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# **Pupils' Transition to Secondary Education: The Impact of Primary Teachers' Beliefs and Judgements of Pupils, Teachers, and Parents on Teachers' Orientation Advice**

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## **Abstract**

In order to advance our understanding about teachers' orientation processes of pupils during the transition to secondary education, this study aims to investigate the influencing beliefs and judgements of primary teachers' orientation advice in Flanders. Using a qualitative research design consisting of an inductive research approach, interview data was gathered from 15 sixth grade teachers. The results indicate that foremost judgements of pupils are considered in view of orientation, particularly pupils' motivation or interests and learning attitude. Although empirical evidence is also found for the influencing character of teacher and parent characteristics, teachers' awareness of its impact is rather limited.

**Keywords:** Educational transition; Secondary education; Teacher beliefs; Orientation advice; Qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

Children are confronted with different turning points in their educational careers, of which the transition from mainstream primary to secondary education is a crucial changeover (Terwel, 2006). In alignment with the worldwide differentiated nature of educational systems (cf. tracking, streaming, stratification, or ability grouping), pupils are sorted into different groups, classes and schools during this transition (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). As such, the importance of primary teachers' orientation or allocation processes of pupils and teachers' cognitions or decision-making processes, in this regard, are highlighted. This particularly applies to the Flemish educational system, considering the role of primary teachers as the "gatekeepers" in the transition to secondary education. In contrary to meritocratic educational systems, in which pupils' orientation is based on their previous performances in standardised tests, Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) makes no use of a binding nationwide standardised test at the end of primary education. As a result, pupils are commonly oriented to secondary education on the basis of primary teachers' judgements of their abilities and potentials in the form of the orientation advice (Department of Education and Training, 2008; EACEA, 2009; Gorard & Smith, 2004; Penninckx, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2011). In fact, alongside pupils' regular school reports, pupils and parents can only formally relay on teachers' orientation advice, when deciding on choice options of secondary education (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b). Clearly, in the highly decentralised and liberal educational system of Flanders, teachers' cognitions are essential for pupils' orientation (e.g., Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a; Van Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2013).

Despite the supported importance of teachers' cognitions in view of pupils' orientation, a lack of knowledge on this topic still exists. In the past, research on the consequences of

educational orientation has been at the forefront rather than the processes of orientation and its mechanisms (i.e., how orientation occurs or how teachers form their orientation advice). In acknowledgement of the prominent role of primary teachers in Flanders, inquiry into teachers' cognitions that precede or coincide with pupils' orientation as a teaching practice (i.e., teacher behaviour) is needed to gain insights into how and on what basis orientation by teachers occurs. Furthermore, past research that did deal with the processes of orientation is traditionally rather restricted to a single focus on (the impact of) teachers' cognitions of pupils. In the Pygmalion study as the pioneering work, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) were the first to identify the impact of teachers' judgements of pupils' intelligence on the assessment of pupils. Also, in their exploratory study on orientation by Flemish teachers during the transition to secondary education, Boone and Van Houtte (2013b) stated that teachers especially take into account non-cognitive characteristics of pupils that are considered to be important for school success, such as the ability to plan and punctuality. Teachers further assess pupils differently according to parental social background (i.e., socioeconomic status), since these characteristics are considered to be unequally distributed across social classes. However, in line with the research on teacher thinking, as discussed below (see 2.2), and in line with the findings of Boone and Van Houtte (2013b), we need to consider the contextual nature of teachers' cognitions. In the context of pupils' orientation to secondary education, logically, alongside pupils, the social influences lie within the teachers themselves and pupils' parents.

