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**Belgian schools engaging with cultural diversity:
A neo-institutional perspective**

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Abstract

Using organizational neo-institutionalism as a framework, our theoretical study argues that the existing literature on immigrants' educational failure has to be expanded by examining school's key role. Dominant explanations of immigrants' educational failure focus on their lack of resources ("deficit" explanations) or on the selectivity of national educational systems favouring (higher class) majority students. In our approach, we argue that, even in institutional environments discouraging ethnic minority students' inclusion, schools, as agents, maintain leeway in shaping their policies and practices towards multicultural student populations. We conclude the paper by presenting the research design for our empirical study and presenting the Flemish educational system on which it will focus.

Introduction

In western societies, education is an important source of upwards social mobility. Ethnic minority children and youth generally fare less well in school than natives and their lower school performance negatively impacts their work opportunities and social mobility (Ogbu, 1990). Figures suggest that even second and third generation immigrants are less educated than natives, suffer higher unemployment rates and are employed in less favorable segments of the labor market (e.g. Van Ours & Veenman, 2003; Rooth & Ekberg, 2003).

Two alternative types of explanations of differentials between ethnic majority and minority children's educational attainment are generally advanced in the existing literature. One group of studies relies on "deficit" explanations, whereby minority students' failure is seen as the result of their unequal access to key cultural, socio-economic and linguistic resources (e.g. Blau & Duncan, 1967; Parker, Rubalcava & Teruel, 2003; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). A second group of studies rather focuses on the exclusionary effects of national educational systems. Specifically, they investigate the way educational sorting – tracking, special education placement and grade retention – and the marketization of education negatively affect minority students (e.g. Adnett, Bougheas & Davies, 2002; Hanushek and Wößmann, 2006).

Much less attention has been paid to the role schools play in creating more or less inclusive environments for ethnic minority children, supporting their educational performance. Such neglect is somewhat surprising as, despite the highly institutionalized context in which schools are embedded, they are not passive implementers of educational regulations. Rather, schools have a 'substantial leeway' in their function, such as for instance in the distribution of pupils and teachers between classes (Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 1998). More broadly, Lipman (2002) has argued that "educators, students, and families remake policy at the local level as they shape educational experiences and negotiate meanings in schools within the constraints imposed by centralized policies" (Lipman, 2002, p. 383).

In this document, we present our research proposal. Our study attempts to contribute to the literature on ethnic minority children's education by exploring how some schools create inclusive environments for ethnic minority students and enhance their performance despite multiple institutional pressures to do otherwise. Drawing on neo-institutional theory to

conceptualize the relation between institutional pressures and organizational agency, the study analyzes multiple secondary schools with distinctive approaches to ethnic minority students within the Belgian school system. Neo-institutional theory allows conceptualizing schools as ‘embedded agents’ (Battilana, 2006; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Garud, Hardy & Maguire, 2007; Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002), whose purposive action is necessary for institutional translation to occur yet who are also bounded by their position within existing structures and their goals (cf. Bourdieu, 1990).

The Belgian educational system is a particularly suitable empirical case to our purpose because it scores very high on quality yet extremely low in inclusiveness in international comparisons. School result differentials between children with a native and a foreign background are extremely high, second only to Germany (Hirt, Nicaise & De Zutter, 2007). Within such environment, schools that successfully create inclusive environments and enhance minority students’ attainments represent “extreme” cases likely to make the phenomenon under investigation more transparent (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989).

The paper is structured into five sections. We start with an overview of ethnic minority children’s educational performance gap. In the second section, we present the existing research explaining such gap as a result of either the characteristics of ethnic minorities (the so-called “deficit” approach), the educational system, or the policies and practices of individual schools. We then present the neo-institutional theoretical framework of the empirical study we intend to carry out and delineate the goals of the study. In the fourth part, we elaborate on the research design and methodological aspects. We conclude by introducing the institutional framework of the Belgian educational system.

1. Ethnic minority students’ educational performance gap: An overview

In western societies, students with a foreign background are often associated with school failure. A considerable body of research shows that they perform worse than students with a local background (e.g. Crul & Vermeulen, 2003; Demie, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Shamai, 1992). For instance, in a study in the United Kingdom, Demie (2001) shows that Caribbean, Portuguese and African immigrants underperform in comparison to the white UK group. The achievement gap between blacks and whites in the United States has received considerable empirical attention (e.g. Jencks & Phillips, 1998). In a Canadian study, Shamai

(1992) shows that most immigrant students perform less well than majority students. In a review-article on the Turkish second generation in Europe, Crul and Vermeulen (2003) show that between one third and one half of the second generation Turkish youth in France, Belgium and The Netherlands begin their secondary school careers in lower vocational tracks. In Germany and Austria, it even adds up to two thirds and three quarters.

