CRAFTING ORDINARY LIVES

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Crafting Ordinary Lives

*How Children Negotiate Ethnic and Social Class Boundaries
in a Super-diverse City*

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For the children in my life.
For my nieces and nephews:
Noor, Nasser and Layla, who call me khaltou,
Amani and Isa, who call me 'amtou,
and all of you I call my life.
For my nieces and nephews with whom
I'm not related by kinship, but by friendship:
Mohammad, Ahmad, Halid,
Norah, Imrane,
and Amina.
With love
and with hope that one day
our society will fully acknowledge and respect
your multiple identities.

Cover photo: still from *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969) by Sergei Parajanov. The photo is courtesy of the National Cinema Center of Armenia.

NC
CA National Cinema
Center of Armenia

Abstract

Antwerp children grow up in a society characterized by unprecedented diversity. This diversity is strongly reflected in primary schools, where about three quarters of the pupils have a migration background. At the same time, the city has a large ethnic gap in its poverty rates and life chances are unequally distributed along ethnic lines as well. Children with a (non-Western) migration background are much more likely to be born into families living below the poverty line and the educational achievement gap between majority and minority pupils is large. Furthermore, while Antwerp has a super-diverse population, the city is confronted with a strong anti-immigrant and anti-Islam rhetoric, setting symbolic boundaries against minority ethnic and religious groups. Yet, while there is much research on the dynamics and impact of these inequalities, little is known about children's perceptions and how they navigate such inequalities.

Building on insights from cultural sociology and the 'New Sociology of Childhood', this dissertation aims to add to the literature on symbolic boundary making by examining how children negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries in a super-diverse environment in which inequality is structured along ethnic lines. Drawing on three rounds of in-depth interviews conducted over a two-school year period with children aged 11-14, and the parents and teachers of some of them, I will examine which repertoires children draw on when they discuss their perceptions of ethnic and social class diversity, how children self-identify with ethnic and national categories, which symbolic boundaries they set to demarcate ethnic and social class groups and how their perceptions of ethnic diversity and racism interact with those of their parents and teachers. Further, I will analyze which aspirations children hold for their futures, how they assess their life chances and on which repertoires they draw to explain the relationship between inequality and opportunities. While doing so, I will also reflect on the presence of symbolic boundaries in research with children, from my position as a minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background.

Overall, my analysis shows that children express a great deal of agency as they negotiate the unequal environment in which they find themselves. They do not passively draw on existing public repertoires to make sense of this environment, but they actively choose, combine and reconstruct those symbolic boundaries, repertoires and identity categories that support both their own perceptions and their self-concept.

After he had applied for a place at university, the working-class protagonist of Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895) received the following rejection letter:

SIR: I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do.

Yours
T. Tetuphenay.

As Jude passed by the gates of this university which had just rejected him, he replied by writing the following phrases in chalk along the walls:

'I have understanding as well as you. I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these?' – Job

Acknowledgements

thought of these dearest children, who are all developing their multiple identities in a sometimes hostile societal context, that made me persevere. Special thanks to Noor, Nasser, Layla, Amani, Isa, Mohammad, Ahmad, Halid, Norah, Imrane and Amina.

Finally, my greatest and deepest appreciation goes to Karel, my fellow FWO aspirant who is completing his doctorate in film studies. I thank him not only for the *considerable* critical feedback he provided on my work and especially on my theoretical assumptions, but also for being the epitome of what I believe an academic should be. Having him as both an example and a sounding board has undoubtedly contributed to my relatively smooth doctoral trajectory. I thank him for all the (at times heated) discussions and for introducing me to some great masterpieces of the seventh art in between – works that have helped me put things into perspective as they reminded me that there was a rich life besides that of completing a PhD.

April 2022

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'My mum used to call me "hood girl" [*meisje van 't pleintje*]', Doha says, laughing out loud, 'because I was kind of *gorro*-ish [Moroccan slang for stereotypical loutish and loitering youth].'

When I meet the 14-year-old pupil in her mother's fish shop for the third and last interview round for this dissertation, Doha assures me that now she is nothing like her 12-year-old self: 'I used to be loutish, I guess. Ugh, I was like… I was so aggressive!'

