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## **'Everyone has their own qualities': Tracking and academic self-appraisal in Flemish secondary education**

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### **Abstract**

Track position has an impact on students' perceptions of educational success. These perceptions matter as they relate to educational and professional aspirations and choices. In this ethnographic study, based on ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews in three secondary schools in Flanders (northern part of Belgium), we want to increase our understanding of the combination of within- and between track comparisons for students' perceptions of their educational success. The hierarchical nature of the Flemish educational system is reflected in students' comparison groups to evaluate their school success. In academic tracks, most students considered their educational career automatically as successful, regardless of their actual grades. Conversely, students in vocational tracks developed more contradictory feelings with respect to their personal school success and felt the need to distinguish themselves from their classmates. Thus, regardless the existence of different school cultures across tracks, students searched for strategies to define themselves as successful in school.

**Key Words:** secondary education, tracking system, Belgium, success

## 1. Introduction

Students continuously evaluate their skills and abilities in school. Through experiences with and interpretations of the immediate environment, students develop specific ideas about their potential, abilities and skills in different domains (e.g., academic, social, emotional or physical) (Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton 1997). However, when setting out future plans, students weigh out their strengths and weaknesses in several domains (Shavelson et al. 1997), which results in a more global idea of one's academic success. To get more insight in the factors that students consider when developing future (post-secondary) educational and professional aspirations (e.g., university attendance, entry in the labor market), more insight should be gained in students' perceptions of academic success in secondary school – that is, students' evaluation of the extent to which they are successful in reaching their academic goals. As 'success' in school is a relative concept that includes the comparison between individuals or groups (Marsh and Hau 2003), it is important to consider the context in which students make self-evaluations of success. From reference group theory (Merton 1949), we know that the choice of reference groups is context-specific. According to Stephen Richer (1976), people use particular groups as reference groups when they are salient, which implies two conditions. First, reference groups should be visible to the actor. Second, they should be meaningful. The context determines which reference groups are salient for the actor. For instance, a student tends to be more likely to perceive him/herself as successful in school when confronted with less able fellow students at school than when the others at school have a higher average ability level – a viewpoint known as the frog pond effect (Davis 1966) or the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE: Marsh 1987).

Most studies on this topic use the school (e.g. Davis 1966; Marsh 1987) or the class group (Trautwein et al. 2009) as the context of comparison, but it might be interesting to look at tracks as well (e.g., Chmielewsky et al. 2013; Ireson and Hallam 1999; Marsh 1987; Marsh and Hau 2003; Van Houtte 2005; Van Houtte, Demanet and Stevens 2012; Oakes 1985). As many educational systems group students in tracks based on previous achievement, tracks give an indication of the level of performance and abilities of students. In tracked systems, teachers can adapt their teaching methods to the particular needs of their students (Hallinan 1994; Hallam and Ireson 2003) and prepare them for different futures (Van Houtte and Stevens 2010). The allocation to a specific track may affect the comparison groups students use for the overall evaluation of their academic success in two distinct ways. First, students may prefer to compare themselves to others in their own track. This would be logical, due to the distinct finality of tracks (Van Houtte and Stevens 2010) and the fact that people especially compare themselves to others whom they meet on a regular basis (Merton 1949). Previous research has already shown that the relative position to others within the own track, rather than the allocation to a specific track, may affect

students' academic self-concepts (Liem et al. 2013; Trautwein et al. 2009). Second, conversely, students may prefer to compare themselves to others who are in a different track. Across educational systems, scholars find that academic tracks are more highly valued than vocational ones (Hallinan 1994; Van Praag et al. 2015). Being enrolled in a track with a particular standing can be reflected in students' academic self-concepts (Trautwein et al. 2009). The different statuses of tracks are strengthened by the consequences of tracking practices. According to the differentiation-polarisation theory (Hargreaves 1976; Lacey 1970), the organisation of students into tracks has led to a polarization of school attitudes and behaviour, with lower tracks being characterized by counter-school cultures. Thus, due to the overall importance of societal status, future rewards on the labour market and existing school cultures, students may use between-track comparison groups with respect to their self-appraisals of academic success. The crucial question is whether students' perceptions of their academic success are informed by between-track comparison or within-track comparison, and whether this varies across tracks. If between-tracking comparison is dominant, one would expect students in the higher esteemed tracks to have more positive self-evaluations than students in the lower esteemed tracks. If within-track comparison is dominant, one would expect at least some students in the generally lower esteemed tracks to feel successful, that is, when they compare themselves to less successful students in their own track.

The present study investigates how students' perceptions of academic success vary across tracks in secondary education in Flanders. The Flemish educational system is an interesting case of study, as there are no standardized tests at the end of secondary education (unlike the USA, UK) and track enrolment is crucial to enter higher education.

