The Barometer For Diversity In Flemish Schools: An Explorative Study Into School Policy And Teacher Attitudes Towards Diverse Students.

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Contribution

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Cross-national educational research, such as PISA, has been central in comparing educational systems across Europe. This research shows that Flanders provides education of a rather high quality, as indicated by high average scores on the ability tests (6). Nevertheless, Flanders simultaneously scores quite low on social equality in education when compared to other European countries, as evidenced by ethnic minorities, children with a disability or from weaker socio-economic backgrounds underperforming when compared to their compatriots. This is not only evident from the PISA tests, but other Flemish research demonstrates time and again that these students tend to repeat years more often, are less present in highly-valued tracks of education, drop out more often and start a study in higher education less frequently (3, 4, 5, 11). In contrast, LGBT students tend to do relatively well in Flanders when compared to other countries (2). However, such findings should be considered with caution, given the fact that Flemish and cross-national research into the school experiences of LGBT students has been limited to date.

As is apparent from the discussion above, there seem to be pervasive issues considering social inequality in Flemish education. Given the fact that Flanders consistently scores poorly on several indicators of social equality, regardless of whether disability, ethnicity or SES is considered (3, 4, 5, 6, 11), it suggests that something pervasive might be going on, transcending the individual level. Hence, it might be advantageous for research to focus on school-related characteristics, rather than student-related characteristics. Furthermore, since school features are more amenable to change than individual
characteristics, focusing on school features might be more conducive to social change. Consequently, in this research, we will focus on the meso-level of school and teacher-related characteristics. More specifically, we will research school policy and teachers’ attitudes towards diverse students, since previous research has demonstrated the importance of both policy and teacher attitudes for the everyday school experiences and educational success of students (1, 9). In line with school effects research (10), we will consider the impact of structural and compositional characteristics on the attitudes of the school staff and the policies the school puts into practice with regards to diverse students.

A central feature of this research is the broad scope, which is achieved by considering teacher attitudes and school policies directed at several social groups. Because most research tends to focus on a single indicator, such as ethnocentrism among teachers (12) or SES-biased evaluation (1), little research has considered several indicators of social inequality simultaneously. Consequently, little is known about how school policies and teacher attitudes towards these social groups might compare. Nonetheless, the intersectionality perspective emphasizes the importance of considering several indicators of social inequality at once, because of the way these indicators tend to intersect and amplify effects of social exclusion and bias (13). Moreover, considering several indicators of social inequality simultaneously contributes to a more nuanced understanding and better approximation of the complex social reality of contemporary school life.

Consequently, in this research, we will investigate and compare school policy and teachers attitudes towards diverse students. More specifically, we will consider policy and attitudes towards LGBT students, students with ethnic roots, a disability, and lower socio-economic background, since these groups tend to occupy a vulnerable position in the Flemish educational context and are confronted with pervasive issues of social inequality. Additionally, we will investigate how structural and compositional features of schools influence these teacher attitudes and school policies.

Method

Data was gathered in both primary and secondary education, where about 200 and 300 educators respectively filled out the questionnaire, clustered in 92 schools. Schools were selected so each geographical region within Flanders was equally represented. Selection was further dependent on school denomination and a proportional representation of rural versus city schools. Within these parameters, selection was randomized. All this ensured a sample representing the diversity of schools in Flanders.

Attitudes towards diverse students was measured using The Personal and Professional Beliefs about Diversity scale of Pohan and Aguilar, consisting of 14 items with a 5-point likert scale (7). Willingness to incorporate diverse students into the current classroom was measured by a scale developed by Schraepen and colleagues, consisting of 23 items with a 5-point likert scale (8). Self-efficacy in dealing with diverse students was assessed by a scale consisting of 25 items with a 5-point likert scale. The school policy towards diverse students was assessed using 17 items with a 5-point likert scale, tapping school policy issues specific to the Flemish educational context.

Structural and compositional effects of schools were considered as well (10). For this, we relied on data provided by the Flemish Department of Education. Indicators for school structure included the denomination of the school (private versus public), school size, and location (urban versus rural). Indicators for school composition tapped the demographic make-up of the student body, consisting of the proportion of low SES students and a herfindahl-index indicating the extent of ethnic diversity among students.

Multivariate regression analyses, using the statistical program SPSS, were used to analyse the data.

Expected Outcomes

Of all social groups considered, analyses indicate that teachers tend to have the most favourable attitudes towards LGBT-students. Nevertheless, when it comes to self-efficacy in dealing with these students, we note a lot of self-doubt, especially concerning transgender-issues. Remarkable in this regard is the difference between primary and secondary schools. Primary school staff seems to consider gender issues “less relevant” for their context, resulting in less favourable policy initiatives and self-efficacy among primary versus secondary schools.

In contrast to LGBT-issues, school policies and teacher attitudes towards ethnic minorities seem to be worse in secondary than primary schools. The especially adverse reactions toward religiosity and foreign language use among students stands out in the analyses.

Willingness of teachers to include students with a disability into their classrooms seems to be conditional as well, depending strongly on the type of disability. Students with physical disabilities and learning disorders are seen as more easily integrated into the classroom. In contrast, teachers are more hesitant to include students with severe mental or emotional disorders, or who combine several disorders. All in all, when compared to other groups of students, teachers seem to hold the least favourable attitudes and self-efficacy towards students with a disability.

In contrast, teachers hold favourable attitudes towards and feel efficacious in dealing with students from a disadvantaged social background. Similarly, the use of positive policies towards these students was consistently reported as well. These findings are in stark contrast with the findings on social inequality in Flemish education, and suggest a disconnect between teacher experiences and social reality.

Additionally, few robust associations were found between structural and compositional characteristics of the schools and
their policies or staff attitudes. Rather, differences between schools were explained by the reported self-efficacy and attitudes of teachers, pointing towards the importance of teacher professionalization.

References


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