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Social inequality in education and the use of extramural support services: Access and parental experiences in disadvantaged families.

### Abstract

*Objective:* As low socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnic minority students often experience barriers during their school career, increased levels of referral of these students to extramural support services in education (ESS) can be expected. Yet, research indicates that disadvantaged students are often underrepresented in different types of ESS. The purpose of this study is to examine possible social inequalities in the use of, and referral, to ESS (study 1), and to explore the experiences of disadvantaged students' parents (study 2). *Method:* In study 1, 3302 parents of school-aged children completed a survey on the use of ESS. Data were analysed using logistic regression analyses. In study 2, parents of disadvantaged school-aged children ( $N = 8$ ) participated in focus group discussions, which were analysed thematically. *Results:* Results of study 1 confirmed the unequal use of ESS according to family SES and migration history, and revealed that inequality was especially prominent in private ESS, while subsidized ESS was equally used. Schools did not refer low SES and ethnic minority students more to ESS. In study 2, disadvantaged students' parents addressed the role of multiple thresholds beyond merely financial barriers in decision processes pertaining to ESS use. *Conclusions:* Results indicate varying degrees of social inequality in the use of subsidized and private ESS. Such dynamics of unequal access and participation can reinforce unequal education opportunities. Addressing disadvantaged families' subjectively experienced thresholds may provide one way to reduce this inequality. When disadvantaged families do not reach the necessary ESS, schools should compensate and increase their guidance for these students.

*Keywords:* socioeconomic status, migration history, social inequality in education, extramural support services in education, thresholds

### **Disadvantaged students and (extramural) school guidance in education**

Internationally, schooling is increasingly seen as a means to bring the necessary guidance to disadvantaged students to counter further social exclusion (Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello, 2003; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001). Ideally, school guidance is a comprehensive programme, integrated into the educational curriculum, aimed at stimulating both the learning process and wellbeing of every student (Galassi & Akos, 2004). In this whole school approach, all school personnel are involved, but cooperation with external partners is also necessary (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Galassi & Akos, 2004).

In this article, the term extramural support services in education (ESS) is used for help by professionals who are not affiliated to the school, but who work independently (private sector) or in a subsidized centre. Their support may address both problems in learning (e.g. remedial teaching) and wellbeing (e.g. mental health care). The costs of private ESS are generally higher than the costs of subsidized ESS, the latter being organized and co-funded by the government. In Flanders, the social security system even makes some forms of ESS free of charge for low-income families. Pisa research indicates that a Belgian student spends on average 10-15 minutes per week in after-school classes organized by a commercial company and paid for by parents, or working with a personal tutor (whether paid or not), which is near the OECD average (OECD, 2012).

Both low socioeconomic status and ethnic minority (LSES&Eminority) students experience on average more **barriers** during their school career compared to high SES and ethnic majority (HSES&Emajority) students respectively, due to unequal opportunities. They have an increased risk for lower school results, dropout, and orientation to special education (Day-Vines & Day-Hirston, 2005; Sullivan, 2011). Therefore, in this article the term ‘disadvantaged students’ is used for LSES&Eminority students. Research indicates that differences in school career between Eminority and Emajority students are partly explained by differences in SES between these two groups (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002), with Eminorities categorised as at risk groups for low SES life conditions.

Given disadvantaged students’ increased risk of educational difficulties in their school trajectories, a more prevalent use of ESS can be expected. Indeed, ESS could play an important remedial role to compensate for the disproportionate academic barriers. However, there are indications that disadvantaged students make disproportionately less use of ESS, both for learning (Santos de Barona & Barona, 2006; Winter, 1999) and wellbeing (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002). Literature points to both access and resource **barriers** in disadvantaged families; They generally have fewer financial resources to pay for ESS or the transportation accompanied with it (Gamble & Lambros, 2014), have other priorities such as fulfilling their basic needs of food

and shelter (Madsen, 2013), and have less information about the opportunities of and access to ESS (Arcia, Fernandez, Jaquez, Castillo, & Ruiz, 2004; Leong & Lau, 2001).

Not only SES but also migration history in se may play a role in reduced access to certain types of ESS (Garland et al., 2005). Especially for Eminorities, language acquisition, a more fearful attitude towards specialized help (e.g. the fear that a professional might take away their children), as well as a lack of cultural competence and processes of stereotyping and discrimination among professionals seems to hamper access to ESS (Gamble & Lambros, 2014; Scheppers, Van Dongen, Dekker, Geertzen, & Dekker, 2006; Snowden, Masland, Ma, & Ciemens, 2006). Additionally, disadvantaged students who do make use of certain types of ESS have disproportionately high dropout rates in ESS (Chow, Jaffee, & Snowden, 2003). Reasons for high dropout rates are a lack of organizational skills, misunderstanding due to cultural differences and even distrust towards professionals (Gamble & Lambros, 2014; Snowden et al., 2006).