## **2. Background**

### ***Reference group theory***

People compare themselves with specific reference groups they meet. The making of comparisons adds to the ways people evaluate themselves and perceive themselves as successful. However, in order to understand how such mechanisms work, it is important to distinguish two kinds of reference groups: normative reference groups and comparative reference groups (Merton 1949). Normative reference groups provide guidelines for the formation of attitudes, which ultimately guide behavior. With regard to self-evaluations of success, however, comparative reference groups are more relevant. In comparative reference group taking, others are used as a yardstick to appraise one's own situation. If this comparison turns out positive, he/she is relatively gratified. When negative, comparative reference group taking results in feelings of relative deprivation. Previous research demonstrated the importance of comparative reference groups for various school-related outcomes (e.g., Demanet and Van Houtte

2013; Van Houtte and Stevens 2009; 2014; Van Houtte et al. 2012; Marsh and Hau 2003). For instance, studies found that feelings of relative deprivation affect rule-breaking behavior at school (Demagnet and Van Houtte 2013), and general self-esteem (Van Houtte 2005; Van Houtte et al. 2012). Importantly, research demonstrated feelings of relative deprivation to be crucial for students' academic self-concept (Marsh and Hau 2003; Trautwein et al. 2009). In essence, success is relative, and, therefore, it is no surprise that students' self-evaluations of their success are found to be largely determined by comparison to the success of immediate others. This logic dates back to the theoretical perspectives of the frog pond (Davis 1966) and the big-fish-little-pond effect (Marsh 1987). These theories share the conception that, in schools with a better performing student body, comparative reference group taking will more readily result in relative deprivation than in schools enrolling students who generally perform poor. For instance, Davis (1966) demonstrated that career decisions of college men were impacted by the average ability level of their campuses. Students in campuses with high grade-point averages were less likely to hold high occupational aspirations than their – nevertheless equally abled – counterparts in schools with lower grade-point averages. Marsh (1987; Marsh and Hau 2003) found that students have lower academic self-concepts in schools with a higher average ability level, compared to students in schools with a rather low average school-ability. Davis (1966) and Marsh (1987) essentially demonstrated that the immediate context impacts students' self-appraisal by determining the choice of particular reference groups. Students' feelings of relative deprivation were found to be influenced by characteristics of peers that are present in their daily environment. Hence, these studies showed that people choose reference groups that are available for observation. This fits in with the first salience condition according to Richer (1976), namely, the visibility condition. Most previous research into the choice for particular reference groups, however, largely ignores the second salience condition. Richer (1976), namely, held that reference groups should also be meaningful. Next to the structural condition of 'being present', hence, a reference group should have a subjective importance for the comparing actor in question. Most previous research failed to provide insight in this last condition, because most of these studies are quantitative in nature (e.g., Demagnet and Van Houtte 2013; Van Houtte et al. 2012). However, qualitative research may add to a better understanding of the meaningfulness of reference groups and how this is shaped by context characteristics.

### ***Tracks and academic self-appraisal***

While the reference group literature focused on schools (Davis 1966; Ireson and Hallam 2009; Ireson, Hallam and Plewis 2001; Marsh 1987; Marsh and Hau 2003) and class groups (Trautwein et al. 2009), similar logics can be applied to tracks, ability groups or streams within schools (Liem et al. 2013; Trautwein et al. 2009). For instance,

Liem and colleagues (2013) applied the reference group perspective to investigate whether the overall achievement in the attended track impacted students' self-appraisals. They found that the effect of overall achievement in tracks was significant and even surpassed the effect of local class or school average achievement levels in strength (Liem et al. 2013).

Tracks can affect students' academic self-appraisal in two distinct ways. First, students can make between-track comparisons to evaluate their academic success. Tracks differ in terms of prestige (Hallinan 1994; Van Praag et al. 2015). High overall achievement often leads to more prestige, but the two are not necessarily the same. Students may be more aware of the status of their track, rather than the actual achievement levels of the track they are enrolled in. This is important to consider as the membership in a group that is positively valued by the individual may result in more beneficial self-perceptions (Tesser 1988). Marsh (1984, 1987; Marsh, Kong and Hau 2000) referred to the positive effects on one's academic self-concept when being enrolled in highly selective programs/schools as 'reflected glory effects'. Such effects imply that students make between-track comparisons: it is the enrollment in a certain track itself that is considered a criterion for success or failure.