The Belgian-born girl of Moroccan descent recalls how, in the previous research rounds, she classified her peers of Belgian descent as stingy, attention-seeking and nerdy, and asserts that she was 'so mean' for claiming those things. Since attending a new secondary school in the city centre for her second grade, Doha has become friends with several girls of Belgian descent whom she does not consider stingy or nerdy at all. She talks about how one of these friends dares to climb somewhat dangerously on the school roofs: 'She's really like… She's really… I wouldn't say *allochthonized* [i.e., she acts like a minority ethnic pupil], but she's… She belongs to our group.'

While Doha suggests that the daredevil belongs to her '*allochthonous*' friendship group, meaning that this group consists mainly of minority ethnic children, it is not pupils' ethnic background which is the most important aspect for her when making friends. Doha rather alludes to complex and everyday negotiated principles determining who belongs to her friendship group and who does not. A good friend, according to her, dares to assertively stand up for herself but is definitely *not loutish,* is more or less streetwise but certainly *not gorro*-ish*. Although she repeatedly describes her friendship group in ethnic terms, she is not really concerned with ethnicity. In fact, she distances herself from some of her peers of Moroccan descent quite as directly as she sets boundaries against some of her majority ethnic peers:

> Doha: I don't get along with them ['judgemental Moroccans'], hypocrites. They always judge but they themselves are not perfect at all. I can't stand that; I really can't stand that.

> Researcher: You prefer non-judgemental people?
>
> Doha: Open minded, yes. Like my mum, she doesn't wear a headscarf, but it's not like that makes her less Muslim. And a girl said, 'your mum doesn't wear a headscarf'. I say, 'Yes, you don't wear a headscarf either and you also eat a Big Mac each Wednesday at the McDonalds [which is considered haram because of the meat], do you hear *me* talk?' She said, 'Ow, yeah, yeah'. *Wallah* [Arabic for I swear by God] those… those people… [bites her lips]. I can't stand it if you're, you're… You're not 100% halal yourself, you don't do what's asked of you in Islam, but you walk around judging other people!

Throughout the entire course of the interviews, whether she is talking about her friendship group, identifications or aspirations for the future, Doha seemingly balances her self-presentation, as a girl who is assertive and independent without appearing loutish, as determined to succeed educationally and professionally while not sounding nerdy, as attached to her Muslim-Moroccan heritage but loathing communitarian social control. Once I had moved beyond her extensive use of ethnonyms, it became clear that Doha mainly draws moral boundaries to distinguish 'people like her' from 'others', as she makes sense of her world.

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Roos walks into the living room of her large, beautiful upper-middle-class house, where I have just been shown in by her welcoming mother. I met Roos for the first time a year ago, when I interviewed her in the sixth grade of a socially mixed primary school. Then, Roos had told me that she was quite popular among her peers because she had lived in New York and travelled a lot. When I gauged her subjective social position, she believed that she was just above the half-way point between poor and rich. After she has taken a seat, while telling me how she has been, I ask Roos what her experiences are of her new school. It soon becomes clear that she does not yet feel comfortable among her schoolmates. She explains that there are many queen bees in secondary, and immediately draws boundaries vis-à-vis them:

> Roos: There's a girl in my class and she has scrunchies, a kind of hair ties, and she has like forty of them, one for each outfit. (…) And we asked her whether we could borrow some [for a school project about scrunchies] and she was like 'well no, that's not possible, I paid 200 euros for those scrunchies', but then I thought like… forty scrunchies, that's, that's really not necessary. (…) They also have uhm, like the most expensive clothes, I mean… That's, a girl who… She has a different outfit for each day and that annoys me because then I think well yeah… I could also do that. But then I think no… We aren't that rich either.

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Wealth and branded clothes are the main topics which Roos avidly elaborates on during this interview. When I ask her how she assesses her current position now she is in secondary school, she states that she is probably just below the half-way line between poor and rich, and that she is not really popular either. Roos thus ranks herself lower than in the first interview. Having lived in New York is no longer remarkable, according to her, as she has schoolmates whose parents are friends with locally famous artists, overshadowing her stay across the ocean, and there are also others who visit the United States every year. From the second interview on, Roos appears highly concerned with social status, although she does not use the term explicitly, and draws on various markers of social class (e.g., financial resources, material possessions, opportunities and lifestyle) when evaluating her moral character and the moral character of others.