Whereas the educational gap between students of local and foreign origins generally holds, comparative studies have pointed to differentials between countries and between ethnic minority groups within the same country. In a review-article, Entorf and Lauk (2006) report studies showing higher correlations between ethnic background and school failure in countries like Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States in comparison to, for example, Finland, Sweden and Canada. Comparing various ethnic minority groups across European countries, Eldering and Knorth (1998) found that children of Maghrebian descent perform worst of all ethnic groups, while children of immigrants from South European countries like Italy and Spain and Asian immigrants performed better. In the United States, studies also show that Asian Americans perform better than other immigrant groups (e.g. Kao, 1995), while in the United Kingdom, Indian and Chinese immigrants even perform above the average of the majority group (Demie, 2001).

2. Explanations of ethnic minority children's school failure

Differences between native and immigrant students' educational performance have to date been generally explained by referring to economic, cultural and social deficits of immigrant students originating in their family or community or in their culture of origin. Other research has rather investigated how the structure of the educational system differently affects students with different ethnic backgrounds reducing, maintaining or even exacerbating initial (pre-educational) deficits deriving from the specific economic, cultural and social position of ethnic minority students. Hereunder, we will elaborate on both types of research.

2.1. "Deficit" explanations of ethnic minority children's school failure

A very popular explanation for the differences in educational performance between ethnic groups is to refer to a certain deficit of the members of the worst performing ethnic groups. For example, in a deficit perspective, the differences in educational performance

between students with a local and a foreign origin result from the latter's more limited knowledge of the local language, lower socio-economic status (SES), or access to social networks and other key resources. Deficits can be located at the individual, family or community level.

Studies on intergenerational mobility have showed that family SES is a crucial predictor of educational achievement (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Lee and Burkam (2002) found that 75% of the African-American cognitive skills gap at kindergarten entry is attributable to their lower SES. SES – a variable at the family-level of explanation – has implications for the human, financial, social and cultural capital, which is needed to develop during education. In a Belgian study, Groenez, Van den Brande and Nicaise (2003) showed that immigrants' SES is an important predictor of educational performance, at all levels of education. These findings also imply that children from higher SES immigrant families perform better in school, which could explain the better results of, for example, Asian immigrants in the United Kingdom, where these immigrants' SES is higher (Demie, 2001).

In the same line of "deficit" reasoning, yet focusing on cultural capital, Driessen (2001) hypothesized that the effect of ethnicity on educational achievement is mediated by the cultural capital children have access to through their family. The author split up cultural capital into two categories: economic and cultural resources. Cultural resources included linguistic resources, reading behaviour of the parents and pedagogical family climate. The results of a survey conducted in The Netherlands could not confirm the mediating role of cultural capital. In a study in the United States, Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) did however find that cultural capital exerted a mediating effect on blacks' and whites' educational achievement.

In a later study, specifically examining language as an aspect of cultural capital, Driessen, van der Slik and De Bot (2002) argued that language deficiencies can partly explain the disadvantaged positions of ethnic minority children in education. The authors examined the language deficiencies of children of the main ethnic minorities in The Netherlands at the start of primary education. Children with a Turkish and Moroccan background showed the largest deficiencies in both language and educational outcomes of all groups. The main focus of the explanation of the differences in language development between ethnic groups is on the language spoken at home. In a longitudinal research design in The Netherlands, Driessen, van

der Slik and De Bot (2002) found first of all that Turkish children performed worst on language tests, immediately followed by children of Moroccan-speaking parents. Children of native Dutch parents scored highest. The authors also compared language deficiencies of 7-8 years old and 9-10 years old. Relative to the Dutch group, the deficit of the Turkish group tended to increase, while the deficit of the Moroccan group stabilized. Despite ethnic minority pupils' language progress in primary education, their relative disadvantage compared to the Dutch group stabilized or increased. The authors hypothesized that the home language might play a crucial role in the explanation of these language deficiencies. However, the data could not confirm their expectations. The children's use of a language other than Dutch at home did not necessarily imply any negative consequence for language development. The authors speculate that individuals with a Dutch background might be more confident than individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups with a more abstract and de-contextualised language as is common in school subjects. Thus, speaking Dutch might not be a sufficient condition for Dutch language development. Rather than the amount, it might be the quality of Dutch-speaking that matters.

Other studies have however found significant results of home language. For example, in a Mexican study, Parker, Rubalcava and Teruel (2003) found that language barriers predicted differences in educational performance between ethnic minority and majority groups. Using a different approach, Bankston and Zhou (1995) studied the relationship between language and educational performance among Vietnamese students in the United States. The results of their study showed that ethnic language skills contributed to educational performance. They advanced the possible explanation that ethnic language skills can strengthen individual cognitive processes, improving educational performance.

Focusing on integration as a source of cultural capital, Oomens, Driessen and Scheepers (2003) claimed that parents' cultural integration in the host society is a crucial factor in determining the educational performance of children. These authors identified two dimensions of integration: a structural and a cultural one. The structural dimension refers to participation in institutions of the host society, such as, for example, participation in the labour market. The cultural dimension refers to the adaptation to the culture of the host society, such as, for example, intercultural marriage. Testing their hypothesis on a Dutch sample of children in primary education, they found that Moroccan families showed the lowest scores in comparison to all other immigrant groups on both structural and cultural

integration. Their results only partially supported their hypotheses, as only cultural integration predicted language performance but not mathematical performance.