Second, students can also make within-track comparisons to evaluate their academic success. This is what is implied in the classical Big-Fish-Little-Pond effect, and Marsh referred to such within-group comparisons as 'contrast effects' (Marsh et al. 2000). When starting from Richer's (1976) two salience conditions, we might expect students to compare themselves especially to fellow students who are enrolled in the same track. Students in the same track may be hypothesized to be meaningful to the comparing actor, as tracks group students together in terms of ability, skills and future goals. Students compare themselves with peers who have similar future goals, skills, abilities or a similar curricula (Van Praag et al. 2015). Furthermore, students who are enrolled in the same track have more contact with each other, which makes students in the same track more visible than others belonging to another track.

The quantitative study of Trautwein and colleagues (2009) already indicated that both within- and between-track comparison matter for students' academic self-concept. Their findings show that being enrolled in a high ability group is related to relatively lower academic self-concepts but that the overall higher standing of these ability groups could compensate this negative effect partly. Although these findings indicate the co-existence of within- and between track comparisons, more (qualitative) research is needed to understand the importance of or meaning attached to tracks as comparison contexts for students' personal evaluations of their academic success, the mechanisms behind the use of track comparisons and the variation across tracks. We will set out the Flemish educational context.

### *The Flemish educational context: educational choices and success*

Tracks play a decisive role in the organization of students in Flemish secondary education. In contrast to the USA, all secondary schools in Flanders are tracked and have a similar structure, which is the same for public and private schools. Students are grouped into four tracks (academic (ASO), artistic (KSO), technical (TSO) and vocational education (BSO)), according to their interests, abilities and capacities:

<Place **Fig. 1: Educational system in Flanders** here>

Within each track, a ranked set of specific study programs are offered—for example, ‘Mathematics–Sciences’ in academic education, ‘Industrial sciences’ in technical education, and ‘Sales’ in vocational education—characterized by different subjects and accents.

In Flanders, tracks are commonly hierarchically classified by level of abstraction and theorizing; academic education is widely regarded as the most prestigious and demanding track and technical and vocational tracks are placed at the bottom of this ladder (Van Houtte and Stevens, 2010; Boone and Van Houtte 2013). The lower societal appreciation of manual labor has resulted in a specific pattern of educational practices and track choice. Students and their parents enjoy considerable freedom when making educational choices and have to refine their choices over the course of their educational career. After primary education (six years), students have to choose in which track in secondary education they will enroll. Although teachers may advise students to enroll in a particular track, this advice is not binding. The six years of secondary school are divided into three so-called grades, each lasting two years, after which students have to refine their curriculum choice. These transitions during students’ secondary school career are institutionalized by certificates (A, B, C) given by teachers at the end of each school year (Boone and Van Houtte 2013). These specific features of the Flemish educational system have resulted in a tendency to start secondary education in the most demanding and most prestigious fields of study (Boone and Van Houtte 2013). Whenever students encounter learning difficulties, receive a B- or C-certificate or lose their interest in the courses offered, they change to less appreciated and cognitively less demanding tracks or fields of study. This general tendency is often referred to as the ‘cascade system’ and corresponds to Rosenbaum’s (1976) ‘tournament mobility model’. The different status of tracks may also be partly due to the future possibilities associated with these tracks as only students in academic, artistic and technical tracks have the possibility to proceed immediately to higher education after the sixth grade. In contrast with other countries where standardized tests, together with the participation in voluntary work involvement and special courses, determine the chances to enroll in particular high esteemed universities and courses, in Flanders, graduation from an academic/artistic/technical tracks is in nearly all courses sufficient to enroll in higher education. Because of the

particular set of features of the Flemish educational system, tracks play a very important role in the life of Flemish students compared to students in other educational systems.

### **3. Research methods**

Ethnographic class group observations and interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2011 in three secondary schools in a large multi-ethnic city in Flanders. Theoretical sampling of schools was based on the track composition of the schools, the number of students of non-Belgian descent in each school and the track/field of study within a school. The three schools selected are St. Bernardus, a catholic school that offers vocational, technical and academic tracks with 444 students, Mountain High, a school with 1159 students that only offers academic tracks and is run by the city authority, and Catherina Atheneum, a school with 404 students, that offers technical and vocational tracks.

In addition, class groups were selected based on the field of study within these tracks, in order to cover a broad range of different tracks. The following fields of study are included in this study: Commerce, Store management, Industrial Sciences (technical tracks), Sales, Car mechanics and Construction (vocational tracks), Latin, Economy-Modern languages, Sciences-Mathematics, Human sciences, Modern languages-Sciences (academic tracks). Students from nine class groups from the penultimate (fifth) year of secondary education and one additional specialisation (seventh) year after compulsory secondary school were included. All students from these class groups were observed for two or three weeks (approximately 80 hours for each group), after which semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 129 students and 29 teachers (approximately 35 and 100 minutes). This resulted in a sample of 66 students from academic tracks, 18 students from technical track and 45 students from vocational tracks. The periods of observation in each class allowed the researcher to build a rapport with respondents and to understand the context, and they were used as a starting point for interviews. During these interviews, students were asked about their achievements in school, definition of educational success, support from family, peers and teachers, and future aspirations and educational trajectories.