If disadvantaged students indeed show a reduced ESS-participation, social inequality in the use of ESS exists, hereby invoking the applicability of reproduction theory. Social inequality is defined as differences in income, resources, power and status within and between societies, which are maintained by those in powerful positions via institutions and social processes (Warwick-Booth, 2013). Social inequality typically leads to social exclusion, which is characterized by unequal access to services (both public and private) (Levitas et al., 2007). Reproduction theories (Bourdieu, 1997) state that parental, social and cultural capital is inherited by their children. This reproduction is believed to be mediated by the education system, in that the culture within the education system is closer to the culture of the majorities. In this way, the education system is more adapted to HSES&Emajority students than to disadvantaged students, indicating a Matthew effect (Merton, 1988) in which advantaged groups accumulate advantages while disadvantaged groups do not profit from these advantages. In reproduction theories, success and failure in school is seen as being due to students' individual accomplishments or deficiencies. In that way students' educational performance helps to reproduce and even legitimate social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1997).

In order to further explore whether and/or how a reduced ESS-participation in disadvantaged families invokes a reproduction of social inequalities, it seems relevant to explore: Differential ESS-use in relation to family's SES and ethnicity; Access to subsidized ESS; The role of schools in referral processes as well as parental experiences with the use of ESS. Up to now, it remains unclear whether LSES&Eminority students indeed use more subsidized ESS compared to HSES&Emajority students, and whether schools do serve as a

gateway to bring the necessary guidance to disadvantaged students, which would contradict the reproduction theory. Lastly, parental experiences of ESS in disadvantaged families remain understudied.

### The current study

In previous studies, the use of ESS was mostly studied through documenting a specific form of ESS (e.g. mental health care, Kataoka et al., 2002), from the professionals' point of view (mainly social workers and teachers, e.g. Santos de Barona & Barona, 2006) and in a quantitative manner (e.g. Winter, 1999). In contrast, this study focuses on the wide range of ESS which can contribute to the educational outcomes of students, relates this use to child and family characteristics, and focuses on the disadvantaged families' perspective, using both a quantitative and a qualitative approach.

The current study investigates the access to and the use of ESS in primary and secondary mainstream education, with a focus on the access to and use of ESS by LSES&Eminority students. First, in addressing the range of ESS, we explore whether LSES&Eminority students indeed show a reduced ESS-use as compared to HSES&Emajority students, respectively, and whether the use of private versus subsidized ESS differs for those groups of students. We hypothesize that LSES&Eminority families use less ESS in general, and private ESS in particular, compared to HSES&Emajority families, but that they use subsidized ESS relatively more. Second, we explore potential differential referral trajectories for LSES&Eminority families as compared to HSES&Emajority families respectively. We tentatively hypothesize that schools refer LSES&Eminority students relatively more to ESS, as these students have an increased risk for experiencing barriers in their school career. Third, it remains unclear how disadvantaged students' parents perceive the access to and use of ESS. We hypothesize that they indeed face many barriers, and we therefore aim to explore parental identifications of barriers as well as how they experience these access difficulties. Based on the formulation of these objectives, we conducted a mixed-method study with a combined questionnaire (study 1) and focus group design (study 2).

The following research questions are addressed:

- To what extent is (the wide range of) ESS used? Does the use of ESS differ between LSES&Eminority versus HSES&Emajority students? Is private ESS used more by HSES&Emajority students, and is subsidized ESS used more by LSES&Eminority students?
- Is the referral process different for LSES&Eminority students compared to HSES&Emajority students? If yes, in what way is it different?
- How do disadvantaged students' parents experience access to and use of ESS?

### Study 1: Method

In order to gather specific information on the use of and referral to ESS from a large representative sample, a survey was developed. Through logistic regression analyses, relationships were made clear between the use of and referral to ESS on the one hand and several child and family characteristics on the other.

### **Measures**

The survey started with a definition of ESS and questioned the use of ESS during the last three school years: 2011-2012, 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. If parents indicated that they made use of ESS for their child in that time period, questions about the type of ESS and the referral process followed.

Parents could indicate the specific type of ESS organization used to support their child (i.c. ‘Which organization offered ESS?’). Parents could choose one or multiple answers from a list of ESS organizations. Both private and subsidized ESS organizations were included in the list, which ended with an open option ‘other’. The ESS organizations could address academic problems and/or problems with wellbeing, which was independent of the type of ESS organization (private versus subsidized ESS).

The referral process was questioned by asking ‘Who advised you to search for ESS?’. Parents could choose from a list of predefined answers which were categorised in three categories: Parents took the decision themselves, school personnel (e.g. teacher, counsellor) or parents’ informal network (e.g. family, friends) advised them to seek ESS. Multiple answers were possible.

The families’ SES was measured by: the family net income, the highest level of diploma and the profession of the parents. The families’ migration history was measured by: mother tongue of the child, birth country of the child, language spoken in the family, birth country of grandparents, and birth country of the parents.