By way of conclusion, although past research already provided some insights into the interplay between teachers' cognitions of pupils and teachers' orientation processes, there are still many shortcomings. Therefore, by means of inductive reasoning, the aim of this study is to identify primary teachers' cognitions related to the three central actors of orientation (i.e., pupils, teachers, and parents) and their decisive characteristics, that impact upon pupils' orientation to secondary education. First, we explore the broad range of influencing teachers'

judgements of pupils and parents. Next, we opt to identify the beliefs held by teachers about themselves and about teaching that underlie the orientation processes. The teachers' orientation advice as an outcome of the orientation process is scrutinized, as is reflected in the following research questions: (1) What judgements with respect to pupils and parents do teachers identify as influencing the orientation advice?; and (2) What beliefs held by teachers about themselves and about teaching impact upon the orientation advice? The present study is part of the Transbaso project (2014-2017), which is an innovative valorisation and research project that deals with the transition from mainstream primary to secondary education in Flanders. In addition to the teacher perspective that is researched in this study, other perspectives with regard to the transition are also being addressed in the project, such as those of pupils and their parents.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### ***2.1 Primary Teachers' Orientation Advice in the Flemish Educational System***

Before we turn to the conceptual framework of (the impact of) teachers' cognitions, we will start with an elaboration of the Flemish educational system. Children typically enrol in secondary education by the age of 12, preceded by nursery education (theoretically, 2.5 to 6 years) and primary education (theoretically, 6 to 12 years). Afterwards, students generally attend tertiary education, including higher professional education and academic education (theoretically, 18 to 25 years). At the onset of secondary education, pupils' and parents' educational choice and, by extension, teachers' orientation advice encompasses a specific study curriculum (i.e., a fixed set of different subjects). Due to the socio-religious compartmentalisation of the Flemish educational system, secondary schools strongly vary in their pedagogical project and offered studies. As a result, school and study choice cannot be

seen separately from one another. Furthermore, the Flemish educational system is characterised by freedom of school choice, indicating that pupils and parents can freely choose to enrol in the secondary school of their choice (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Related to this specific educational policy of freedom of school choice is the level of socioeconomic and ethnic school segregation, which is found to be exceptionally high in Belgium compared to other Western countries (Agirdag & Van Houtte, 2011; Jacobs, Rea, & Teney, 2009).

Secondary education is divided into three grades (each of two years) characterised by increasing levels of differentiation (for an overview, see Pustjens, Van de gaer, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2008). In the first grade, pupils can choose between two oriented streams, for which there are no specific entrance requirements. The A-stream proposes a common curriculum supplemented with optional courses (e.g., Latin or technology) to prepare pupils for more demanding academic education. The B-stream provides education for pupils who are considered to be less interested in theoretical tuition and for those who did not obtain a primary education certificate. However, in a number of cases, the perspective of reaching the primary education certificate and a possible transfer to the A-stream is kept open. The optional courses can be considered as forerunners for the different educational tracks in the second and third grade: general secondary education (GSE: broad curriculum), technical secondary education (TSE: technical subjects), artistic secondary education (ASE: art practices), and vocational secondary education (VSE: vocational-oriented). Compared to TSE and ASE, which occupy an intermediate position, a relatively higher status is associated with GSE and a relatively lower status with VSE (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

## ***2.2 The Impact of Teachers' Cognitions on the Orientation of Pupils***

In order to investigate how pupils' orientation by teachers occurs and, in particular, upon which information teachers' orientation advice is based, we need to address teachers' cognitive thought processes. Indeed, since the 1980s, researchers' interests have shifted from solely teacher behaviour and its effects (i.e., the relationship between teachers' classroom behaviour, students' classroom behaviour, and students' learning or achievements) to teacher thinking (for a review, see Fang, 1996). Influenced by the developments in cognitive psychology, this paradigm shift was grounded in the growing understanding how human action is affected by one's cognitions (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

In accordance with the personal interpretative framework of Kelchtermans (1993), in which teachers' professional behaviour and development is conceptualised from a narrative-biographical perspective, teacher thinking refers to a set of cognitions that guides teachers' interpretations (i.e., how teachers look at their job and give meaning to it) and behaviour (i.e., how teachers act in it) in a particular context (i.e., the social, cultural, material, and institutional context). At the same time, teachers' cognitions are modified by and resulting from interactions with this context, indicating its contextualised, interactionist, constructive and dynamic nature (cf. the Social Cognitive Theory of Bandura (1986) and his conception of reciprocal determinism of human functioning). Also Fang (1996) acknowledged that teachers' cognitions are shaped by many factors, such as social influences. Logically, in the context of educational orientation, we can assume influences of both the teachers themselves and pupils on teachers' cognitions, given that they are the key actors of the orientation process. Additionally, alongside teachers and pupils, parents are actively and jointly involved in the process of making educational choices regarding secondary education of their children (Fallon & Bowles, 1998; Gorard, 1999). Their involvement is also reflected in the common way in which pupils' orientation is discussed, more specifically during formal teacher-parent conferences at the end