A lack of social capital is also considered as a variable determining ethnic minorities' school failure. For example, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbush (1995) claim, in a study in the United States, that certain ethnic minorities live in neighbourhoods lacking social networks that can help them acquire important competencies which are needed in school. Their research is situated at the community level of explanation. The authors found that social capital predicted educational performance: they are positively correlated. In another U.S.-based study, Israel, Beaulieu and Hartless (2001) examined social capital situated at the family and the community level and found that both predicted educational performance at both levels of explanation, but that social capital at the family level was most important.

Cultural deprivation theory emphasizes negative and self-defeating values and attitudes of ethnic minorities (Loury, 1985). In this line of reasoning, Andriessen, Phalet and Lens (2006) claim that minority students may have more negative perceptions of the instrumentality of schooling for future success than non-minority students, which undermines their motivation to perform well in school. Motivational processes, at the individual-level of explanation, are considered crucial. However, the results of their Belgian study showed that perceptions of instrumentality of schooling did not significantly differ between majority students and students of Turkish and Moroccan origin. In the United States, Carter (2003) also showed that ethnic minorities maintained very high aspirations and strongly endorsed beliefs about the connection between education and socio-economic mobility.

In sum, the “deficit” research has investigated the effect of the relative lack of skills and resources of ethnic minority students compared to majority ones on educational performance. Deficit explanations seem to be important to understand immigrants' school failure. For instance, there is consistency over the importance of SES and social capital as a predictor of school performance. Results are however not always significant or consistent across studies. For instance, there is less agreement on the role of language in explaining differential school results and only little evidence of the role of cultural capital and the level of integration. Clearly, deficit explanations are not exhaustive. In the next paragraph, we discuss research that rather examines the influence of the educational system on the school performance gap between ethnic majority and minority students.

2.2. The role of the educational system in explaining ethnic minority children's school failure

In this paragraph, we will review the literature that studies the role of the educational system in explaining educational differentials between students of different backgrounds. We first present Bourdieu's (1977) social reproduction theory as a theoretical framework for understanding how, contrary to what is commonly thought, the educational system operates as an institution that creates, maintains and even exacerbates social inequalities rather than diminishing them. Second, we elaborate on two specific aspects of the educational system which have been seen, in the current literature, as key mechanisms for producing inequality among students: educational sorting and marketization.

From the beginning of the school period, a transition takes place into a new social world (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Children add the social role of "school child" to their repertoire of roles. Crucially, this role takes place in an institutional context different from the context of home: other rules, norms and conventions are considered important. Bourdieu's (1977) social reproduction theory stresses the role of the gap between home and school rules, norms and conventions in maintaining social inequality. He argues that the school context reflects the rules and norms of the ruling classes functional to maintaining their dominance in society. Lower SES children and ethnic minority children – two often overlapping groups – lack the cultural capital to function and perform as expected in schools because their home cultures differ more from school culture in comparison to the home cultures of children of higher SES and belonging to the ethnic majority. For ethnic minority children, the gap between home and school might be larger than for majority children, as the school system typically reflects the norms, values and social arrangements of the host society at large. As a result of this "mismatch", low SES and ethnic minority children perform less in school, end up in lower study programmes, and in lower quality schools, reducing the chances for their social mobility.

In contrast to "deficit" explanations, the educational system is considered responsible for reproducing social inequalities. The dominant culture (culture of the majority group) is institutionalized as legitimate and valuable at the macro-level, causing problems for students of other cultures to adapt in schools: their behaviors, which deviate from the dominant culture, will be sanctioned (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In this way, the majority group can protect its privileged position. The dominant culture is used to exclude students who do not

behave and perform according to the rules, norms and conventions. As a result, many institutions in western societies (unintentionally) exclude ethnic minorities and other weak student populations in subtle ways (Hollinsworth, 1998). Because the dominant culture is taken for granted, its exclusionary effects are more subtle and particularly difficult to eliminate.

In reviewing the literature, two aspects of the western educational systems that play a key role in excluding ethnic minority students (and other weak student populations) have received particular attention: 1) *educational sorting (tracking, special education placement and grade retention)* and 2) *market-like organization* of the educational system. Both can be related to social reproduction theory, in the sense that these organizational mechanisms implement the selection necessary to uphold the dominant culture in the school system, excluding ethnic minorities.

A first important feature of the educational system is *educational tracking*, which is one way to sort and select between students: schools attempt to sort the most able and motivated students into the highest status positions (Dornbusch, Glasgow & Lin, 1996). The starting age of the allocation of students into tracks differs between western countries. These differences might indicate differences in the emphasis on ability, as early allocation into tracks reflects the belief that performance reflects innate capacities rather than ones acquired in school. The Belgian, German, Austrian, Hungarian and Slovak educational systems are characterized by early selection. In contrast, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom select late.