***

Enes attends an ethnically diverse secondary school. Although his schoolmates originate from dozens of places over the world, there are none of 'native' Belgian descent. Enes considers his Turkish ethnic background very important, and since he was born in the Netherlands, he self-identifies as Dutch as well. In contrast to many of the other minority ethnic children in this study, he does not draw any clear boundaries against 'Belgians' and he hardly interacts with majority ethnic children. Living in a diverse working-class neighbourhood, he also says that he has never had a 'Belgian' friend outside of school. He considers his teachers, the only majority ethnic people he daily interacts with, as nice educators, and he further claims that their ethnic background is not at all relevant to him.

Enes, however, uses many ethnonyms when talking about the peer groups in school and he mentions that children often joke around using ethnic slurs. Especially so-called 'Moroccans' and 'Turks' would often insult each other, but they only do so to tease each other in play: 'My best friend is Moroccan, so it's not like I'm going to discriminate or behave racist'.

Enes might seem to be hinting that the children generally all get along well since they more or less share the same 'minority status', which is why they can joke around using ethnic slurs, yet further probing reveals clear boundaries between some groups of children. When I ask Enes which peer groups are least popular, he refers to recently arrived children of migrants, who do not yet speak Dutch very well. He recounts several stories about conflicts he and his friend had, especially with the 'Spanish girls', whom they like to pick on: 'Each time when my friend sees that Spanish girl who once fought [on the playground], he says *ebmemneheh* [mimics Spanish] so that she gets angry.'

Although Enes repeatedly emphasizes his attachment to his Turkish background, he subjects the recently arrived Turkish children to the same evaluative criteria as the Spanish girls:

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> Enes: Those [Turkish children] from OKAN [classes for recently arrived foreign-language children] are different from us, but they are really from Turkey, the living environment is different there.
>
> Researcher: How are they different?
>
> Enes: Let's say, they don't care about their privacy, they talk about everything very loud, what happens at their homes and that stuff… Then I think not everyone has to know, we don't have to know what happens at your place, just talk quietly to your friend… But then they talk with a very loud voice about private concerns.
>
> Researcher: Do you hang out with each other? Turkish children who grew up in Belgium and Turkish children from OKAN?
>
> Enes: No.

Although the school consists mainly of minority ethnic children, Enes insinuates that they nevertheless create both a minoritized and majority position. The children who are born or have lived long enough in Belgium to speak Dutch fluently and to have embodied the dominant manners and habits (see further), such as talking discreetly about personal matters, seemingly distance themselves from those who have recently immigrated with their parents to Belgium. Rather than drawing boundaries based on children's ethnic backgrounds as such ('Spanish' girls), Enes hints that, on the whole, the most significant boundaries in his school are between the 'established' and the 'recently arrived' children.

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Liam and Jeremy are two aspiring footballers whom I met separately in different primary schools but who ended up together in the same sport-oriented secondary school, where I interviewed them again. Liam dreams of a career at *FC Barcelona* and Jeremy at *FC Barcelona* or at *Paris Saint-Germain*. These children, who are interviewed separately, are determined to achieve success, which is strongly reflected in the ways in which they evaluate social groups. Jeremy, for instance, distinguishes himself from his peers based on his self-discipline and healthy lifestyle. After writing down that he is more likely than his classmates to achieve his dreams, Jeremy argues:

> Jeremy: Because at this school all the pupils are great, I'd say, but I notice that some won't make it. Also because of their [less developed sporting] abilities, I notice, and because of habits, how they eat and that kind of stuff. That they will become… a little bit… yes like fat.

Researcher: They don't eat healthily?

Jeremy: No, they… I mean, they do eat healthily but also non-healthily, but they really keep eating and eating. Now they're still thin but, as soon as they grow up, they'll feel it. (…) I eat fries only once a week and even without using oil.

Liam, in turn, stresses that he does not like to hang out with pupils who are not committed to achieving high grades. He believes that although their main objective is to become star footballers, children should also be committed to their school work. Liam feels uncomfortable when talking to classmates who are not concerned by their grades, and his best friends are those at the top of the class, like him.

Even when talking about romantic relationships, the boys draw on similar repertoires as they both state that footballers have a complicated love life. According to Jeremy, it is best to stay single while achieving his dreams, since a girlfriend might distract him from doing so. Liam asserts that he intends to stay single for a long time as well, especially if he becomes a star footballer, and alludes to his potential social status as a barrier to authentic love:

Researcher: So, you don't want to have a love life yet?