The parent survey was drafted in easy language and was available online and on paper in three languages. In that way, non-vernacular speaking parents and parents without Internet facilities at home could also fill out the survey.

### **Sample**

A total of 1895 parents of children in 104 primary schools, and 1557 parents of children in 60 secondary schools, filled out the survey in response to a letter from the research team that was handed out by the participating schools. The sample of participating schools and parents was quasi-representative for respectively the population of schools in Flanders and the population of parents in these participating schools, according to SES (measured by education level of the mother, families receiving a school allowance and language spoken at home) (Verschueren et al., 2015). In order to make comparisons between groups possible according to SES and migration history, the whole sample was included in further analyses. Table 1 shows the distribution of participating parents on the SES and migration history variables.

**Table 1** Sample information on SES and migration history

% Used ESS	<i>N</i> no (%)	<i>N</i> yes (%)
Net income of the household		
< 1000 euros	41 (1.57%)	11 (.42%)
1000-2000 euros	307 (11.72%)	121 (4.62%)
2000-4000 euros	1074 (41.01%)	398 (15.20%)
4000-6000 euros	404 (15.43%)	150 (5.73%)
>6000 euros	82 (3.13%)	31 (1.18%)
Highest degree of responding parent		
Completed primary school	119 (3.68%)	28 (.86%)
Diploma secondary education	873 (26.97%)	316 (9.76%)
Bachelor/master degree	1378 (42.57%)	523 (16.17%)
Highest degree of other parent		
Completed primary school	182 (5.71%)	58 (1.82%)
Diploma secondary education	1108 (34.79%)	424 (13.31%)
Bachelor/master degree	1037 (32.56%)	376 (11.81%)
Occupation of responding parent		
No occupation	278 (8.75%)	81 (2.55%)
Occupation	2047 (64.43%)	771 (24.27%)
Occupation of other parent		
No occupation	206 (6.69%)	50 (1.62%)
Occupation	2046 (66.43%)	778 (25.26%)
Language spoken in the family		
Only vernacular	1914 (58.80%)	762 (23.41%)
Vernacular and also other languages	349 (10.72%)	83 (2.55%)
No vernacular	120 (3.69%)	27 (.83%)
Mother tongue child		
Vernacular	2140 (65.89%)	826 (25.43%)
No vernacular	236 (7.27%)	46 (1.42%)
Birth country child		
Belgium	2196 (69.78%)	824 (26.18%)
Other Western country	66 (2.10%)	18 (.57%)
Non-Western country	34 (1.08%)	9 (.29%)
Birth country grandparents		
Four grandparents born in Western countries	2038 (65.15%)	794 (25.38%)
At least one grandparent born in a non-Western country	246 (7.86%)	50 (1.60%)
Birth country biological mother		
Belgium	1972 (62.64%)	779 (24.75%)
Other Western country	134 (4.26%)	43 (1.37%)
Non-Western country	189 (6.00%)	31 (.98%)
Birth country biological father		
Belgium	1964 (62.61%)	756 (24.10%)
Other Western country	139 (4.43%)	53 (1.69%)
Non-Western country	184 (5.87%)	41 (1.31%)

## Analyses

Using univariate logistic regression analyses, the predictive effect was examined of SES and migration-related child and family variables for the use of (different types of) ESS (i.c. private versus subsidized ESS) and for the referral process. For the second, two separate sets of logistic regression analyses were conducted with, as

dependent variables, 'use of private ESS' (the group of parents who selected only private organizations of ESS, was compared with the group of parents who did not use ESS) or 'use of subsidized ESS' (the group of parents who selected only subsidized organizations for ESS, was compared with the group of parents who had not used ESS). Predictors included all socio-demographic variables shown in Table 1. Only significant results ( $p < .05$ ) are reported.

### Study 1: Results

#### Use of ESS

During three school years, 27.50% ( $N = 908$ ) of the parents used ESS for their child. Private ESS or subsidized ESS was exclusively used by respectively 71.83% and 16.59% of these parents, respectively, while 11.59% used both types of ESS.

*Child and family variables as predictors for ESS use.* Table 2 shows the significant predictors for ESS use according to univariate logistic regression analysis.