In most European countries, an initial period of exposure to the same curriculum is followed by diversification of curricula into separate tracks during secondary education: vocational and academic tracks. Education equips individuals either with general capacities for learning (in academic tracks) or with specific skills required for more technical occupations (in vocational tracks). The allocation into tracks is often based on previous educational achievement, which is related to another important factor, perceived ability (Brunello, Giannini & Ariga, 2004). The emphasis on ability is characterizing for western meritocratic societies (Stevenson, 1990). On the contrary, Asian societies (which should also be seen as meritocratic) emphasize effort instead of ability. Educators believe that few students are too low in ability to learn the necessary materials. Stevenson (1990) found that in

Asian societies, the variability in math performance between students is lower compared to the United States. Emphasis on ability is thus positively related to social inequality. Emphasis on ability seems more problematic than meritocracy on its own. In western meritocracies, where emphasis on ability is relatively high, the reputations children earn at the start of their school careers is crucial for constructing their image as talented students, which will influence their further school careers (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993).

In a review-article on educational tracking, Epple, Newlon and Romano (2002) conclude that, relative to the outcomes of classes with students of different ability-levels, students assigned to low tracks are hurt by tracking while those assigned to high tracks gain. In an international comparative study, Hanushek and Wößmann (2006) show that early tracking is positively correlated to social inequality. In systems focused on early educational tracking, underachieving students are often moved to vocational forms of education, instead of being helped to progress with their peers. This could explain the link between early educational tracking and social inequality. Lower SES students perform worse from the start of education due to their socio-cultural background and, instead of being helped to progress, are moved to lower tracks, negatively affecting their educational performance and careers. The assumption of equal opportunities for all students at the start of education, made in meritocratic societies, is a mere illusion (see also Dornbusch, Glasgow & Lin, 1996). Pekkarinen, Uusitalo and Pekkala (2006) found that educational reform in Finland, which postponed tracking first from age 10 to age 16, reduced the impact of SES on educational performance.

Brunello and Checchi (2007) mention that tracking is defined differently in Europe and the United States. In Europe it refers to the presence of differentiated vocational and academic curricula. In the United States, tracking corresponds to within-class ability-grouping within a comprehensive educational system. Within-class ability-grouping means that the best and the worst students are separated, but the curriculum is the same, although there can be different ability groups for math and reading within the same class (see Entwisle and Alexander, 1993). In contrast to educational tracking in Europe, within-class ability-grouping already occurs in primary education. However, in a review of the literature, Oakes, Gamoran and Page (1992) found no studies showing effects of ethnicity or SES on the assignment to lower ability-groups at the level of primary education and consequently, no relationship between within-class ability-grouping and social inequality.

Two other features of the educational system related to educational sorting are special education placement and grade retention (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993), but little scientific attention has been devoted to these topics. It is hypothesized that the existence of special education placement and grade retention increase social inequality, analogous to the mechanisms working in educational tracking (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). The poorest students' chances to be confronted with special education and grade retention are increased due to their lower ability-levels, which negatively affects their educational careers.

A second important aspect of the educational system is its market-like organization. Marketization implies competition between schools in attracting 'consumers', that is, the students and their parents (Adnett, Bougheas & Davies, 2002). The underlying logic is that competition increases school performance and high-quality schools are needed to create high-ability students, which is important to stimulate economic growth. However, some authors claim that marketization creates social inequality in educational achievement (Adnett, Bougheas & Davies, 2002; Bradley & Taylor, 2002). The marketization of the educational system creates differential access to education provision and quality (Apple, 2001). A problem might arise if only the richest students can get access to high-quality schools: social inequality might increase, because the richest students get higher quality education in comparison to the poorest students, who end up in low-quality schools. In this line of reasoning, Hirt, Nicaise and De Zutter (2007) show, in an international comparative study, that the degree of privatisation of education in a country (measured by the amount of private schools) is positively correlated with social inequality. The authors develop a tentative interpretation of this finding. Possibly, schools in privatised educational systems can more actively select their student populations, so that the best schools attract the best students. The most privatised (European) educational systems are in The Netherlands (80% private schools) and Belgium (60%). Other countries with relatively high degrees of privatisation are the United Kingdom and Spain (between 30-35%). Countries like Finland, Norway and Sweden are, on the other hand, characterized by relatively low degrees of privatisation (less than 10%).

2.3. The role of schools in shaping ethnic minority children's school experience

Dornbusch, Glasgow and Lin (1996) define schools as highly institutionalized organizations (see also Hallinan, 2001). In their attempt to achieve legitimacy and acquire

resources, schools need to adhere to the rules, norms and conventions taken for granted in society which are reflected in the educational field in which they are embedded. Despite the rhetoric of mass education as a democratizing institution, schools get institutional incentives for reproducing dominant cultural patterns – like emphasizing individual ability and meritocracy – which exclude culturally “deviant” student populations such as low SES and/or ethnic minority students. Recently, however, a few authors have highlighted the active role schools play – through their specific approaches, policies and practices – in shaping the school experience and school performance of students (e.g. Lee, 2001), either reproducing or diminishing social inequality and exclusionary effects inherent to the educational system. Even in this highly institutionalized environment, schools are not passive carriers of institutional meaning and implementers of institutional practices, but rather agents. Lipman (2002) has pointed to the power schools have to “remake policy at the local level”, “negotiate meanings” and “shape educational experiences”, within and despite centralized policies (Lipman, 2002, p. 383).

