



## Ethnic composition of the primary school and educational choice: Does the culture of teacher expectations matter?



Sarah Thys\*, Mieke Van Houtte

Department of Sociology, CuDOS, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' expectations are low at schools with a lot of ethnic minority students.
- Pupils' educational choices are more ambitious at these schools.
- High educational ambitions are tempered by low teachers' expectations.
- The impact of teachers' expectations is an important topic in teacher education.

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### ABSTRACT

The authors investigate whether teachers' expectations (TE) at the school-level mediate the relationship between ethnic school composition and educational choice at the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders. The link between TE and pupils' educational choices is explored without neglecting school-level variables. Hierarchical logistic models were tested using data of May 2015. Results show that pupils' educational choices are more ambitious at ethnically diverse schools. These ambitions are tempered by TE at the school-level, which are lower in these schools. The importance of TE for the educational progress of students in the increasingly diverse Flemish landscape is demonstrated.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, considerable attention has been paid to teacher expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies, due to the well-known Pygmalion study of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). Several meta-analyses and reviews later, we can conclude that teacher expectations influence student performance (Brophy, 1983; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Spitz, 1999). Nowadays, these findings are frequently applied to argue that teacher expectations play an important role in the reproduction of social inequalities at school (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Williams, 1976). Jussim, Eccles, and Madon (1996), ascribe this interest in the power of teacher expectations to "their potential to further understanding social injustice" (Jussim et al., 1996, p.294). However, the role of teacher expectations in explaining social inequalities at school has not yet been explored to its full potential.

Original teacher expectancy research focused mostly on cognitive outcomes for students, but subsequent research shows that non-cognitive student outcomes, such as motivation and self-esteem, are also influenced by teacher expectations (de Boer, Bosker, & van der Werf, 2010; Jussim, 1989; Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Trouilloud, Sarrazin, Martinek, & Guillet, 2002). However, it is only recently that research dealing with expectancy has examined a non-cognitive student variable that is directly related to educational inequality, namely educational choice (Becker, 2013). Social inequality in educational choice has been demonstrated by research in various countries (Flanders: Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Germany: Ditton & Krüsken, 2006; France: Duru-Bellat, 2002; England and Sweden: Jackson, Jonsson, & Rudolphi, 2012; Denmark: Jaeger, 2009; the Netherlands: Kloosterman, Ruiter, de Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2009). These recent studies show that pupils' educational choices are influenced by their socioeconomic background. Norwegian research shows that although the effect of social class on educational opportunities

\* Corresponding author. Ghent University, Korte Meer 5, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.  
E-mail address: [Sarah.Thys@UGent.be](mailto:Sarah.Thys@UGent.be) (S. Thys).

operates throughout people's entire educational progression, it is greatest at the first major transition to secondary education at 15–16 years of age (Hansen, 1997). In Flanders, this first important transition occurs even earlier, at the age of 12. Previous German research by Becker (2013) investigated the effect of teacher expectations on educational choices, and advocated for the integration of expectancy research with research about inequality in educational opportunity. Both research traditions, however, have a history of neglecting school-level variables. Although recent expectancy research has focused on discovering the situations in which the most powerful self-fulfilling prophecies occur, this quest has concentrated on the individual characteristics of students or teachers, whilst neglecting environmental influences (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Jussim et al., 1996). Studies about educational choice at the transition from primary to secondary education have likewise paid little attention to features of the primary school (Ditton & Krüsken, 2006; Kloosterman et al., 2009; Van Houtte & Boone, 2012).

The present article aims to fill this research gap by considering school-level variables that are related to both teacher expectations and inequality in educational choice. By doing this, we further the ongoing investigation into the link between teacher expectations and educational choice, without neglecting school-level variables. Recent research suggests that teacher expectations are related to both educational choice and the ethnic composition of a school (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2013; Becker, 2013). In Flemish primary education, the level of ethnic school segregation is high, and in secondary education ethnic minority students are overrepresented in the 'lower' tracks, especially in vocational education (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2011; Opdenakker & Hermans, 2006). However, little research has considered both ethnic composition and teacher expectations in relation to educational choice. Knowing this, we examine the possibility that ethnic composition is related to educational choice through its impact on teacher expectations. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine whether the culture of teacher expectations, seen as the aggregation of teachers' expectations at the school-level, mediates the relationship between ethnic composition and educational choice in the transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Educational choice and teacher expectations