**Table 2** Significant predictors for the use of ESS

	Log odds (SE)	P	OR	95% CI
Highest degree of responding parent (bachelor/master degree versus completed primary school <sup>a</sup> )	-.48 (.22)	.03	.62	.41-.95
Occupation of responding parent (no occupation versus occupation)	.29 (.13)	.03	1.34	1.03-1.74
Occupation of the other parent (no occupation versus occupation)	.48 (.16)	.00	1.62	1.17-2.22
Mother tongue child (vernacular versus no vernacular)	-.68 (.17)	< .001	.51	.37 – .70
Language spoken in the family: Only vernacular versus no vernacular	-.57 (.22)	.01	.57	.37-.87
Language spoken in the family: Only vernacular versus also other languages	-.52 (.13)	< .001	.60	.46-.77
Birth country grandparents (four grandparents born in Western countries versus at least one grandparent born in a non-Western country)	-.65 (.16)	< .001	.52	.38-.72
Birth country biological mother: Non-Western country versus Belgium	.88 (.20)	< .001	2.41	1.63-3.55
Birth country biological mother: Non-Western country versus other Western country	.67 (.26)	.01	1.96	1.17-3.27
Birth country biological father: Non-Western country versus Belgium	.55 (.18)	.00	1.73	1.22-2.45
Birth country biological father: Non-Western country versus other Western country	.54 (.24)	.02	1.71	1.08-2.72

<sup>a</sup> The reference category is always listed first

Table 2 shows that the odds of using ESS was decreased by 38-49% when the responding parent had, at most, completed primary school, when the child's mother tongue was not vernacular, when no or not only vernacular was spoken in the family, and when at least one of the grandparents was born in a non-Western country. The odds of using ESS was increased by 34-96% when the parents had a job, when the biological

mother was born in another Western country (compared to a non-Western country), and when the biological father was born in a non-Western country (compared to Belgium or another Western country). The odds of using ESS were 2.41 times larger when the biological mother was born in Belgium (compared to a non-Western country). Thus, both SES and migration-related variables were predictive for the use of ESS.

To check whether the effects of migration-related family characteristics were invoked by the migration history, and not merely related to differential SES between Eminority and Emajority groups, the analysis on the relationship between migration variables and use of ESS was repeated after controlling for SES variables that had a significant effect on the use of ESS (degree of the responding parent and occupation of both parents). The child's mother tongue, the language spoken at home, and grandparents' birth country still had a significant effect on ESS use. Regarding parental birth country, only the difference between parents born in Belgium and parents born in a non-Western country remained. Overall, these migration-related family characteristics predicted less use of ESS after controlling for SES.

*Child and family variables as predictors for private versus subsidized ESS.* Table 3 displays the significant predictors for private ESS use according to univariate logistic regression analysis.

**Table 3** Significant predictors for the use of private ESS

	Log odds (SE)	P	OR	95% Confidence Interval
Net income of the household (>6000 euros versus <1000 euros <sup>a</sup> )	-1.34 (.64)	.04	.26	.07-.92
Highest degree of responding parent (bachelor/master degree versus completed primary school)	-1.12 (.34)	.00	.33	.17-.63
Highest degree of other parent (bachelor/master degree versus completed primary school)	-.56 (.23)	.01	.57	.37-.89
Occupation of responding parent	.86 (.20)	< .001	2.37	1.61-3.47
Occupation of the other parent	.99 (.24)	< .001	2.68	1.68-2.28
Mother tongue child (vernacular versus no vernacular)	-1.80 (.33)	< .001	.17	.09-.31
Language spoken in the family (only vernacular versus no vernacular)	-1.86 (.46)	< .001	.16	.06-.38
Language spoken in the family (only vernacular versus also other languages)	-.80 (.17)	< .001	.45	.32-.63
Birth country grandparents (four grandparents born in Western countries versus at least one grandparent born in a non-Western country)	-1.07 (.23)	< .001	.34	.22-.54
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus Belgium)	1.52 (.31)	< .001	4.57	2.47-8.47
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus other Western country)	.94 (.39)	.02	2.56	1.19-5.53
Birth country biological father (non-Western country versus Belgium)	1.03 (.26)	< .001	2.81	1.69-4.65
Birth country biological father (non-Western country versus other Western country)	.85 (.32)	.01	2.34	1.24-4.41

<sup>a</sup> The reference category is always listed first

Table 3 shows that the probability of using private ESS was even more influenced by SES and migration variables than the probability of using ESS in general. Not only were the predictive effects stronger, but also more variables were predictive for the use of private ESS (i.e. also the net income of the household and the highest degree of the other parent).

Follow-up analyses confirmed that the effect of the migration history remained after controlling for SES variables that had a significant effect on the use of private ESS (net income of the household, highest degree and occupation of parents). The effects of migration variables were therefore not merely explained by a difference in SES between parents with and without migration history.

Similar analyses were performed predicting the use of subsidized ESS. These analyses revealed that SES and migration-related child and family characteristics did not predict the use of subsidized ESS.

## Referral process

A total of 441 out of 904 parents (48.78%) reported that they took the decision for ESS themselves, 473 out of 903 parents (52.38%) were advised by a school professional, and 67 out of 904 parents (7.41%) were advised by someone in their informal social network.

*Child and family variables as predictors for the referral process.* Table 4 displays the significant predictors for the referral process according to univariate logistic regression analysis.