For instance, lamenting the lack of research on organizational processes impacting multicultural education, Lee (2001) investigated how a school in the UK managed multiple, contradictory institutional pressures concerning multicultural education originating in the surrounding community. In his single-case study, white parents were overtly opposed to anti-racist multicultural education (which was interpreted as a constraint for the implementation of multicultural education, resulting from the institutional environment, since white parents are important providers of resources for the school to survive). In contrast, other institutional actors, like minority parents stressed the importance of anti-racist multicultural education. Lee (2001) found that the school uses inconsistent impression management to answer to the different institutional pressures. Towards white parents, school managers constructed a monocultural image of the school, while towards minority parents, they constructed a multicultural school. However, the school did not adopt any systematic management strategy to improve minority parents’ low school involvement. The school managers attributed this lack of involvement to poor language skills and minority parents’ alleged cultural assumptions that the school is solely responsible for their children’ s educational performance. Consequently, the actual implementation of organizational practices supporting anti-racist, multicultural education was omitted.

Donnelly (2004) explored the construction of multicultural education of a school in a mixed Catholic-Protestant environment in Northern Ireland. Specifically, she studied how school directors and teachers dealt with issues related to multicultural education such as religious symbols. Interviewees at first stressed the open and harmonious relationships between Catholics and Protestants within their school. However, in a later stage of the interviews, open and harmonious relationships revealed itself as an illusion. Teachers stressed the social inappropriateness of talking about sensitive cultural beliefs. Some controversial issues were not discussed because they believed that these discussions would induce feelings of discomfort and harm harmonious relationships. As a consequence, the fear for an intolerant school, fostered a culture of avoidance. If differences were talked about at all, it was in a humorous fashion. Donnelly (2004) concludes that such a culture of avoidance is detrimental for the effective operation of the school: “[A]voiding conflict issues to maintain a semblance of harmony can create the conditions wherein a much more threatening culture emerges: one which breeds and reinforces distrust and suspicion between the two communities rather than reducing it” (Donnelly, 2004, p. 274).

Using a neo-institutional theoretical approach, Bertels and Lawrence (2008), investigated the responses of ten Canadian schools to institutional pressures to adopt “Aboriginal education” in order to enhance Aboriginals’ educational performance. Although schools were confronted with similar institutional pressures, school boards adopted four distinct strategies towards Aboriginal education: avoidance, advocacy, isolation and integration. Each of these strategies was related to a specific constellation of practices and meanings in the schools. Specifically, the three schools that were most ‘multicultural’ implemented an integration strategy and defined “Aboriginal” by referring to Aboriginal students’ academic problems, poverty and social isolation. According to the authors, this construction of Aboriginal education was enabled by its high ambiguity, providing interpretive leeway.

The key role schools play in creating more or less inclusive environment has more extensively been discussed in relation to students with disabilities (e.g. Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Kugelmass, 2001; Zollers, Ramanathan & Yu, 1999). Whereas the empirical focus is slightly different, the issues at stake are actually similar, as disabled students are also perceived as having a learning and ability “deficit” and the goal is to investigate the ways schools can become more inclusive and provide all students with equal opportunities.

Zollers, Ramanathan and Yu (1999) stress the importance of an inclusive school culture to support the development of inclusive education, that is, education where both 'typical' and disabled students are integrated in the same classes, instead of being separated in different classes. Inclusive education is constrained by arguments that 'typical' students will suffer in the distracting environment of de-segregated classes. The authors rather argue that attempts to make schools more inclusive have often failed not because of de-segregation as such, but because de-segregation was implemented without the necessary support. In a qualitative single case study in the United States, they found three characteristics of a school culture leading to the success of inclusive education: an inclusive leader (with a democratic approach, providing value-driven leadership with a strong belief in inclusion and who is a model for the disabled population, such as a leader with a visible disability), a broad vision of school community (including the community, like students' parents, in every aspect of the school) and shared language and values (of all members of the school). These findings are echoed in Kugelmass' (2001) qualitative study of an inclusive school in the United States. She identified the following characteristics of an inclusive school culture: a commitment to a central philosophy and belief system (valuing diversity), teacher initiatives supported by the principal, and collaborative structures that support on-going change and continuous improvement. It should be remarked that in both studies (Kugelmass, 2001; Zollers, Ramanathan and Yu, 1999) 'typical' students are a minority. This suggests that the creation of an inclusive school culture might be less constrained by institutional actors in the immediate environment, such as parents of 'typical' students expecting traditional forms of education, compared to schools where 'typical' students are the majority group.

Like Bertels and Lawrence (2008), yet focusing on the inclusion of disabled students, Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) show that inclusive developments by schools are possible despite an institutional environment that does not favour them. In their U.K.-based study, they explain how the 'standards agenda' emanated by the Ministry of Education to ameliorate standards of attainment de facto incentivises exclusive school policies. As formulated by the authors: "Since schools are held to account for the attainments of their students and are required to make themselves attractive to families who are most able to exercise choice of school for their children, low-attaining students, students who demand high levels of attention and resource and students who are seen not to conform to school and classroom behavioural norms become unattractive to many schools" (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006, p. 296). The

comparison of the cases showed that inclusive developments were distinct from school to school, suggesting schools' key role in the interpretation and implementation of the policy. The authors showed that, as a whole, inclusive developments were neither crushed by the 'standards agenda', nor was this latter rejected in favour of a radical inclusive alternative. Rather, the reciprocal influence of the 'standards agenda' and inclusion ideals and practices were observed in the schools. In particular, the implementation of inclusive developments was mediated by 'communities of practice' of staff and teachers within a school context, discussing and negotiating the meaning of the issue of inclusive development. As a result, schools made their own sense of the tension between the 'standards agenda' and inclusive developments, creating unique visions and solutions.