Liam: No.

Researcher: Later you would, I guess?

Liam: Yes, it depends. If… Yes, it depends. If I have an ordinary job, then at the age of 22 or 23. But if I become a footballer, then I have to focus on football first and then… But I shouldn't, if I'm a footballer I shouldn't only think about a very pretty girl who only thinks about my money, but just that she really wants me, that's she's really in love with me. So, if I'm a footballer, 25 maybe.

Researcher: You think that girls would want to be with you for your money?

Liam: (nods) Yes, like in my favourite team, Marseille, there's a boy, he's 26, he's not really handsome, I'd say, but his wife… she's just way too pretty. (…)

Researcher: Why are you so sure she isn't with him for his personality?

Liam: Because… Well, it's strange if you're a very pretty woman but you don't want a very handsome man, isn't it? That means something, no? That's what I think… It means something.

Whether talking about their peers or future romantic relationships, both Liam and Jeremy emphasize that they do not want to hang out with those who could undermine their determination and hard work.

They set boundaries against peers who, at least in their perception, do not take their own careers very seriously, be it because of unhealthy eating habits or not working hard enough to achieve good grades. Liam's potential wealth as a star footballer is also seen as an obstacle to his future romantic relationships, as 'very pretty girls' might use him for his money. The young footballer indicates that he will secure his self-respect by saying further in the interview that he is not going to let others take advantage of him and that his dad 'would also talk to them [potential girlfriends], he always says that, to see how they react.'

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This dissertation tells the story of a group of children who are constructing their multiple identities, friendship groups and aspirations in a super-diverse[1] city. The children come from very different ethnic and social backgrounds and differ strongly in their experiences, worldviews, and identifications. What they all have in common, however, is that they are daily exposed to a society in which strong inequalities are structured along ethnic lines. For this group of children, living in a highly diverse environment is as much part of their everyday normality as being exposed to important inequalities between different ethnic, racial and religious groups. This situation raises many questions. How do children from different backgrounds perceive this complex ethnic diversity and these inequalities? Are they aware that their ethnic and social class backgrounds may affect their chances in life? Where do they place themselves on the social ladder? How do they draw or bridge boundaries between themselves and other ethnic groups? While much research has examined these kind of questions among adults (e.g., Albeda et al., 2017; Jiménez, 2017; Wessendorf, 2013), little is known about children's experiences and how they, as active agents, negotiate symbolic hierarchies in their proximate super-diverse environments. Building on a cultural sociological approach (e.g., Lamont, 1992, 2000; Savage, 2015; Swidler, 1986), this dissertation aims to add to this literature by analysing how children perceive and experience diversity, how they assess their own social standing and how they negotiate the prevailing boundaries set against them and other groups.

Doha, Roos, Enes, Liam and Jeremy are five of the child-participants I interviewed three times over a two-school year period to explore these questions. As the illustrative vignettes show, to various

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[1] Whereas I use the term super-diversity to refer to the growing ethnic and cultural complexity in cities such as Antwerp, there is much debate about this term, on which I will not elaborate in this dissertation. In short, the term has been criticized, among other things, for lacking a gender focus (Geerts et al., 2018) and for its Eurocentric approach, as it would not acknowledge how many African countries have always been characterized by a high degree of complexity regarding ethnic, linguistic and social class diversity (Ndhlovu, 2016).