**Table 4** Significant predictors for the referral process

	Log odds (SE)	P	OR	95% Confidence Interval
<b>The parent took the decision for ESS</b>				
Highest degree of responding parent (bachelor/master degree versus secondary education <sup>a)</sup>	-.53 (.14)	< .001	.59	.45-.78
Highest degree of other parent (bachelor/master degree versus completed primary school)	-.99 (.30)	.00	.37	.21-.67
Highest degree of other parent (bachelor/master degree versus secondary education)	-.55 (.14)	< .001	.58	.44-.76
Language spoken in the family (only vernacular versus no vernacular)	-1.12 (.47)	.02	.33	.13-.83
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus Belgium)	1.02 (.42)	.01	2.78	1.23-6.29
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus other Western country)	1.40 (.52)	.01	4.06	1.47-11.22
<b>School advised ESS</b>				
Highest degree of responding parent (bachelor/master degree versus secondary education)	.55 (.15)	< .001	1.74	1.31-2.31
Highest degree of other parent (bachelor/master degree versus completed primary school)	.81 (.29)	.01	2.25	1.27-3.97
Highest degree of other parent (bachelor/master degree versus secondary education)	.75 (.15)	< .001	2.11	1.59-2.80
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus other Western country)	-1.19 (.50)	.02	.31	.11-.81
<b>Informal social network advised ESS</b>				
Net income of the household (>6000 euros versus 2000-4000 euros)	-1.28 (.57)	.03	.28	.09-.85
Birth country grandparents (four grandparents born in Western countries versus at least one grandparent born in a non-Western country)	1.10 (.39)	.01	3.00	1.39-6.50
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus Belgium)	-1.54 (.43)	< .001	.21	.09-.50
Birth country biological mother (non-Western country versus other Western country)	-1.91 (.83)	.02	.15	.03-.76
Birth country biological father (non-Western country versus Belgium)	-1.02 (.44)	.02	.36	.15-.85

<sup>a</sup> The reference category is always listed first

Table 4 shows first, the odds that the parents themselves choose ESS was decreased by 41-67% when the parents had no bachelor/master degree, and when no vernacular was spoken in the family. These odds were 2.78-4.06 times larger when the mother was born in Belgium or another Western country (compared to a non-Western country).

Second, the odds that somebody from the school advised ESS was decreased by 69% when the mother was born in another Western country (compared to being born in a non-Western country). The odds were 1.74-2.25 times larger when the parents had a bachelor/master degree.

Third, the odds that somebody within their own informal social network advised ESS was 64-85% smaller when the net income of the household was 2000-4000 euros (compared to over 6000 euros), and the parents were born in a non-Western country. The odds were three times larger when at least one grandparent was born in a non-Western country (compared to four grandparents born in a Western country).

### **Study 2: Method**

To investigate how disadvantaged students' parents experience access to and use of ESS, two focus groups were organized, independently from study 1. Focus groups are particularly suitable in gathering information about experiences, opinions, desires and motives of user groups (Krueger, 1997).

#### **Procedure**

Two organizations working in disadvantaged communities collaborated in the setting up of a focus group within their organization. The first organization consisted of a large, city-based parental support service organization, oriented at supporting (mainly) minority families, with questions about the upbringing and schooling of their children. The second organization was a small, rural-based organization, oriented at providing food and clothing to disadvantaged families. These organizations assisted in the recruitment of candidate-participants and arranged a meeting space within their premises.

Mothers in the parental support service focus group (FG1) talked about their experiences within this organization. On the other hand, mothers in the second organization (FG2) talked about their experiences with remedial teaching and psychiatric help, independent of the organization itself. All focus group discussions followed the same semi-structured interview guide developed for the purpose of this study, in which general questions were followed by key questions (Yin, 2010). This interview guide probed in both focus groups the personal experiences and perceptions regarding issues such as the decision to use ESS, the relationship between the use of ESS and school guidance, the perceived effect of their migration history, and their financial resources

in relation to ESS-use. During the interview, probing and clarifying questions were asked to reach an in-depth understanding.

The conversations were recorded with a camera and lasted two hours. The spoken language was vernacular.

### **Participants**

Through purposive sampling methods, the organizations recruited candidate-participants. These participants did not participate in study 1. However, due to reasons such as not having transport to the organization or not having a babysitter for the children, low response rates and drop-out occurred. The focus groups consisted of three (FG2) to five (FG1) female participants, all mothers of school-aged children. Two members of the research team acted as moderators of the focus groups. In addition, in FG1 a professional and team member of the organization was also present, to assist in the multi-ethnic focus group administration and to decrease potential distrust from participants.

Participants' age varied from 16-37 years old. Their birth country varied from Belgium, to Morocco, Russia and Spain (first generation immigrants). Their mother tongue varied simultaneously. The mothers were poorly educated; Only one mother had obtained a diploma secondary education.