Several strategies were used to ensure the quality control, such as full-tape-recording and transcription of the interviews, computer software to facilitate comprehensiveness, application of principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the constant comparative technique, and method triangulation to check reliability of data interpretation. An open coding scheme was used, resulting in codes, such as ‘definitions of success of significant others (e.g. parents, friends, teachers, classmates, divided in separate codes)’, ‘track status’, ‘importance of grades to define success’, ‘importance of aspirations for definition success’, ‘cascade system’ and

'tracks and success', which formed the basis of more extensive analyses. Replacing the real names of the respondents with pseudonyms chosen by them preserved the anonymity of the respondents.

#### **4. Results**

In the following sections, we will first set out the overall peer evaluations of success in school to fully understand the educational context and hierarchies in which these evaluations take place. Later, we will discuss students' perceptions of their academic success separately for academic and vocational tracks. In so doing, we are able to examine how they relate to the overall peer evaluations of success in school in Flanders. While we make use of data collected in academic, technical and vocational tracks for the first part of the analyses, we will not go deeper into students' perceptions of their academic success for students in technical tracks. The intermediate position of technical tracks within the hierarchical educational system in Flanders was clearly reflected in technical students' personal evaluations of success and contained elements of the discourses of both students in academic and vocational tracks.

##### ***Overall peer evaluations of success in school***

The cascade-like structure of the Flemish educational system was found to inform the ways students evaluate the tracks in which they are enrolled. This hierarchy corresponds with the historically grown lower status that manual labor receives in society (Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996). Generally all respondents agreed that students in academic tracks are seen as more successful by society, compared to vocational tracks (see also Van Praag et al 2015). This idea was so well-spread that students were not always aware of the frequency they referred to it. For instance, students started their sentences with '*Okay, maybe ASO [the academic track] is better but...*' (Almino, vocational track) or referred to technical and vocational tracks in a negative way, like Bas (academic track): '*In the beginning, I thought that TSO [the technical track] was [a track] for those who fail in ASO*' or as Sander (technical track) put it: '*I would send my children first to the academic track, and see where they end up (...) so they start in the highest [track], and if they want to, they have still the opportunity to drop down. Because, if you start in the middle [technical track], you can't go up again*'. However, although tracks were 'higher' or 'lower' esteemed, which can be seen as a crude indicator of success, this did not mean that being enrolled in a particular track was automatically equated with success or failure. As shown by the next interview extract with three students who are enrolled in an academic track, additional criteria were formulated to categorize someone as successful:

**Chris** (academic track): ‘I think that everyone is smart, but in their own way. For example, I think that I am better in an academic track but I am not so good at manual work, compared to someone enrolled in a vocational track. So, I think that everyone can be successful in their own way.’

**Bas** (academic track): ‘Everyone has their own qualities.’

**Eduardus** (academic track): ‘There, in TSO [technical] and BSO [vocational tracks], will be some successful students too...’

**Bas**: ‘...who can achieve something too’

**Chris**: ‘I really can’t say what ‘success’ is.’

**Researcher**: ‘So, as I may resume, you all agree that it doesn’t matter in which track, ASO, TSO or BSO, you are enrolled in, as long as you become successful in that track.’

**Eduardus**: ‘You do what you like to do and where you have some fun. And if you are interested in that course, mostly, you will be more motivated and successful.’

**Bas**: ‘As long as you do your best as much as you can, it doesn’t matter in which track you are, then, you are successful.’

**Chris**: ‘But, you shouldn’t do like ‘I am not in the mood to fail [in the track I am enrolled in], let’s go to BSO [vocational track], that’s really like....’

**Eduardus**: ‘The wrong attitude.’

**Chris**: ‘Yes, then you are not so successful’.

**Researcher**: ‘Do you think that happens frequently?’

**Chris**: ‘I think so, there are quite a lot of people, yes.’

**Bas**: ‘That’s the entire system. If you fail in the academic track, you have to downgrade to a ‘lower’ track and then they consider that as, TSO [technical track] as ‘lower’.’

**Eduardus**: ‘That’s already a wrong point of view. It’s like ‘you have to go lower’. When you do that, you won’t be able to stimulate someone to learn more. *Allez*, you make it so-called easier, so you make it easier to succeed, but at the same time you won’t stimulate someone to learn better.’