of primary education (Lemmer, 2012). Consequently, during these interactions, also parents are expected to exert an influence on teachers' cognitions.

Kelchtermans (1993) distinguished two strongly interwoven domains of cognitions that make up teachers' personal interpretative framework. First, teachers have certain conceptions of themselves as teachers, that is, a *professional self-understanding*. These cognitions include interconnected components such as one's self-image (i.e., a descriptive component referring to the way teachers typify themselves as teachers), self-esteem (i.e., an evaluative component referring to teachers' appreciation of their job performances), job motivation (i.e., a conative component referring to the motives one has to choose the teacher job, to stay in the job, or to leave it), task perception (i.e., a normative component referring to teachers' ideas of what constitutes their professional tasks and duties), and future perspective (i.e., teachers' expectations about their future in the job). Next, teachers use a personal system of knowledge and beliefs about education and teaching, while performing their job, that is, a *subjective educational theory* (i.e., teachers' professional know-how or the basis on which they ground their decisions). A teacher's professional self-understanding is grounded in his/her subjective educational theory, for instance, in terms of the knowledge and beliefs used to implement in a teacher's task perception. The content of a subjective educational theory consists of more formal insights and understandings (e.g., based on research and training courses) as well as personal-based experiences and convictions (e.g., teachers' experiences of parenthood), and is usually developed by reflection on classroom practices (Kelchtermans, 2009). Earlier on, also Clark and Peterson (1986) stated that theories and beliefs make up an important part of teacher thinking (alongside teachers' planning or thought processes before and after classroom interactions, and teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions during classroom interactions). Referring to teachers' knowledge about objects, people, events, and their relationships, teachers' theories and beliefs impact upon teachers' planning, interactive thoughts and

decisions, and classroom behaviour (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Among them are personal-practical knowledge, pointing to teachers' experiential knowledge about pupils in terms of, for instance, their strengths, difficulties, interests, and needs. As such, teachers' theories and beliefs, in terms of personal-practical knowledge, can be embodied in teachers' judgements of pupils (Brophy & Good, 1970; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Rosenthal, 2002).

In summary, as also stated by Fang (1996), teachers' cognitions can take many forms. Regardless of the forms they take, teachers' cognitions impact upon teaching and learning. In acknowledgement of the association between teacher thinking and teacher behaviour, we hypothesise that teachers' orientation processes, and more specifically teachers' orientation advice as an outcome of these processes (i.e., teacher behaviour), are influenced by teachers' beliefs and judgements (i.e., teacher thinking). As mentioned earlier, in line with the personal interpretative framework of Kelchtermans (1993), we consider beliefs held by teachers about themselves (cf. professional self-understanding) and about teaching (cf. subjective educational theory). Additionally, teachers' judgements of pupils and parents (cf. subjective educational theory) are included in this study.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

Since face-to-face discussions are traditionally used to access respondents' "thick descriptions" of the topic under investigation, a qualitative research design is particularly suitable for studying teachers' cognitions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The influencing teachers' beliefs and judgements of the orientation advice were examined by means of 15 in-depth interviews with primary teachers. The interviews were conducted in the period

from May to June 2015 and generally lasted one hour to an hour and a half. As part of the Transbaso project, 11 primary schools in the cities of Antwerp and Ghent were involved because of their high density of both primary and secondary schools, and their large amount of cultural and social diversity.