### **Analyses**

The ad-verbatim focus group transcripts were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using Nvivo. A thematic analysis is suitable for focus group data (Howitt, 2010). Themes and subthemes were differentiated in the transcripts both inductively and deductively, through in vivo coding and using sensitizing concepts (Yin, 2010). The themes and subthemes were checked, and adapted if necessary.

### **Study 2: Results**

Participants described difficulties in access to and use of ESS, which indicated a position of social isolation and the influence of cultural differences.

#### **Social position**

First, the focus groups revealed difficulties experienced by disadvantaged students' mothers in the access to ESS because they were less familiar with ESS. On the one hand disadvantaged mothers experienced deficits in referral to information on payment options for ESS. Some disadvantaged mothers indicated they had little or no help in the search for opportunities for ESS. On the other hand, they were also less familiar with the institutionalized ESS.

*Mother1: I've had to ask for everything. As a single mother you have to ask a lot of questions, otherwise they stab a hole in your wallet. (FG2)*

Some disadvantaged mothers described a limited familiarity with institutionalized ESS. They mentioned they were afraid of the unknown. Personal contact with an extramural counsellor seemed to help them to (continue to) use ESS.

*Mother1: She gave me a leaflet from the parental support service and said that I could come. But just coming without knowing anybody, that's very difficult. But she invited me and then I came. It was a very big step for me. I was afraid; I did not know who I was going to meet. (FG1)*

Disadvantaged mothers also reported prejudices about ESS. Some disadvantaged mothers fear that ESS could lead to the placement of their child and that they will "have to" do what the extramural counsellor says them.

*Mother1: If you get a brochure for the parental support service, you think it's mandatory. The brochure seems to indicate that it is obligatory to always be there and that they're going to ask various questions which you have to answer. And I do not like that. (FG1)*

In both focus groups, the (high) cost of ESS was discussed. Everyone agreed that ESS often has a high cost. However, erroneous perceptions existed about low costs or free services of ESS. The local social security system makes some forms of ESS inexpensive or free of charge for low-income families. According to one participant, however, some disadvantaged mothers are convinced that ESS cannot be free.

*Mother4: Many parents are convinced that they have to pay for ESS. If you say it's free, they say "wait until the bill comes. Nothing is for free here." (FG1)*

Second, mothers talked a lot about issues other than the problems of their child. Some disadvantaged mothers were more concerned with fulfilling their basic needs, such as food and housing, and therefore focused less on the satisfaction of other needs, including the emotional and academic needs of themselves or their children.

*Mother1: I always got food packages, because I am a single mother. But when I started working part-time, the food packages stopped. Now I need to spend every euro three times to actually have enough. (FG2)*

Third, participants also reported difficulties in the practical organization of ESS. The practical organization of ESS does not easily fit with their daily lives and priorities. A mother, for example, tells why she missed her appointment with a psychiatrist that was made four months in advance.

*Mother2: An appointment is only possible after four months. Excuse me, I'm not constantly there. If you have five children, it is normal that you forget something. The psychiatrist would have to remind me the week before the appointment. (FG2)*

Fourth, some disadvantaged mothers indicated they have a narrow and even malfunctioning informal social network, while others seem to have a good informal social network. In the first case, the extramural counsellor was very involved with the family and a trust relationship was formed. The extramural counsellor even seemed to compensate for the inadequate informal social network, because the mother said she only trusts the extramural counsellor of the parental support service, and contacts her for all kinds of questions. In contrast, the second statement illustrates the broad social network of an Eminority parent.

*Mother4: I don't talk about my life or about my child to anyone, that is something I don't trust anymore. Only to Pascale [an extramural counsellor in the parental support service] can I talk. I still have that. I feel safe with Pascale. Pascale is actually always with me. When I need her, I call her. Not only for my child, but even if I have a problem. (FG1)*

*Mother3: I actually had a lot of help from my friends. During delivery I received messages from everyone on my phone. Then I felt strong and I didn't feel alone. (FG2)*

### **Cultural signification**

The influence of cultural differences was also discussed. The Eminority mothers were asked if they encountered problems related to the difference in cultural background between themselves and the extramural counsellor. None of them seemed to experience this difference as problematic. They found the extramural counsellor within the organization was very clear and they understood the counsellor. An Eminority parent even preferred to be helped by someone from the host country and said that using interpreters may offset some cultural differences.

*Mother2: The treatment is the same. (FG1)*

When they were asked if they thought Eminority mothers used ESS for other reasons than Emajority mothers, they indicated that there are no cultural differences in this matter:

*Mother2: No. Each child has his own problems, regardless of nationality. (FG1)*

Eminority mothers also indicated that they do not experience the ESS differently than Emajority parents. Rather than the influence of the cultural background, they believed different experiences of the ESS are merely influenced by personal characteristics of the client and the extramural counsellor.