This extract shows the difficult balance between the idea that all tracks should be valued equally, the institutionalized hierarchy between tracks, associated stereotypes of tracks and individual features (e.g., merit, competence, personal interest and effort). At first sight, Bas, Eduardus and Chris did not make any distinctions between tracks concerning the possibility to achieve success, suggesting that everyone can be successful. Hence, this implies that the final evaluation of someone’s success in school depends on the students’ personal capacities

and interests, and not necessarily on the track one is enrolled in. However, as they continued to discuss this issue, some nuances were made with respect to the possibility of achieving success in less prestigious tracks, such as technical and vocational ones. For instance, when Eduardus mentioned *'There, in TSO and BSO will be some successful students too'*, completed by Bas' remark *'who can achieve something too'*, this clearly showed that these students implicitly subscribed or at least recognized the strongly embedded hierarchy between tracks and associated stereotypes in the Flemish educational system. This extract illustrates 'success' was interpreted in terms of the initial tracking philosophy/objective, namely to group students in tracks that suited their interests, capacities and prepared them for their future plans. However, as a result of the cascade-like structure of the Flemish educational system and hence the institutionalized ways to change between tracks (e.g., certificates, downward mobility), vocational tracks were perceived to be relatively 'easier' (e.g., work load and level of abstraction) (see quote Eduardus) and (were perceived to) attract students that are less motivated to study. During the interviews, 69 students (53 percent), like Elvis, spontaneously mentioned the tension between level of difficulty of tracks, depending on students' capacities, and individual professional aspirations. All of them agreed upon the idea that one should be in a track that is 'not too difficult nor too easy', by saying things like *'When you have good grades by doing nothing, it means that you made it yourself too easy. So you can achieve success but actually, you underperform as you are 'too low' [in a lower esteemed track]'* (Viktor, academic track) or *'I don't think it is smart to change track, if you could have managed. I don't think you are successful in school when you 'go lower' [change to a less esteemed track] just for your own convenience'* (Marcel, academic track). These quotes indicated that the degree of difficulty – depending on one's capacities – mattered for students' definition of success. The academic track was perceived to be sufficiently difficult (e.g., one should put some effort (at home) to succeed), which implied that nearly all students felt successful while technical and especially vocational tracks were perceived to be (too) easy. Remarkably, it seems that, depending on the track one is enrolled in, students evaluated the relationship between the difficulty of a track, given one's personal capacities, and the success of a student differently:

**Elvis** (vocational track): 'Yes, I feel a different approach, the way they look at you although they don't know you. A kid at school always says: 'I am enrolled in the academic track, so I will have a better job'. But that's not true! If you don't finish your [secondary] school, then your job will be worse than mine and at least, I like my job. So for me, that's not a job, it's more a hobby for which I will get paid.'

**Researcher:** 'Can you give me another example in which you feel that they look down on...?'

**Elvis:** ‘Most people, like in my previous school, they knew me. I was too smart for those enrolled in BSO. So, that’s the reason that most people didn’t look down on me, because I was smarter than them [academic tracks students]. The Modern [Languages] track, that is something that is not that difficult. You just sit there for and you only have to do sometimes twice a year: learn your exams and you’re ready! That’s not that difficult, you just have to have the will [to study]. Most people that are enrolled in BSO are not stupid, they’re just lazy.’

When contrasting Elvis’ citation with those from Marcel and Viktor, the criteria that Elvis used to indicate his success, namely the fact that he is too intelligent for the vocational track, were evaluated as unsuccessful by Marcel and Viktor, who think that the level of difficulty of tracks should match with students’ capacities (i.e. not being too easy nor too difficult). Furthermore, while all students agreed – in theory – upon the idea that all tracks should be valued equally, they also recognized that there is some truth in the existing negative stereotypes of vocational tracks, such as the lower workload as a reason to opt for the vocational track. Moreover, these negative stereotypes concerning vocational tracks were perceived to be shared by ‘everyone’, as stated by Kaya (vocational track): ‘*It’s just: everyone told me ‘yes, BSO is easier’’*. Because of these negative stereotypes, the idea that all students in all tracks have equal chances to be considered as ‘successful’ was challenged. Nevertheless, when individual features were taken into account, such as perceived level of difficulty for a person, study motivation and future aspirations, students in less prestigious tracks could also be considered as successful.

In general, students mainly made between-track comparisons to describe the overall success of students across tracks. This resulted in a more positive evaluation of academic compared to vocational tracks. Nevertheless, students within vocational tracks *could* be seen as successful, when they met additional criteria based on individual characteristics, such as study motivation, study attitude, personal future aspirations, skills and capacities. These evaluations of success were by nearly all participants interpreted in academic terms. Further analyses revealed that these overall evaluations of peers’ educational success also influenced students’ perceptions of their personal academic success.