As a key feature of purposive sampling, the research units were chosen for a specific purpose on the basis of specific selection criteria (Cohen et al., 2011). First, the selection of schools was based on their ethnic and socioeconomic composition. As a reflection of today's multicultural society and the high level of socioeconomic and ethnic school segregation in Belgium, Flanders, and more specifically the cities of Antwerp and Ghent, count a large number of schools with a high incidence of vulnerable pupils (according to the criteria of the Flemish Decree on equal educational opportunities: (1) speaking a non-native language at home, (2) having a school allowance, and (3) having a mother that has completed lower secondary education at most). These pupils often have a lower socioeconomic status and are often ethnic minorities. The selection of schools resulted in a representation of 11 primary schools with a low (one school, three teachers), average (six schools, seven teachers), and high (four schools, five teachers) incidence of vulnerable pupils (referring to the pupils who meet the criteria of equal educational opportunities). Additionally, by addressing different "types" of schools, different "types" of pupils and parents were also addressed. Due to the inductive research approach, a natural variation, with respect to the pupils and their parents included in this study, was pursued. Next, the sixth grade teachers of the selected primary schools were asked to participate in the study, in order to access those who are responsible for, and have in-depth knowledge about, pupils' orientation to secondary education. Fifteen teachers were willing to participate. Moreover, empirical saturation was reached at that point (i.e., theoretical sampling) (Cohen et al., 2011).

### ***3.2 Research Method***

Similar to the interview guide approach, as one of the distinguished interview types by Patton (1980), we conducted semi-structured interviews. The main interview topics were specified in advance in the form of an interview guideline, though the sequence and wording of the questions could be dealt flexibly. In line with the research questions, our interview topics were: (1) judgements of teachers about pupils (cf. research question 1), (2) judgements of teachers about parents (cf. research question 1), and (3) beliefs held by teachers about themselves and about teaching (cf. research question 2). Considering the research objective aiming at exploring or generating theories concerning the influencing teachers' cognitions of the orientation advice, open-ended questions were used, in which the interviewee's response was minimally restricted (Cohen et al., 2011).

### ***3.3 Data Analysis***

The in-depth interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by means of the verbatim principle. Based on the computer-based software programme NVivo, the data was qualitatively analysed through coding and content analysis. All of the information was encoded by using open coding to label and sort the information. In accordance with the inductive nature of the data collection, a basic coding scheme was used and adjusted with the creation of codes during the coding process itself. The codes were further refined and deepened using axial and selective coding, moving from specific to general theory building (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Cohen et al., 2011). Additionally, the data analysis was approached from an emic point of view. The data analysis was based on the conceptual framework of the teachers being researched, rather than on the conceptual framework of the researcher (i.e., etic approach), in order to be able to

generate theories concerning the influencing teachers' cognitions of the orientation advice (cf. inductive approach) (Arthur, Waring, Coe, & Hedges, 2012).

#### 4. Results

In order to explore the broad range of primary teachers' beliefs and judgements that influence teachers' orientation advice, the participating teachers are asked which features of pupils, parents, and themselves as teachers as well as the teaching practice are taken into account when orienting pupils to secondary education and in what way. In line with the inductive nature of the data collection, the influencing features are questioned both spontaneously and explicitly. This results in an identification of crucial pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics, as decisive factors of teachers' beliefs and judgements related to these actors.

When the participating teachers are asked, '*which actors and/or factors do you think play an important role for the orientation of pupils to secondary education?*', pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics are *spontaneously* mentioned, though not to the same extent. As one might expect, all of the teachers indicate that they especially consider pupil characteristics when deciding on orientation advice. In contrast, only one teacher spontaneously indicates to consider his/her own characteristics. Parent characteristics are further found to be important by half of the teachers. In comparison with the findings, as described above, different results are found when the participating teachers are *explicitly* asked to identify which pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics are influencing their orientation advice. Table 1 describes the number of times each participating individual teacher expresses pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics. Pupil characteristics remain the most frequently mentioned (mentioned 56 times in total) and also parent characteristics are considered by a substantial number of teachers (mentioned 20 times

in total). Surprisingly, when looking at teacher characteristics, a different picture occurs. Teacher characteristics are considerably more taken into account (mentioned 32 times in total), when questioning its influence on pupils' orientation explicitly. We can thus conclude contradictions in findings concerning the influencing character of teacher characteristics depending on the spontaneous versus explicit phrasing of the question. Consequently, the extent to which teachers are aware of, or recognise, their own impact on pupils' orientation, can be questioned.