extents and each in their own way, these children indeed indicate that they challenge widely shared classifications and status hierarchies when discussing the things that matter to them. If the 'world's a stage', as is famously stated, then these children seemingly are *not* merely script-following players. I will analyse if and how, to an equal extent, they are strategic playwrights experimenting with unequally available repertoires and roles. I will also examine how, striving for a metaphorical standing ovation - for recognition – they may surround themselves with those kinds of co-actors who help them to virtually present themselves as they wish to be perceived, as Doha shows when seeking fellow players to jointly stage her assertive but *not loutish* role. To what extent are they cultural critics who evaluate others' performances and whether or not all the decorative attributes contribute to a credible play? We think of Roos, who questions the necessity of having *too many scrunchies*, while she deals with her own subjective and relative lack of dramaturgical attributes. Which strategies do they use as they take up the role of gatekeepers – cultural consumers or rather *excluders* – guarding the boundaries of the theatre, and keeping those who are perceived to lack highbrow culture at a distance? Think of Enes, refusing to hang out with Turkish children who, according to him, hardly know how to behave appropriately in the worldly theatre. And to what extent are these children protagonists who need to carefully deal with the consequences of their misrecognized or successful roles, for example Liam, who involves his father in managing his romantic relationships so that no girl will take advantage of him? How do they strictly define the qualities that both they themselves and the other players should have to be worthy of their roles, as Jeremy does when he stresses that aspiring footballers should work hard and eat healthily? This dissertation, hence, aims to closely examine the complex and creative strategies displayed by children as they may create micro spaces where they, as *plural actors* (Lahire, 2011), negotiate the rules of the societal production and the relative worth of its audiences and players.

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In this introduction, I will set out the theoretical framework of the study. First, I will discuss how social inequality in a Western European context is largely structured along ethnic lines. I will rely on a cultural sociological framework and distinguish between inequality stemming from the unequal division of material resources (distributional inequality) and inequality that stems from assignment to readily available social categories, such as ethnicity and race (categorical inequality). This conceptual distinction is important to understand why this study focuses on symbolic boundaries rather than on material inequality, and it will also help us to gain insight into the broader structural conditions in which individuals give meaning to ethnic diversity and social class positions. Second,

I will dissect the concept of symbolic boundary making, and discuss its definition, dimensions and types. I particularly draw on this concept as it does not take ethnic groups for granted as internally homogeneous and distinct from each other, and hence allows me to disentangle so-called 'ethnic' processes from other mechanisms of social structuration in my analysis. Third, I will relate the concept of symbolic boundary making to the first part of my theoretical framework by looking at how categorical inequality is negotiated on a micro-level (i.e., in everyday interactions between social actors). As my study concerns children, I will also discuss how the literature on boundary negotiation and the 'New Sociology of Childhood' may inform and cross-fertilize one another. Fourth, after briefly describing children's developing awareness of ethnicity and social class, I will elaborate on how children negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries, and how social class and ethnic categories are challenged (or not) in children's peer and friendship group relations. Finally, I will describe the research questions of the study, and will then present the further structure of this dissertation.

Categorical inequality and ethnic stratification

To understand children's boundary work, we first have to look at the unequal society they encounter and how this inequality is structured along ethnic lines. Our child-respondents are growing up in an environment characterized by an existing ethnic classification system in which minority groups have, or are perceived to have, a lower social status. This ethnic classification system is the result of inequality in both *distribution* and *categorization* (Safi, 2020). Distributional inequality refers to the unequal division of material resources, such as economic means, educational opportunities and labour market positions. Categorical inequality, on the other hand, refers to the (re)production of inequality based on social categories such as ethnicity, race and gender (Brubaker, 2015; da Costa et al., 2018).

There is much debate on how distributional and categorical inequalities are related to each other and how the channels between them function differently according to type of category (see e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Brubaker, 2004; Lamont, 2018; Lamont et al., 2014; Safi, 2020; Tilly, 1998). While this theoretical discussion is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to mention here that these two processes strongly affect each other. The unequal distribution of resources may create categories (e.g., rich and poor), and categorization processes - which are initially disconnected from material allocation – may affect distribution (e.g., which category receives what). This relation is not a one-way street, however, as categorical inequality can also exist prior to market relations (Massey, 2018; Safi, 2020). In this section, I will particularly illustrate how distribution and categorization affect

ethnic inequality in a post-migration context, since in our research setting, as in many other continental European countries, ethnic diversity is predominantly (yet not exclusively) the result of guest work migration flows since the post-war period (De Bock, 2018).

While some societies (e.g., the UK and US) experience diversification at the top and bottom of the socio-economic ladder, as both high-skilled and low-skilled migrants have been recruited to fill labour shortages, many Western European countries are characterized by migration at the lower steps of the socio-economic ladder. In the aftermath of World War II, Belgium recruited low and unskilled migrant workers from Italy, Greece, Spain, and later Turkey and Morocco, to work in coal mining and other industries – jobs that, it was said, 'Belgians did not want to do anymore' since the *trente glorieuses* (see Beyers, 2008). These low-status jobs were not only dangerous (in the case of coal mining), but generally not well paid as well, resulting in a strong ethnic gap in employment and income distribution (Knotter, 2020; Safi, 2020). This post-war migration flow hence directly resulted in ethnic stratification on the labour market (distributional inequality), with migrants categorized as particular '*types of workers'* (Safi, 2020: 153).