*Moderator: Do you think that you experience the help differently because you come from a non-native community?*

*Mother2: No, because that is something personal. Every person has different feelings.*

*Moderator: So it differs from person to person?*

*Mother1: Yes. I don't think it has anything to do with migration history.*

*Mother2: No, that has nothing to do with migration history. (FG1)*

Consequently, disadvantaged students' parents in both focus groups did not indicate that they were victims of stereotyping or discrimination.

*Mother4: Some Moroccans or Turks say they have to deal with a lot of racism, but I've never had a problem with someone doing something strange to me. I always feel welcome. (FG1)*

Eminority mothers did think they get more help than Emajority mothers. They did not elaborate on how they experienced this increased help.

*Mother4: We are like the natives, but we get more help. All foreigners get more help than natives, in education or other things. I also experience that in school more attention is given to us. Teachers give more attention to foreign children than to native children. (FG1)*

Nevertheless, the mothers indicated one cultural difference. In general, using ESS means that parents have to tell others about their problems. However, this may contrast with how the social network of some Eminority mothers wants them to deal with difficulties. Problems should be kept within the family and thus one should not find external help to overcome these problems. A mother also believed that external non-family members – like extramural counsellors - cannot fully understand their problems and that parents are ashamed of their problems.

*Mother2: I preferred to discuss this with my family. (FG1)*

### **Discussion**

ESS can be important for the educational career and development in general of all students, and can play an important remedial role for disadvantaged students in particular (Sullivan, 2011). Equal access to ESS for all societal groups is therefore important.

To gather information on possible social inequalities in the use of and referral to ESS and the subjective experiences of disadvantaged families regarding the use of ESS, a survey and focus group study were conducted. One strength of this study is that it examines ESS in general, rather than specific forms of ESS which can promote schooling of disadvantaged students, in a large users' sample. It examines the access to and use of ESS in a mixed-method design, with special attention to the perception of disadvantaged students' parents themselves.

Although ESS takes on different forms in different countries, ESS can often be divided into private (and more expensive) and subsidized (and less expensive, co-funded by the government) guidance, indicating international relevance of these results. Findings on the experiences of disadvantaged mothers, guide hypotheses about thresholds for disadvantaged families in the use of ESS worldwide.

*Study 1* shows that about 27.50% of parents use ESS for their child at least once in a period of three school years. Low SES and a migration history reduce this use. Furthermore, the effect of migration history remains largely intact after controlling for SES. Not surprisingly, in the prediction of the use of a private form of ESS, the role of SES and migration history turns out to be even larger than in the prediction of the use of ESS in general. In other words, LSES&Eminority students have significantly less access to ESS in general, and these students have even more reduced access to private forms of ESS. Surprisingly, in predicting the use of subsidized forms of ESS, child and family characteristics play no role. In conclusion, not only do LSES&Eminority students have less access to ESS in general, and private ESS in particular, also they have no increased access to subsidized ESS (despite the much lower costs within these organizations) than HSES&Emajority students. In other words, subsidized ESS does not compensate for their low use of private ESS.

In predicting the referral process, LSES&Eminority parents decide less for themselves to use ESS than do HSES&Emajority parents. The probability that someone of the school advises ESS increases remarkably when parents have a bachelor/master degree. These odds decrease when the mother was born in another Western country (compared to when she was born in a non-Western country). Based on a limited numbers of respondents, we found that second generation immigrants have a higher odds that the informal social network advises ESS. Remarkably, these odds decrease for other disadvantaged family characteristics.

Previous studies have already indicated that disadvantaged students make disproportionately less use of certain types of ESS, e.g. mental health care (Santos de Barona & Barona, 2006), although they are more at risk for problems (Garland et al., 2005). This study reveals that this inequality also manifests itself when one looks at the whole range of ESS. Disadvantaged families use less private ESS, but not more subsidized ESS, which is less expensive. The financial cost of ESS does not seem to be the only threshold for the use of ESS (see also study 2). Based on our limited findings on school referrals to ESS, we cannot conclude that the school advises ESS more to disadvantaged students to compensate for their academic challenges. Our results seem to indicate the opposite.

*Study 2* reveals several difficulties disadvantaged students' mothers experience in enabling and using ESS. Literature suggests several explanatory factors, mainly from the perspective of professionals, which are located both within families (e.g. shortage of financial resources, having other priorities such as food and shelter, having less information about ESS, different mother tongue, negative attitude towards specialized help, lack in organization skills) and within the professional context (e.g. lack of cultural sensitivity of school internal and –

external professionals, miscommunication because of a different cultural background and even stereotyping and discrimination) (Arcia et al., 2004; Gamble & Lambros, 2014; Madsen, 2013; Snowden et al., 2006).

In study 2, similar thresholds are mentioned by the disadvantaged students' mothers, which indicate an isolated position in society of disadvantaged families. Some disadvantaged mothers were highly dependent on the ESS counsellor because of their own limited informal network. These mothers had less (correct) information about ESS; They do not know what to expect, hold prejudices about the ESS and express feelings of fear and discomfort. Mothers also talk about the (high) costs of ESS, but nuance that there are misconceptions about the costs of ESS; Some mothers are convinced that ESS cannot be free. They also need to give priority to their basic needs such as food and shelter, and the practical organization of ESS does not easily fit with their daily lives and priorities.