**[Insert Table 1]**

When focusing on the specific nature of the influencing pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics, seven different pupil characteristics are distinguished by the teachers in view of their orientation advice, compared to five teacher characteristics and five parent characteristics. The characteristics, which are discussed below (see 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3), are shown in Table 2 and listed in order of their perceived importance, based on the number of times expressed by the teachers.

**[Insert Table 2]**

#### ***4.1 Influencing Pupil Characteristics***

Both cognitive and non-cognitive characteristics of pupils are considered by teachers in view of pupils' orientation, of which the latter to a slightly greater extent than the first-mentioned. Thirteen out of the fifteen participating teachers indicate the influencing nature of pupils' *motivation or interests* for certain secondary choice options. The same is true for pupils'

*learning attitude*, referring to, amongst others, their effort and participation in the classroom and the extent to which they work independently. Furthermore, pupils' *school achievements* are mentioned by approximately a two-thirds majority of the teachers. Pupils' *well-being* and *talents or strengths* are taken into account by roughly half of the teachers, followed by few teachers who indicate to consider pupils' *intelligence* and *degree of maturity*. The following reaction of Matthew (Teacher 5) illustrates the perceived importance of several of the above-mentioned characteristics and the extent to which they are decisive for his orientation advice:

*I put the school report [school achievements] at the top, that is the most important thing for me. Then, the interests of the pupils, what they like [motivation or interests], and of course also their talents, what are their strengths [talents or strengths], because pupils are not necessarily good at what they like. Also very important is the work attitude or how the child studies [learning attitude]. These are the most important aspects for me (Matthew, Teacher 5).*

With respect to pupils' well-being, examples such as "*pupils' position in a group, are they leaders, are they followers or are they outsiders?*" (Evelyn, Teacher 4) and "*a child will not succeed if he or she does not feel at home*" (Kirsten, Teacher 14), illustrate the emphasis teachers lay on pupils' social functioning, self-image, and need for care support or guidance.

#### ***4.2 Influencing Teacher Characteristics***

Both beliefs related to the teachers themselves (cf. teachers' professional self-understanding) and the teaching practice or education in general (cf. teachers' subjective educational theory) are found to be influencing teachers' orientation advice. The majority of teachers report various

*educational beliefs* (cf. subjective educational theory). Two main groups can be distinguished in this respect: (1) beliefs concerning the Flemish educational system and its specific structure, and (2) beliefs concerning the compatibility between pupil characteristics and their educational choices. Looking at the first group, Matthew (Teacher 5), for example, demonstrates that, “*I try to pass on to my pupils that every study choice option is equally good and that it does not matter what you choose, as long as it is something you are comfortable with*”. In addition to the equality of the different secondary study choice options of the Flemish educational system, the changeable and non-predictive nature of the initial study choice of pupils is also emphasised. Wesley (Teacher 12), for example, states that, “*I say to my pupils that they will not be attached to the study choice made at the start of secondary education. Look at me; six years of TSE followed by something completely different in higher education*”. In line with the previous findings regarding pupil characteristics and teachers’ orientation advice, the teachers of the second group believe that pupils’ secondary study choices need to be compatible with certain pupil characteristics. Next to pupils’ motivation or interests and learning attitudes, “*pupils should definitely employ their strengths [talents or strengths], when deciding on a study choice*”, as illustrated by Jack (Teacher 15).