This stratification would be reproduced in the subsequent decennia. In many European countries, and especially in Belgium, children of migrants have been educationally groomed to work in similar low-skilled occupations to their parents. Whereas 'native' Flemish working-class children, since the post-war period, increasingly began to continue education in the 'well-respected' technical or general tracks of schooling, most children of migrant miners initially did not enjoy these opportunities, and largely ended up in mining or colleges teaching domestic skills after biased teachers' advice (Beyers, 2008). In the following decennia, up to this day, children of migrants have been largely directed to the vocational tracks of secondary education (see, for example, Agirdag, 2020; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013; Merry, 2005; Sneyers et al., 2018), resulting in both an ethnically stratified educational tracking system and reinforcement of the labour market stratification (see next chapter). Research in European countries shows that the daughters of especially non-Western migrants have been limited to education and occupations in textiles, care and domestic work, while their sons were mainly trained up to become mechanics or for similar occupations (Crul and Doomernik, 2003; Farris, 2017). This illustrates how, like their parents, children of migrants have also been widely categorized as particular '*types of future workers*'. Besides occupation and education, there is evidence of ethnic stratification in various other domains, such as the housing market (e.g., Bonnet et al., 2015; Krivo and Kaufman, 2004), health (e.g., Brown et al., 2016; Brown and Hargrove, 2013), and places of residence (Adler et al., 2005; Alba and Logan, 1991), among others.

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This research, however, explicitly focuses on the categorical or symbolic dimension of inequality. It is therefore important to elaborate on how external categorization processes have sorted minority ethnic groups into stigmatized categories. While it is often argued that ethnic inequalities are merely a consequence of much stronger mechanisms of economic and legal inequality, these categorical dimensions should be studied as autonomous mechanisms that may also produce inequalities, even when economic and legal egalitarianism prevails. Even when, then, they belong economically and legally to the dominant or privileged group, minority ethnic citizens may nevertheless be perceived as of lower status because of their ethnicity as such (Safi, 2020).

In the first decades after the immigration of the first guest workers, immigrant groups, especially non-Western minority groups such as Northern African and Turkish citizens, have suffered considerable stigmatization. They have been seen as criminal, maladjusted, misogynist, lazy and taking unfair advantage of the welfare state, among other things (Kamans et al., 2009), and blatant racism has become commonplace (Billiet and de Witte, 2008; De Witte, 1999). This already omnipresent racism was heightened after the 9/11 attacks, as was anti-Islam sentiment in both Europe and the rest of the world. While Islamophobia had already been present, non-Western minority groups were now stigmatized more than ever because of their religion, rather than their ethnicity – although the latter form of racism has never disappeared (Bakali, 2016; Beyers, 2008).

These anti-Islam sentiments impact not only the first generation of Muslim migrants, but also their children, grandchildren and even their great-grandchildren, who are now coming of age. Indeed, although nowadays most children 'with a migration background' legally and technically belong to the national category (e.g., 'Belgian', 'French', 'Dutch'), they are not culturally considered so by the majority group and hence are often excluded from the national imaginary, mainly because of their religious background. This exclusion is not only reflected discursively, but also through politics in countries such as Belgium and France, revealed in the headscarf ban in various institutions or the burkini ban in public swimming pools. Generally, there is a strong public and political discourse that considers the Muslim religion as in conflict with 'Western' or 'progressive' culture and values (Castañeda, 2018). This pertinent marginalization (distributional inequality) and stigmatization (categorical inequality) in Western European countries reveals how ethnicity and religion remain significant in shaping life circumstances (Beaman, 2017), as I will show in the next chapter (see also Heath et al., 2009 for general trends across Western Europe).