### ***Personal evaluations of success in academic tracks***

Being enrolled in an academic track was sufficient to consider academic students’ personal educational career as successful and for this, they depended less on their actual grades, motivation, effort or study satisfaction:

**Researcher:** ‘Do you think you are successful in school?’

**Nafia** (academic track): ‘Well, we are now currently enrolled in the fifth year of secondary education and the fifth is like...look at what we have accomplished, everything that preceded and then...’Aaaah! I am in fifth grade!’ It’s probably because we are here at a good spot.’

**Sidika** (academic track): ‘I am at a good spot, I am satisfied and..’

**Nafia** (interrupts): I am satisfied too’

**Sidika**: ‘I do my best at school’

**Nafia**: ‘We are in fifth grade and it’s more difficult but you also realize ‘I did it!’’, because in your first year, we were always like ‘Oh shit, I probably won’t make it because ASO is too difficult and those exams will be too difficult and I will probably get confronted with some racist teachers. But when I look at myself, sitting here in fifth grade, I think it’s a big step, like it’s something else: sitting in fifth grade of the academic track!’

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**Georgetje** (academic track): ‘My goal was, I know it’s a cliché but, I just wanted to remain enrolled in ASO’.

Despite the more study-oriented culture in academic tracks (Van Houtte 2006), Nafia’s quote indicated that grades – the conventional assessment criteria – were not automatically used in academic tracks to differentiate between those who felt successful in school and those who did not. Being enrolled in an academic track was seen as a sufficient condition to evaluate their educational career as successful. This could be due to the combination of several track-specific characteristics. First, as pointed out by Herman (academic track): ‘*I think you can get equally far in life when you obtained a 51 [percent], compared to when you have 81 [percent]*’. Grades do not matter for the enrolment in higher education in Flanders, which is the end goals students in academic tracks want to achieve. Again, success in school is evaluated in terms of future social goals or value (Clycq et al. 2014). Second, the higher (perceived) difficulty of the academic tracks may reduce possible feelings of failure when achieving lower grades than their classmates (see Stouffer et al. 1949). Due to the specific ‘high’ position of the academic track in the status hierarchy of tracks in Flanders, students made between-track comparisons to evaluate their overall success. Third, often associated with the second feature, the presence of immediate comparative reference groups mattered to a lesser extent for students’ feelings of success, as the overall higher societal appreciation is constantly repeated in school, by teachers and students and has led to feelings of relative gratification (see also Davis 1959; Guimond and Dambrun 2002; Tajfel and Turner 1979; ‘reflected glory’ effect, Trautwein et al. 2009; Van Houtte et al. 2012). Finally, it should be remarked that although grades did not matter for students’ overall evaluations of their

academic success, they remained important. Students in academic tracks need to have 'good' grades to pass to the next year and stay enrolled in the academic track. Usually students should have at least more than fifty percent on average for each main subject. Hence, students used grades as a personal evaluation of the effort put in to homework and studying. This was especially the case for the highest achieving students (11 respondents out of 66, 17 percent) within the academic tracks, who felt that they had to perform according to their personal capacities and effort they had put into studying.

### ***Personal evaluations of success in vocational tracks***

Students' personal evaluations of success in vocational tracks contrasted with those of students in academic tracks. In general, the data revealed that students in vocational tracks did not consider themselves automatically as successful, as they are perceived to be enrolled in the 'easiest' tracks with more specialized future opportunities and least societal appreciation. Nevertheless, this did not mean that all students in vocational tracks evaluated their academic success in negative terms. For example, Plant (Sales) thought of himself as successful, saying things like: *'I am performing well, like, I do my best. I am not a Blokko [egghead] who studies five hours every day, but I am satisfied with my grades.'* Despite the low status of vocational tracks, none of the students in vocational tracks considered themselves as a failure. This seems contradictory, but is in line with the premises of the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to this theory, everyone searches for ways to achieve a positive evaluation of themselves. If one belongs to a group that is negatively evaluated, people try to change group, or, if that is not possible, they try to dissociate from the group they belong to, use distinct criteria of comparison, or change values assigned to attributes of the in- or out-group. Students in the vocational track made use of several of these mechanisms. A first small but significant group of female students (6 out of 44 respondents, 14 percent) searched for alternative criteria for comparison to achieve a positive self-concept, such as popularity in- or outside school. For example, when Shania (Sales) was asked to define how to be successful in school, she answered *'do your best'*. However, she adds to this that she *'could not care less'* and that she is bored at school. Another student, Wassila (Sales), interpreted 'success' initially in terms of social life and being popular in school. Nevertheless, apart from the additional social criteria that can be used to define one as successful, all of these students also cared about how they performed in school and tried to evaluate their school career in a positive way. Half of the 44 respondents (50 percent) enrolled in the vocational track, tried to put the vocational tracks in a more positive light or at least reduce the negative connotation that is associated with vocational tracks. For example, as Masha puts it *'those tracks [BSO and TSO] are not bad tracks'*. Eight respondents (19 percent) downplayed the workload and

degree of difficulty of the courses in the academic tracks. However, due to the persistence and institutionalisation of status hierarchy between tracks, this strategy was often not sufficient to actually achieve a positive appraisal of one's academic success. The other 36 students (81 percent) internalized at least some of the negative stereotypes associated with vocational tracks. Therefore, to achieve a positive academic self-concept, 16 students (36 percent) dissociated themselves from other students in the vocational track, or better, from those who – according to them – fulfilled some of the existing stereotypes associated with vocational tracks, like Arnoud (vocational track):