Approximately one third of the teachers also report a perceived influence of their *personality* on pupils’ orientation (cf. self-image as the descriptive component of professional self-understanding). Examples, such as the impact of a very positive approach to life on the attached importance to pupils’ self-confidence and self-image, and the impact of a very performance-oriented attitude on pupils’ global self-fulfilment, are mentioned. In addition, Lily (Teacher 1), for instance, talks about the importance she attaches to pupils’ well-being as a result of her being very empathetic:

*I strongly pay attention to the children’s well-being and where they are going to*



*feel at home. I think that is just a part of who I am, that I very much try to empathise with the children and focus on the care of pupils. Pupils, for example, who think studying is horrible... you cannot advise them to enrol in Latin [optional course of the A-stream in the first grade that can be considered as forerunner for GSE from the second grade]. I do think I allow such feelings to take part in pupils' orientation (Lily, Teacher 1).*

Lastly, some teachers state that their *experience with pupils' orientation and the extent to which they feel confident to orient* (e.g., feeling very confident in deciding on orientation advice and also defending it with great vigour in relation to parents) are important issues in view of the orientation advice (cf. self-image and self-esteem as the descriptive and evaluative components of professional self-understanding). The same is true for *teachers' relationship with pupils* (cf. self-esteem and task perception as the evaluative and normative components of professional self-understanding). The teachers point to certain aspects of these relationships that exert an influence on the extent to which they “earn” pupils' respect and really get to know them, which is, in turn, important to be able to orient pupils in a good way. Examples, such as “*an open and friendly atmosphere, in which pupils experience no obstacles to ask me things or to tell me things*” (Vivian, Teacher 7) and “*pupils who know the real me and vice versa*” (Kirsten, Teacher 14), are mentioned in this respect.

### ***4.3 Influencing Parent Characteristics***

When deciding on orientation advice, a two-thirds majority of the teachers consider the *extent to which parents support their children in their schoolwork* at home. By this, teachers refer to,

for example, supervision of schoolwork and offering help with studying. Patricia (Teacher 8), for instance, considers parents' support in the light of her orientation advice:

*In secondary education, pupils get a lot of homework and the subject matter becomes more difficult [compared to primary education]. I want to avoid advising, for instance, GSE [educational track in the second and third grade considered as one of the most demanding educational tracks] to a pupil that has to work very hard and which I suspect that he will not get any support at home. However, if the pupil will get support, he is less likely to fail and lose his interest in school (Patricia, Teacher 8).*

Additionally, one third of the teachers express the importance of parents' *involvement* with respect to school and education, including "*whether parents are interested in what happens at school*" (Logan, Teacher 3). Compared to the support offered by parents, parental involvement is rather situated at the emotional or psychological level and encompasses more than just assistance with pupils' schoolwork. A minority of teachers further mention the extent to which parents can make important (financial and cultural) *resources* available for their child (e.g., access to the internet), the specific *family structure* (i.e., searching for a compromise regarding the orientation advice in case of divorced parents) and *parents' expectations concerning their child's educational career*. With respect to the latter, the teachers indicate a connection with *parents' socio-cultural background* (i.e., socioeconomic status), which they strongly emphasise. Particularly immigrant parents have high, and often unrealistic, expectations, as experienced by the teachers. Specific beliefs about how the future of their child should look like and preconceptions regarding the Flemish educational system, in which certain secondary study choice options are more valued than others, are held responsible for this. It

further appears that the child's cognitive school results are highly valued by immigrant parents, as the basis on which they make choices with respect to secondary education (and thus without or insufficiently taking into account the child's preferences). The following example of Melanie (Teacher 10), for instance, illustrates her experiences in this respect:

*Most of the time, my orientation advice corresponds with the choice of the child's parents. But there are still a lot of parents, especially immigrant parents, who have very high expectations and who do not always have a realistic view of the school results and the qualities of their child. They then want to aim too high [referring to choosing one of the most demanding educational tracks in secondary education], resulting in an unhappy child. [...] One of my pupils is not going to obtain his primary education certificate at the end of the school year. If I had known in advance that his parents would make a wise choice [regarding secondary education], I would have let him graduate. But I know that his parents prefer a secondary school that is unrealistic for him, so I have decided to force him into the B-stream [one of the oriented streams within the first grade of secondary education for those pupils who did not obtain their primary education certificate] (Melanie, Teacher 10).*