Ethnic boundaries, however, are in flux and subject to change. Throughout history, there are examples of how minority ethnic groups have become treated as full members of the national majority. European migrants and their children in the United States, for instance, have crossed ethnic boundaries and become accepted as American (Alba and Foner, 2015; Wimmer, 2013). Similar

processes are observed in Western Europe among Italian miners and their children. While they were previously strongly stigmatized as lazy, morally low and dirty, children of Italian guest workers, unlike those of Moroccan of Turkish descent, have gradually become much more accepted by the majority group (Beyers, 2008). The mechanisms which are decisive for whether minorities become accepted or not varies from context to context and, as I will elaborate on later in this chapter, strongly depends on how they are included by the majority ethnic group (Wimmer, 2013).

In this dissertation, I will focus on how children negotiate this categorical inequality on a *micro level,* as I draw on the concept of symbolic boundary making. I will examine whether children are aware of these inequalities, how they challenge (or not) exclusionary discourses on diversity and how they aim to gain recognition and a positive sense of self-identity. As one's socio-economic position in a Western European context is strongly impacted by one's ethnic background, I will also examine how children assess their own standing on the social ladder and how they perceive the relationship between inequality and life chances. It is important to stress here that while I will strongly highlight children's agency, their agency should be understood as a 'relational dynamic' (Balagopalan et al., 2019; Spyrou et al., 2019). It is constrained by exactly these distributional and categorical inequalities. In this sense, I will not so much investigate the extent to which children institutionally or structurally may 'succeed' or not in their negotiation. This study rather draws on the notion of symbolic boundary making to analyse the ways in which children distinguish 'people like themselves' from 'others', to develop a positive self-identity while navigating an unequal society. It focuses on children's agency to make sense of their own environment and to bridge boundaries in their everyday interactions.

The making and unmaking of social groups: from *groupism* to a *boundary approach*

While the idea of boundaries can be traced back to the work of the founding fathers of sociology (see Lamont et al., 2001 for a historical overview), it has gained importance in cultural sociology particularly since the 1960s. Research into symbolic boundary work spans very different disciplines (see Pachucki et al., 2007) and aims to understand the role of symbolic resources in the making and unmaking of social groups and differences (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). In this dissertation, I am particularly concerned with how boundary work processes manifest themselves in the construction and negotiation of ethnic and social class categories.

Ethnic boundaries

Regarding ethnicity, the boundary approach challenges conceptualizations of ethnic groups as distinct and internally homogeneous aggregates of people who share a unique culture, are held together by communitarian solidarity and are bound by a shared identity (Wimmer, 2013). Fredrik Barth (1969) was one of the first to challenge this 'groupism' (Brubaker, 2004) when he posited that ethnic distinctions are not the outcome of particular groups sharing similar cultures, but that they result from the demarcation and maintenance of group boundaries, which distinguish 'insiders' from 'outsiders'. According to him, a shared culture is indeed not the cause but an outcome of group formation. Consequently, the focus in research should be on 'the boundary that defines the group' – how group boundaries are set, maintained and made relevant – and not necessarily on 'the cultural stuff that it encloses' (Barth, 1998: 15). Following Barth's seminal work, various scholars have advanced and dynamized this approach and have increasingly begun to study how ethnic boundaries are set and negotiated on both a micro and macro-sociological level. Among the most influential studies is Wimmer's (2013) comparative analytic, in which he reviews research on how knit communities differently emerge and cultural differences are produced (or not), with specific attention to why, how and the conditions under which ethnic categories become relevant. Wimmer disentangles alleged 'ethnic' group formation processes from other mechanisms of social structuration, and convincingly shows that bounded ethnic groups - and their supposed shared culture or communitarianism – indeed cannot be taken for granted (see also Brubaker, 2004). The work calls for a 'de-ethnicization' of research designs, since what might be perceived as an ethnic outcome 'should represent the *beginning* – not the end – of the explanatory endeavour because there might be several mechanisms through which ethnic background affects individual outcomes, all of which might be causally independent of ethnic solidarity, ethnic culture and the like' (Wimmer, 2013: 38). Lamont (1992, 2000), for instance, has shown how boundary-making processes within ethnic and racial groups vary according to class position, and how so-called racial and ethnic boundaries are often drawn based on moral worldviews, rather than based on racial or ethnic markers (see further).