3. An agent-centered neo-institutional perspective on school policy towards ethnic diversity

3.1 Schools as institutionally embedded agents

Early neo-institutionalists traditionally focused on explaining inter-organizational isomorphism within institutional fields (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983). They argued that organizations tend to adopt similar forms and practices not because they are inherently better, but rather as they seek to gain legitimacy within their field. In later neo-institutional research, attention however shifted to explaining divergent behaviour *despite* organizations' embeddedness in the same institutional field (Christensen, Karnoe, Strangard & Dobbin, 1997; DiMaggio, 1988, 1991; Oliver, 1991; Powell, 1991). Authors argued that organizations were not passive carriers of ready-to-wear institutional meaning (Scott, 1995) carrying out 'programmed practical action' authorized and constrained by institutional logics (Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002) but rather, they should be conceived as purposive agents.

Attempting to make more theoretical space for organizational agency yet to avoid ontological dualism between structure and agency (cf. Willmott, 2005) or a simple juxtaposition of "a theory of (external) institutional constraints on the one hand and a theory of (rational) action and strategic resource mobilization on the other" (Djelic & Lagneau-Ymonet, 2008, p. 7) the notion of 'embedded agency' has been advanced (Battilana, 2006; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Leca, Battilana & Boxenbaum, 2008; Seo & Creed, 2002; Holm,

1995). Relying on balanced theorizations of the agency-structure relationship (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Emirbayer & Misch, 1998), ‘embedded agency’ stresses agents’ purposive action yet conceives of such action as bounded by agents’ position within existing structures, which shape their point of view and interpretation of objectified ideas.

In this study, we rely on the notion of ‘embedded agency’ to understand the discursive and material practices schools develop towards their multicultural students’ population from their embedded position within the Belgian educational field and the multiple institutional pressures they are subject to.

3.2 Goal of the study

In this study, we want to elaborate on how individual schools engage with cultural diversity. We are interested in qualitative studies, focusing on schools’ meaning-making of ethnic diversity and multicultural education and how such meaning affects the experience and performance of specific groups of students, possibly diminishing social inequality. Our analysis will be structured around the following research questions:

- 1) How do schools re-interpret the potentially exclusionary norms and conventions of the educational system to become more inclusive?
- 2) Which inclusive (discursive) practices characterize them? And
- 3) How do these practices affect minority and majority students’ school experience and performance?

4. Research design

In our empirical study, we will use a comparative multiple-case design. We argue that a multiple-case design is more suitable than a single-case study to identify structures, policies and practices that support multicultural education in schools. Lee (2001), has argued that schools can be ‘normal’ or ‘exceptional’. ‘Normal’ schools reflect the dominant culture. Even when creating an image of tolerance towards other cultures they fail to take actions and create practices ameliorating the situation of ethnic minorities. In contrast to ‘normal’ schools, ‘exceptional’ schools try to answer to different needs of students of different cultures by taking actions and creating a new social reality. Our study will compare ‘normal’ and ‘exceptional’ schools. We build on the principle of theoretical sampling in case-study research

as developed by Pettigrew (1988). Specifically, contrasting schools are selected – ‘normal’ versus ‘exceptional’ schools – in order to enhance the power of the comparison, making the phenomenon under study more ‘transparently observable’ than it would generally be (Eisenhardt, 1989), getting insight into the processes creating (or inhibiting) truly multicultural education. We will select schools with different degrees of social inequality, measured by differences in educational performance between different student populations, to construct ‘normal’ (schools with the highest degrees of social inequality) and ‘exceptional’ schools (schools with the lowest degrees of social inequality).

To collect our data, we will use multiple data collection methods (interviews, observations and archival methods). According to Eisenhardt (1989), “the triangulation made possible by multiple data collection methods provides stronger substantiation of constructs” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 538) and add to the empirical grounding of the theory.

We will interview school staff (directors and administrators), teachers and students and search for converging and diverging patterns of meaning-making within each school context. The questionnaires for the interviews will include five topics: 1) The organization of the schooling process (i.e. How is the process organized? Who reports to whom?); 2) The organizational culture (i.e. How would you describe the organizational culture? Are there specific practices that support a certain organizational culture? Can you describe them?); 3) The situation of ethnic minorities (i.e. How does the school attract students, in particular ethnic minority students? What do ethnic minorities’ bring into the school?); 4) The relations between ethnic majority and minority students (i.e. How would you describe relations between ethnic minority and majority students? Are ethnic minority students accepted by students with a local background?); and 5) Practices of managing an ethnically diverse school context (i.e. How is diversity managed? What types diversity-related initiatives are there? To what extent is the school adjusted to ethnic minorities?).

