored ways to systematically counteract them.

The initial focus was on *ways to make the current professionalisation of schools and teachers more effective.* Arguments were chiefly raised here for *long-term professionalisation plans* instead of one-off workshop days. These plans would not be followed by teachers individually, but rather, through strong policy-making capacity in the school, they would become the focus for the entire school team. Moreover, by mobilising the entire school team around certain topics, the representatives of the participating organisations hope to see the teamwork within schools reinforced. After all, we observe that the workload of teachers continues to grow ever heavier and more complex. Consequently, it is increasingly difficult for an individual teacher to possess all the necessary knowledge and competencies for the specific challenges in his or her class. Precisely by focusing on co-teaching and collaboration, it is hoped that maximum benefit can be gained from the diverse expertise present within a school team. Although all participants in these discussions were in favour of this proposed professionalisation, certain participants also felt that there is a need for a *stricter policy.* These people mentioned, for example, the importance of formulating clear goals, commitments of results instead of commitments of means, linked to evaluation/analyses of school policy. Some participants felt a need for a body that would be able to take action to sanction or endorse schools for having developed either weak or strong policies on equal opportunity and well-being.

A second frequently recurring method for counteracting the systems observed was to offer *more frames of reference within school teams.* The first important perspective that the respondents in the focus group mentioned was what is known as the perspective of intersectionality. This approach involves becoming aware of the ways in which various characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, social background, language, disability, etc., intersect and can amplify social inequality. The respondents often applied this perspective in discussing the survey results, for example by referring to the culturalisation of (learning) difficulties among multilingual students with a migration background or in discussing the white, middle-class background of children in inclusive education. It was also mentioned that this type of perspective can offer an important conceptual framework for school teams for examining the diversity within the school. The second way of encouraging diverse frames of reference that was consistently mentioned by all focus groups was greater diversity in the teaching staff. After all, it is clear that teacher teams are predominantly made up of white, middle-class, heterosexual women without any functional disability. On account of this specific background, it is often difficult for teachers to relate to the challenges and life circumstances of students from more diverse backgrounds. This also leads to the misunderstanding of certain signals or (learning) difficulties of students. An additional advantage of more diverse school teams is that teachers can also act as role models for students. After all, it has been observed that certain students do not believe that higher education would be possible for them, or that a diploma could lead to job opportunities. Although the topic of the diverse teaching staff is frequently mentioned, it must also be pointed out that the representatives realise that this is a complex issue. After all, in order to ultimately achieve this, major changes are needed in the enrolment and graduation of students in academic programmes of study and teacher training programmes, as well as solutions for discrimination on the job market.