Next to the teachers who consider parents' expectations concerning their child's educational career in relation to socio-cultural background, four other teachers express similar experiences. They also acknowledge the importance of this parent characteristic, however, they do so without allowing it to be of any influence for their orientation advice. Irrespective of the fact that the teachers do, or do not, experience an impact of parents' socio-cultural background on pupils' orientation, it was much-debated. Wesley (Teacher 12), for instance, underlines that

he is, in a sense, powerless in comparison to immigrant parents and the educational choices they make:

*There is a large difference between immigrant parents and native parents. I have certain immigrant parents in mind who refuse to send their son to a technical secondary school [referring to the study offer of mainly TSE and/or VSE] because they believe that a general secondary school [referring to the study offer of mainly GSE] is superior. I, however, do not consider parents' and pupils' socio-cultural background in view of my orientation advice. I simply want the best for my pupils, but some immigrant parents have a different opinion than mine and there is nothing that I can do in order to change this (Wesley, Teacher 12).*

## **5. Conclusions and Discussion**

This study investigates primary teachers' beliefs and judgements that impact upon teachers' orientation advice in the context of pupils' transition from primary to secondary education in Flanders. Due to the highly tracked structure of Flemish secondary education, primary teachers are challenged in their orientation processes of pupils during this transition. Considering the autonomous nature of orientation in Flanders highlighting teachers' personal decision-making role, a contribution to the inquiry into the processes of orientation and its mechanisms is made by addressing the influencing teachers' beliefs and judgements. An inductive approach was used in order to explore the broad range of possible influencing judgements of pupils and parents (cf. research question 1), and the influencing beliefs held by teachers about themselves and about teaching (cf. research question 2). This results in an identification of decisive pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics of teachers' orientation advice.

A first conclusion is that teachers', above all, take judgements of pupils into consideration, when deciding on orientation advice. This finding can be considered to be in line with the stated prominent role of Flemish primary teachers and their cognitions for pupils' orientation to secondary education (Agirdag, Van Avermaet, & Van Houtte, 2013; Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a; Van Houtte et al., 2013). Judgements of pupils' motivation or interests and learning attitude are perceived as the most crucial for the orientation advice given. Thus, in line with the findings of Boone and Van Houtte (2013b), teachers consider non-cognitive characteristics of pupils to be slightly more influential in comparison to cognitive characteristics (such as pupils' academic performances and cognitive features). These findings further support the general emphasis laid on a global development of pupils in education, in which pupils' non-cognitive characteristics are found to be at least equally important as cognitive characteristics.

To a lesser extent, teachers take into account beliefs related to themselves and teaching. Hence, empirical evidence is found for the impact of the distinguished teachers' cognitions by Kelchtermans (1993) that underlie teacher behaviour. In the context of teachers' orientation processes as a specific teaching practice, teachers' conceptions about themselves as teachers (cf. professional self-understanding) and teachers' knowledge and beliefs about teaching and education (cf. subjective educational theory) are found to exert an influence on teachers' orientation advice. In correspondence with the latter, teachers' educational beliefs about the specific structure of the Flemish educational system and the compatibility between pupils' educational choices and specific pupil features, are perceived as the most influencing for the orientation advice. In addition to these beliefs about teaching and education, the identified influencing teachers' judgements of pupils and parents can also be seen as part of one's subjective educational theory. Furthermore, related to teachers' professional self-understanding, a considerable number of teachers express an impact of personality beliefs on pupils' orientation and of other personal judgements, such as the extent to which they feel

confident to orient pupils to secondary education. Questions, however, can be raised about the extent to which teachers are aware of, or recognise, the influence they can exert on orientation, since the importance of their own characteristics only become apparent when explicitly questioning this issue (in contrast to the spontaneous phrasing of the question). Therefore, further in-depth research into the influencing teacher characteristics of pupils' orientation and the ways in which teachers are aware of them, is needed.