Observations will be used to gain an understanding of the daily practices in the school environment, while archival data will provide basic information about the composition of the student and the teacher populations, students’ performance as well as the vision and policies towards multicultural education.

5. The empirical study

5.1 The Belgian educational system

Within the Belgian federal structure, education is a competence of the Flemish region. Flemish education covers five levels of education. The first level, *elementary education*, is divided into normal and special elementary education. Normal elementary education includes kindergartens, primary schools and schools who provide education to both toddlers and primary pupils. Although the Flemish government does not require toddlers to attain school, a good network of subsidized daycares is available. Parents are free to enroll their toddlers, aged between 2,5 and 3, in kindergarten. In contrast to normal elementary education, special elementary education focuses on children with disabilities.

The second level of education in Flanders is *secondary education*. A distinction is made between full-time secondary education, part-time secondary education, and special secondary education. Full-time secondary education can be divided into three major parts. It takes two years to complete a single part. The first part (the first two years of secondary education) includes first and second grade. The first grade can be followed in two ways, more specifically an A-form and a B-form are present. First grade B is established for children with difficulties regarding learning or predominantly theoretical education to make the transition from elementary education to secondary education easier. After completion of first grade B, two options can be made. A pupil can choose to follow first grade A or second grade B. The second grade guides the students in choosing an appropriate discipline in the second part of full-time secondary education, more specifically a discipline that is in line with the interest and potential of each student. This discipline can be part of general secondary education (ASO), vocational secondary education (BSO), arts (KSO) or technical secondary education (TSO). ASO provides in general education, in contrast to BSO where a specific profession is taught. Within KSO art practice is offered in addition to general education. The TSO focuses on general and technical-theoretical subjects. A transfer to another educational form is theoretically speaking always possible but in practice uncommon. After completing the second year of the third grade of ASO, TSO, or KSO, the student receives a diploma of secondary education. The BSO-student only gets a certificate, but is given a possibility to earn a diploma of secondary education in an additional third year. When students reach the age of 15 or 16, a switch from full-time secondary education to part-time secondary education is

possible. Part-time secondary education focuses on direct employment. Young people with learning disabilities from 13 to 21 years are educated in special secondary education.

After completion of secondary education (ASO, TSO and KSO) students are given the opportunity to study in higher education, the third level of Flemish education. BSO students can also follow higher education if they completed an additional third grade in the third part of secondary education. However, the transition from BSO to higher education is uncommon. Higher education includes studying at college or university and is organized, since a few years, according to a bachelor-master structure.

Flemish education consists of three educational networks: community education, subsidized official education, and subsidized private education. Community education, organized by a public organization with legal personality, is characterized by neutrality. In other words, every student, independent of his or her religious, philosophical, or ideological convictions, deserves respect and is welcome in community education. Subsidized formal education consists of community schools (organized by the municipality), urban schools (organized by the city) and state schools (organized by the province). Schools participating in the subsidized private education are organized by a private organization. Historically, most free schools are connected with Catholicism, but they can also be connected to other faiths (like Protestantism, Islam, etc.) or specific educational philosophies such as Montessori, Freinet and Steiner. Private schools are to a certain degree free to establish their own educational vision. If the school meets certain criteria established by law, it is subsidized (and therefore free for students) and its degrees are legally recognized.

To support pupils who are disadvantaged because of their weak SES or the use of a different language at home, the Flemish government introduced in 2002 so-called GOK-initiatives, or 'equal educational opportunities' initiatives. The decree on equal education opportunities covers three main subjects. The first subject has to do with the *right to enroll a child in schools*. Parents may enroll their children in an elementary or a secondary school of their choice. Yet there are a few exceptions in which a school can and should refuse the enrollment of a child or young person. The first exception has to do with the number of students within a school. More specifically, when the maximum capacity of the school is reached, the registration of new students can be refused. Also, schools are allowed to refuse registration of a student when the student has previously been expelled through a disciplinary

procedure from the school. Even if the excluded pupil wants to enroll in another school, this latter is allowed to refuse his or her registration. The decree concerning equal education opportunities further foresees a number of priority measures. According to a first priority measure, children whose brother or sister is already enrolled in the school get priority over other new students. This measure aims at avoiding that children from the same family end up in different schools. Moreover, all elementary schools and the first grades of secondary schools are permitted to take priority measures for GOK-pupils. However, this is not an obligation.

The second important subject covered in the decree is that of *legal protection of the right to enrollment*. In case of refusal to enroll in a certain school, two agencies can be contacted. The first agency is the local consultative (LOP) of the municipality or region. The LOP has three missions, including a research implementation, an advisory function, and mediation. Parents can consult the mediation function of the LOP if their child is refused in a particular school. The second agency involved when a student is refused is the committee on student rights. It practices two tasks. The first task is dealing with parental complaints of refusal to register a child. Moreover, the committee handles the cases that are unresolved after the intervention of the LOP.