Looking for the particular influence of cultural background on ESS, study 2 shows ambivalent views of the participants. On the one hand, when asked directly, the Eminority mothers indicate that they experience a limited role of cultural differences in using ESS. They do not report problems caused by the different cultural background of the extramural counsellor, other reasons for their children to use ESS, or other experiences with ESS compared to Emajority mothers. On the other hand, and more indirectly, there are indications that cultural differences do play a restrictive role in ESS, as mentioned in international literature (Ataca & Berry, 2002; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). Eminority mothers also recognize prejudices about ESS in acquaintances (e.g. the prejudice that parents must do what extramural counsellors tell them or else they might take away their children), which indicate cultural differences and even imply power imbalances within the caring relationship between a (disadvantaged) Eminority parent and the extramural counsellor. These fears may also impede the referral to ESS. In addition, these prejudices about ESS indicate that some parents are inadequately informed about ESS. Some Eminority mothers also preferred to solve problems within the private context of their own family. They expressed feelings of shame when talking about their problems with others and were convinced that extramural counsellors would not understand them anyway.

Several possible explanations exist for the absence of experienced difficulties due to cultural differences, and thereby contradictory results. Since the parental support service has a lot of expertise in transcultural guidance and the mothers had already formed a trusting relationship with this extramural counsellor, it seems possible that the participants experienced fewer problems due to cultural differences. The presence of an employee of the parental support service during the interview, may have also induced social desirability in FG1.

The only difference mothers explicitly are convinced of is that they receive more help from ESS and the school than majorities. However, based on previous research indicating that these families are less informed about ESS (Leong & Lau, 2001), and the findings on unequal use in study 1, we hypothesize that disadvantaged mothers are unaware of the range of ESS, underestimate the frequency these ESS are used, and as a consequence overestimate their use. Moreover, study 1 indicates that HSES&Emajority parents themselves take the initiative to use ESS more than LSES&Eminority parents, and that the school does not advise ESS more to the latter.

*Implications of current findings.* It is important to study the use of ESS by disadvantaged students, since this help can compensate for their increased risk for academic barriers. Indeed, the use of ESS in Flanders has risen in recent years (Verschueren et al., 2015). However, study 1 contradicts the possible remedial role of ESS for disadvantaged students. HSES&Emajority students profit more from the existence of ESS in general, and private ESS in particular, compared to LSES&Eminority students, indicating a Matthew effect (Merton, 1988) and social exclusion (Levitas et al., 2007). The existence of subsidized ESS does not compensate for the unequal access to private ESS. We conclude that the broad range of ESS seems to reinforce the social unequal education opportunities, as predicted by reproduction theories (Bourdieu, 1997). Although the school is seen as the ideal gateway to bring the necessary ESS to disadvantaged students (Farmer et al., 2003), our results indicate that the school does not seem to compensate for the unequal access to ESS; Schools do not advise ESS more to LSES&Eminority families than to HSES&Emajority families. This raises the question whether schools themselves compensate for the unequal use of ESS; In other words, do schools themselves give more intramural guidance to LSES&Eminority students than to HSES&Emajority students? Future research is needed to study whether intramural school guidance programmes compensate for the unequal access to ESS.

Schools and ESS should be aware of the thresholds experienced by disadvantaged mothers (cf. study 2). In particular, school psychologists or the school guidance team should know the challenges disadvantaged students' parents experience during guidance to ESS. We therefore call for more attention and adaptation to the personal circumstances of needy disadvantaged families, both in schools and in ESS. Since schools reach disadvantaged students' parents, they can inform them better about ESS. Open and clear communication from the school and ESS about ESS and transparent information is necessary to reduce possible prejudices. School psychologists or members of the school guidance team and extramural counsellors who belong to a minority group can increase credibility (Sue, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). Working via other existing communities or organizations for disadvantaged families, or with other individuals who disadvantaged families

trust (e.g. their general practitioner), can also promote their participation (Takeuchi, Sue, & Yeh, 1995).

Personal contact with extramural counsellors can convince disadvantaged families to (continue to) use ESS.

Schools and ESS should act as a team to refer disadvantaged families to ESS and should do a follow up. When disadvantaged families do not reach the necessary ESS, schools should compensate and increase their guidance for these students.

Lastly, a limitation of this article is that the authors assume that all ESS programmes are effective, which they cannot confirm. Moreover, one can question whether different ESS programmes or ESS in general holds equal status for different groups. How is the balance between supply and demand of ESS for variable cultural views on effective guidance? Indeed, certain Eminority groups are more suspicious of mental health programs (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002). Follow-up research is necessary to answer these questions.

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