**Arnoud:** 'Like my buddy [example of non-successful student], he knew that he would not pass. He had the same results for theoretical subjects but in the practical subjects, he was not worth a thing. The only thing he cared about was 'Wow, a car, finely tuned' or 'Oh, it is a V motor, it has that many Horsepower'. We *all* know that! But you know, with car freaks like us, we say 'our *bougie* [stark plug] is broken' and he asks 'What is a *bougie*?'. Someone who really cares about cars does not only has to know the *outside*, but also the *inside*. A normal car freak is like us, we try to know how to set up a car. If you want a special color for your motor, we get the motor out, take all the different parts out, pssst, we paint it, put the motor back and it is finished. He goes to the garage and asks 'Can you do that for me?'. We do it ourselves.'

This extract shows that Arnoud emphasizes the unique character of the vocational track, by stressing the skills he acquired and the joy he retrieved from learning this particular profession. This interview extract shows that within-track comparisons are used to define oneself as successful. Especially students enrolled in vocational tracks that prepared students for manual labor jobs, such as Car Mechanics and Construction, stressed the future job opportunities, like Amal (specialist course): '*I think that, if you achieve what you want to achieve, that it doesn't matter anymore, what [track] you originally studied.*'. Or, the extract of Elvis shows that he recognised the negative appreciation of technical and vocational tracks by other students, but, at the same time, stressed his unique, individual features that made him a successful student. Elvis was intrinsically motivated to study Car Mechanics and wanted to have job satisfaction in the future. Moreover, he contradicted the idea that he opted for the vocational track because he did not have the capacities to stay enrolled in academic tracks and questioned the higher degree of difficulty of academic tracks. This struggle to evaluate one's academic achievement as positive, even when being enrolled in a track that receives an overall lower societal appreciation, was a recurring theme during interviews. In general, to contradict the prevailing stereotypes, such as being lazy, lack of motivation, interest or intelligence, students in vocational tracks emphasized their individual intellectual capacities, or the importance of being intrinsically motivated, having particular future (job) opportunities and high grades.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In the present study, we examined how students from the academic, technical and vocational track evaluate their own academic success, and how comparisons to other students in the same or other tracks shape these self-evaluations. This topic of study is particularly interesting in the hierarchical Flemish educational system that is open for individual decision-making, and in which tracks play a decisive role for enrollment in higher education (Boone and Van Houtte 2013). Furthermore, subjective feelings of success may play a crucial role as they inform students' future educational and professional choices (Marsh and Yeung 1997).

The findings suggest that track enrollment was used by all students – irrespective of their track – as the first criterion to evaluate students' success in school. Students in academic tracks were more easily seen as successful, compared to students in vocational tracks. While nearly all students acknowledged the existing status hierarchy between tracks, most of them claimed that – in theory – all tracks should receive equal societal appreciation. However, when analyzing students' accounts more in detail, the majority made a distinction between tracks, formulating additional prerequisites students in technical and vocational tracks have to fulfill, before being possibly considered to be successful in school.

Our results indicate that the existing status hierarchies are also reflected in students' personal evaluations of their academic success. The importance of the 'status' of a particular track seemed more important than the actual achievement grades within the respective tracks. All students automatically seemed to make between-track comparisons to evaluate their educational career. However, these comparisons yielded different results for students of the different tracks. For students in academic tracks, between-track comparisons seem sufficient to evaluate themselves as successful. The higher status associated with academic tracks was often a source of pride for students and had a 'reflected glory' effect on students' evaluations of their academic success (see Marsh et al. 2000). Furthermore, the positive feelings concerning being enrolled in the academic track could also partly be due to the higher perceived level of difficulty and the fact that graduating from an academic track is for most courses sufficient to enroll in higher education. Success was therefore dependent upon the comparison with other tracks which led to feelings of relative gratification (see also Davis 1959; Guimond and Dambrun 2002; Trautwein et al. 2009; Van Houtte et al. 2012).