The third and last subject covered by the decree concerning equal education opportunities is the *support to schools*. Additional support is offered when at least ten percent of the pupils within the school are considered to be GOK-pupils. At entry in the primary school or in the first grade of secondary education parents are offered a questionnaire, which they voluntarily fill. The questions relate to the social, cultural and economic background of the family. Based on the information provided by the school, the Flemish government decides whether a school is entitled to additional support. Support is offered for a period of three years. The school decides itself how to use these additional resources. The second and third grade of secondary education can rely on support if at least 25% of the students is categorized as GOK-pupils. Through that support elementary and secondary schools are given the possibility to work towards expanding care for disadvantaged students. The Flemish government hopes to reach two important goals. First of all, it hopes to reduce the percentage of students who have to attain a grade twice. Secondly, the government hopes at increasing the numbers of students that complete their studies.

5.2. Immigrants' educational situation in Belgium

Immigration history differs across the borders of western countries, which impacts immigrant composition. Bauer, Lofstrom and Zimmerman (2000) differentiate between traditional immigration countries (for example, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States), immigration countries with either post-colonial immigration or active recruitment (for example, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom) and the new immigration countries (for example, Italy, Ireland and Spain). In the traditional group, founding and development of the countries were dependent on immigration. In countries with either post-colonial immigration or active recruitment, immigration is seen as a temporary tool to stimulate economic growth. In the new immigration countries, immigration is mainly driven from outside, by the influence of other countries, in particular the inflow of asylum seekers and refugees.

Belgium, the country that will be used as a case in our study, can be situated in the second group of immigration countries (with either post-colonial immigration or active recruitment). Different generations of immigrants have been settling in. In the 1920s Belgium started to accept guest workers from neighboring countries, Central and Southern Europe (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003). The two largest non-EU immigrant groups in Belgium, in particular Moroccans and Turks began to immigrate in 1964, also as guest workers. Despite the moratorium on immigration in 1974, Moroccan and Turkish communities in Belgium kept growing. Instead of the expected massive return to the countries of origin, more immigrants came to Belgium to reunite with their family.

In Belgium, the educational situation of immigrants is an extreme example of ethnic minority children's school failure. Belgium scores, in international comparisons, very high in education quality yet school result differentials between children with a native and a foreign background are second highest (Hirt, Nicaise & De Zutter, 2007). Of all countries, Belgium scores second worst for social equality in math scores at age fifteen, following Germany and followed by the United Kingdom. The average relative (in comparison with the richest students) test score of the 25% poorest students in Finland (the best performing country) was twice as high as the score of the poorest students in Belgium. Hirt, Nicaise and De Zutter (2007) focus on socio-economic status (SES) instead of immigrant status (our focus), but SES

and immigrant status are highly correlated (Zhou, 1997), especially for some immigrant groups like Moroccans and Turks.

Other studies confirm the particularly disadvantaged position of immigrant children in Belgian schools, especially for children belonging to the Turkish and Moroccan communities (Duquet, Glorieux, Laurijssen & Van Dorsselaer, 2006). According to Groenez, Van den Brande and Nicaise (2003), the ethnic and cultural background has an influence on participation in *kindergarten*. Their research results reveal a greater amount of non-participation regarding toddlers with a foreign nationality. In particular, 36 % of Maghrebian toddlers does not participate in kindergarten, compared to 16 % of native toddlers.

Immigrant children are also more likely than natives to lag behind in Belgian *primary schools* (30% of them repeat one or more years versus 10% of the native students) (Groenez, Van den Brande and Nicaise 2003). Consequently they are over-represented in special education. Their chance to end up in special education is 9.5 % in comparison to 4.5 % regarding to non-immigrant children (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003).

In *secondary schools*, immigrants especially attend technical (particularly in the branches of “electromechanics”, “commerce” and especially in “car mechanics” and “bodywork”) or even vocational (particularly in the study options “central heating and sanitary fittings”, “electrical installations”, “hairdressing” and “nursing”) education (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003; Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003). Moreover, 40% of them leaves secondary school without qualifications

Participation of immigrants in *higher education* is limited. In particular, only 20 % of the immigrant population participates in higher education (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003). This limited participation of immigrants can partly be explained by the fact that 60 % of immigrant youth does not possess a diploma that gives access to higher education (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003). When Turkish or Moroccan immigrants do participate in higher education, they are most likely to drop out in the course of the year (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003). Half of Belgian youth gets a higher degree in comparison with one out of six immigrants (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003). Despite this fact, the proportion of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants who complete a successful higher education is rising. Moroccans seem to be doing better than Turkish

immigrants. In particular, the probability that Moroccans complete higher education is twice as high of that of Turkish immigrants (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003).

As a result of their lower educational performance, Timmerman, Vanderwaeren and Crul (2003) also find that unemployment among Moroccan and Turkish immigrants is higher compared to unemployment among Belgians. “Figures from the national employment agency (Rijksdienst Voor Arbeidsvoorziening, RVA) show, for example, that on June 30, 2001, some 20.6% of Turkish and 17.3% of Moroccan workers in Belgium were benefit-entitled full-time unemployed persons, as compared to 9.9% of Belgian workers” (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003, p. 1078).

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