In many European countries, educational choice at the transition from primary to secondary education is not only based upon a pupil's interests or talents, but is also influenced by the social position of a pupil's parents (Flanders: Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Germany: Ditton & Krüsken, 2006; France: Duru-Bellat, 2002; England and Sweden: Jackson et al., 2012; Denmark: Jaeger, 2009; the Netherlands: Kloosterman et al., 2009). Educational choice embodies the secondary effect of class differentials in educational attainment according to Boudon (Boudon, 1973; Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Yaish, 2007). Research demonstrates that, irrespective of achievement, pupils with a high socioeconomic status (SES) have a greater likelihood of choosing one of the more demanding academic tracks, compared with pupils who have a low SES background (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a). A study by Hansen (1997), shows that social class has the strongest impact on the early transition to secondary education at 15–16 years of age. As a consequence, a pupil's educational path is influenced by his/her socioeconomic background from a very young age.

Because of the importance of parental background, research

into the process of educational choice has focused on the perspective of parents and has neglected the role of the school, and more specifically, the role of teachers (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b). However, in the absence of nationwide standardized tests or entrance requirements for tracks, teachers and the advice they offer might play a very important role at the time of the transition from primary to secondary education. Research in various countries has shown that these teacher recommendations are unconsciously socially biased (Flanders: Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Germany: Ditton, Krüsken, & Schauenberg, 2005; France: Duru-Bellat, 2002). The probability to get the advice to enroll in the more demanding academic tracks is greater for pupils with a high socioeconomic background, regardless of their level of achievement. Teachers presumably base the advice on their expectations concerning a pupil's future educational progress. Teacher expectancy research has shown that high-expectancy students are given the benefit of the doubt in borderline situations (Finn, 1972).

In line with Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), expectancy research has been primarily concerned with the impact of teacher expectations on student intellectual development (Jussim & Harber, 2005). According to literature, different teacher expectations produce differential treatment of students, in the form of giving high-expectancy students more emotional support, clearer and more positive feedback, more attention, more opportunities to learn, and different learning materials (Brophy & Good, 1970; Brophy, 1983; Cooper, 1979; Jussim, 1986). This differential treatment of high versus low-expectancy students can be explained by a number of psychological mediators, for example the perception of control over students. According to Cooper (1979), teachers may feel they have greater control over the behavior of high-expectancy students than over that of low-expectancy students. Therefore, they will emphasize controlling and structuring the behavior of low-expectancy students to a greater extent than they will for high expectancy students. This comes about through minimizing student-initiated interactions with low-expectancy students, by providing a less emotionally-supportive environment with less positive feedback for success (Jussim, 1986). The differential treatment of students can invoke performance consistent with the expectations, by the lack or abundance of opportunities to develop important scholastic skills. Low-expectancy students receive less positive feedback regarding their success, although appropriate feedback provides a student with the information needed for good school performance. Through these mechanisms of differential treatment, teacher expectations can influence student achievement (Brophy, 1983; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Spitz, 1999).

More recent teacher expectancy research has focused not only on student cognitive outcomes, but also on non-cognitive outcomes, such as motivation and self-esteem (Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Jussim, 1989; Trouilloud et al., 2002; de Boer et al., 2010). Research concludes that teacher expectations are also related to student perceived control over outcomes, motivation, and self-concept of ability (Jussim, 1989). A greater degree of emotional support and positive feedback given to a high-expectancy pupil can affect that student's self-esteem concerning school affairs (Jussim et al., 1996). Becker (2013) links these concepts to the subjective evaluation of the likelihood to succeed, within the cost-benefit calculation of an educational decision. According to the rational action approach of Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), educational choices are based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits, thereby taking into account the subjective evaluation of the likelihood to succeed in a particular educational track. It is this subjective evaluation – which is closely related to self-concept of ability and self-esteem regarding school affairs – that is influenced by teacher expectations.

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