Although teachers primarily consider pupil characteristics in view of pupils' orientation to secondary education, it might be surprising that parent characteristics are also taken into account. Teachers' judgements about the extent to which parents support their children in their schoolwork are perceived as the most decisive for the orientation advice. When comparing the extent to which pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics are mentioned by teachers, parent characteristics can be considered as the least influential for educational orientation. This, however, can be questioned, as becomes clear when teachers talk about the influence of parents' socio-cultural background or socioeconomic status. Although only few teachers indicate its impact on the orientation advice given, more teachers express its experienced negative influence during teacher-parent conferences in general (in which pupils' orientation and teachers' orientation advice is discussed). Consequently, we can question teachers' awareness of the impact of parents' socioeconomic status on orientation. In line with Boone and Van Houtte (2013b) stating that the impact of parental socioeconomic status is rather indirect (i.e., through differences in Flemish teachers' assessment of pupils' competencies), perhaps similar conclusions can be drawn in this study. Furthermore, given the possible sensitive or even threatening nature of this topic for the teachers interviewed (i.e., in the context of discrimination of pupils), teachers' experiences, in this regard, might be biased due to the desire of 'social acceptable' responses. Once again, these results point to opportunities for future research, in which special attention should be given to the specific questioning of sensitive matter.

Furthermore, in today's multicultural society, in which the number of immigrant pupils with an often lower socioeconomic status is still growing and phenomena like educational inequality and socioeconomic and ethnic school segregation manifest itself (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001; Wiggan, 2007), teachers need to be aware of the possible influence of parental social background on teachers' orientation of pupils.

To conclude, a significant impact of primary teachers' beliefs and judgements on teachers' orientation advice is demonstrated. In line with the traditional focus on teachers' cognitions of pupils (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Brophy & Good, 1970; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1986; Rosenthal, 2002), our findings support the strong influencing character of teachers' judgements of pupils for educational orientation. On top of this, we were able to ascertain an impact of also teachers' judgements of parents, and teachers' beliefs about themselves and about teaching. Doing so was particularly rewarding, as we think to have found exploratory evidence for the impact of teacher and parent characteristics, in addition to pupil characteristics, which enlarges our current vision and knowledge-base about the topic under investigation. However, as already mentioned, in order to be able to fully understand the influencing character of all these influencing beliefs and judgements and their decisive characteristics, further in-depth research is needed that goes beyond the exploratory.

Our findings have important educational theoretical and policy-related implications. First, the results of this study demonstrate that, in the context of educational orientation, it matters who the teacher is, as also suggested by Kelchtermans (2009). Consisting of a professional "self" together with personal-based knowledge and beliefs (i.e., the influencing beliefs held by teachers about themselves and about teaching of the orientation advice), teachers are at the centre of the educational process, of which pupils' orientation to secondary education is one specific aspect. At the same time, our results stress the relational and social nature of pupils'

orientation by teachers, in which pupils and their parents are also found to exert an impact. Consequently, for future research into this study field, both approaches should be ideally integrated. Next, teachers should become more aware of the ways in which they orient pupils to secondary education, more specifically the ways in which they take pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics consciously and unconsciously into account. We consider that it would be very useful to implement these insights in pre-service and in-service teacher education, especially in the context of educational systems characterised by a high cultural and social diversity. Special attention should be further given by teacher educators on student teachers' understanding and awareness of the impact of both teacher and parent characteristics, since teachers' awareness of its impact on orientation is found to be limited. Consequently, the influence of teacher and parent characteristics is likely to be greater than in the first instance, as perceived by the teachers.

Despite the valuable data found in this study, there are also a number of limitations and other suggestions for future research. The influencing pupil, teacher, and parent characteristics of orientation are marked by a large heterogeneity concerning each individual teacher (referring to the number of characteristics expressed), but also between the various participating teachers (referring to the content of the characteristics). After having identified the influencing teachers' beliefs and judgements of the orientation advice, the need for an explanatory model concerning this heterogeneity arises. In this perspective, and in response to the restrictions of this study, examining this topic on a larger scale would add value to our current knowledge-base. The heterogeneity between the participating teachers of different schools raises the question of whether orientation is, in fact, a process shaped by the individual teacher and/or by the school (policy). Consequently, it would be interesting to investigate the influencing teachers' beliefs



and judgements of pupils' orientation to secondary education at school level, transcending the individual teacher level.

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