However, when between-track comparison results are negative, this comparison leads to relative deprivation, which is accompanied by a negative evaluations of one's academic success. Negative evaluations of the track one is enrolled in may lead to status frustration. Applying Cohen's (1955) theory on the delinquent

subculture to the creation of subcultures within tracks, Hargreaves (1967) already found that students in less esteemed tracks actively seek for ways to deal with status frustration. He argued that students in lower streams do not receive the same status as students in other streams as they have less opportunities to achieve success in the future. When students feel they cannot succeed in school, they start gradually to reject the values of schooling, through systematic stigmatization and stratification processes (Nouwen and Clycq 2016). When a group of students feels that they cannot adjust to the school system and fail to succeed in school, this could lead to the creation of an oppositional school culture. Our findings seem to nuance these previous results. While students in less esteemed tracks are less motivated to study or less involved in school (see also Van Houtte 2006; Van Houtte and Stevens 2010; Van Praag et al. 2015), students still search for ways to evaluate themselves in a positive way, which is concordant with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Many students try to avoid the experience of status frustration by pointing to their grades (for particular courses) or interest in school, relative to other students in the same track. A small group of students looked for alternative sources or criteria of success at school (e.g., number of friends) or outside school (e.g., extracurricular activities or friends). In general, the majority of students still want to evaluate their school career in a positive way. Some students do so by minimalizing the status difference between academic and vocational tracks. Nevertheless, it seems that this negative societal appreciation of vocational tracks, associated with negative stereotypes, is hard to avoid. Therefore, many students tried to dissociate themselves from the prevailing stereotypes. Students stressed individual intellectual capacities, skills or study motivations to make a clear distinction with their so-called ‘unsuccessful’ peers. Such within-track comparisons often lead to positive feelings concerning one’s personal accomplishments in school and feelings of relative gratification for students in less esteemed tracks. However, it should be noted that these positive evaluations are to a lesser extent shared by others and depend on students’ personal criteria and/or features. More specifically, while one student stresses his or her ability to perform specific tasks, the other tends to get more positive feelings when referring to the academic knowledge he or she has acquired. Or put differently, many students searched for ways to be the ‘big fish’ in their little pond (Marsh 1987), and, using the terminology of Marsh and colleagues (2000), for students missing the ‘reflected glory’ of attending a highly valued track, ‘contrast’ effects come into play. By contrast, in academic tracks, getting good grades and putting effort in school enabled students to pass their year, but appeared to be less decisive criteria to label students’ educational career as successful in general.

Our findings therefore elaborate on the work of Marsh and colleagues (2000), who concluded that negative contrast effects are more important than positive reflected glory effects. First, it seems that the high status

of the academic track is so important for students, that this reflected glory effect indeed surpasses eventual contrast effects. The importance of reflected glory and contrast effects, therefore, might depend upon the specific context and topic under study. Second, it may be unwarranted to pit the two kinds of effects against each other, and see them in a more dynamic way. Our findings suggest that negative reflected glory effects may lead students to guard their self-appraisal by searching for positive contrast effects. Finally, we can state that our findings show that students have internalized and their evaluations of success largely reflect the hegemonic discourses in Flanders. Due to the consequences of the hierarchical nature of the educational system (see Van Praag et al. 2015), students are constantly reminded of reference groups, regardless their immediate visibility. For example, students who are enrolled in vocational/technical tracks, often have started their educational career/trajectory in the general track, or are confronted (at all stages of their secondary educational career) in the classroom with students coming from other higher esteemed tracks/fields of study.

One of the main limitations of the study is that it remains unclear whether the relative importance of within- and between-school tracking effects on students' self-evaluations of their academic success and the variation in the use of comparison groups across tracks is similar in schools with different track compositions (e.g., Van Houtte and Stevens 2009; Van Houtte, Demanet and Stevens 2012). For instance, it could be interesting to compare very specialized (and rare) vocational programs (such as 'truck driving' in Catherina Atheneum) that seemed to attract a more committed body of students from different regions in Flanders with more general vocational programs (such as 'Sales' in St. Bernardus) that seemed to attract less motivated students who often lived close to the school. Furthermore, more research is needed to build further on the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) to examine the relative importance of these alternative definitions or sources of success for students. Finally, more internationally comparative research is needed to examine how students' self-evaluations of their academic success varies across educational systems.

Some social policy recommendation can be made. First of all, it seems that structural changes in the organization of tracks in the Flemish educational system are necessary to reduce the distinct appreciation of tracks and hence, the feelings associated with this negative status (Van Praag et al. 2015). Second, as suggested by Rosenbaum and Kariya (1991), the self-appraisal of students in vocational tracks seems to be more linked to the labor market. Hence, a way to improve the self-evaluations of their academic success of those students would be for corporations to select employees based on their actual achievement, instead of their diploma.

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