In the context of this research, therefore, I am especially interested in how alleged ethnic markers are used to set boundaries against other groups and to distinguish oneself from the others. When I speak of 'ethnic boundaries', I do not refer to different ethnic groups in se but to perceived and drawn upon differences between groups; these boundaries are, furthermore, not merely cognitive but also imply a behavioural component (see further). I use the term 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic background', however, to refer to ethnic groups - in the Weberian sense (1978, 2013) - based on a subjective felt belonging calling on markers such as shared history, language, customs and religion, among many other things. Although this dissertation focuses on ethnic boundaries, I am well aware

that there is much debate about whether 'ethnicity' or 'race' (or also 'ethnoracial' categories) should be used in the social science literature as a concept (see e.g. Safi, 2020; Wimmer, 2013; Banton, 2018). Scholars often draw on the concept 'race' to refer to biological or phenotypic criteria, while 'ethnicity' is used to refer to more malleable 'cultural' markers, such as language, religion, norms, values, and lifestyle, among other things. However, this marker-driven contrast between race and ethnicity has been challenged for various reasons. First, it neglects how cultural markers (such as religion) may be used to racialize social groups, and how biological markers may also inform ethnic belonging (Beaman, 2021; Safi, 2020). Second, conceptually separating race from ethnicity ignores the fact that the same group can be treated as a racial group at one moment in history and as an ethnic group at another moment. Third, claiming that race is 'fixed and imposed' while ethnicity is 'fluid and self-ascribed', disregards situations in which ethnic groups experience the kind of forced segregation, exclusion, and domination that are usually associated with race (Wimmer, 2013). While this conceptual debate is beyond the scope of this study, it is especially important to mention that when I refer to ethnicity or ethnic inequalities, I by no means use these concepts in opposition to race or suggest that ethnic differences in a Western European context are not racialized. Many social groups in Western Europe are indeed both attributed to specific ethnic categories (e.g., Moroccans, Algerians) and racialized as 'non-white' (Beaman, 2017).

Social class boundaries

Besides ethnicity, the concept of boundaries has also had a major influence in research on social class, where, over the past years, growing attention has been paid to how social class groups are demarcated by symbolic markers such as cultural consumption, lifestyle and taste, among other things. Especially important here is the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues, who showed that social class groups not only differ from each other in terms of institutionalized differences in income, education and occupation, but that they also distinguish themselves from each other by setting class boundaries based on cultural and symbolic markers. In their ground-breaking *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture,* for instance, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) showed how the weaker performances of lower-class children in the French education system are largely due to institutionalized biases against them. Children who do not meet 'middle-class norms', a culture that permeates the education system, are seen as less capable, causing symbolic class markers resulting in inequality. This analysis is further developed in *Distinction,* in which Bourdieu (1984) examined the ways in which (upper-)middle-class groups succeed in legitimizing their own taste, lifestyle and overall culture as superior to those of lower classes. This legitimized culture is subsequently used to set class boundaries, which result in forms of social closure. Lamont (1992, 2000), while explicitly

drawing on the boundary metaphor, provided an empirical evaluation of Bourdieu's corpus and showed that social groups not only differentiate themselves based on culture and social position, but also by differentially drawing moral boundaries (see also further).

The work on boundaries, thus, demonstrates how social categories such as ethnic or social class groups are not merely categories of *analysis* but also categories of *practice*; 'categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors' (Brubaker, 2004: 31). Ethnic and social class markers are actively used on an interactional level to make sense of one's own identity and to construct or rework group boundaries distinguishing 'us' from 'them.' This dissertation, in this sense, draws on the concept of boundary making, as it allows us to examine the formation and dissolution of groups in more detail and nuance than approaches which take the existence of groups for granted (Wimmer, 2013). First, it acknowledges intra-group differences, as members of an alleged social or ethnic group are not seen as predetermined by their 'membership'. In this vein, it allows us to analyse individuals' agency to choose which boundaries they put forward (or not) and to highlight how individuals sharing a similar background differentially draw boundaries, independently from alleged ethnic belonging, 'culture' or group solidarity. Second, this concept has proven fruitful in examining how social groups are made and unmade in super-diverse cities, as it can capture how individuals may draw boundaries based on various interrelated dimensions, such as ethnicity and social class, but also gender, morality and lifestyle, among many other things (see Albeda et al., 2017). Third, a boundary approach highlights the contested, dynamic and fluid nature of group boundaries. As we will see further on, group boundaries are not fixed, as groups may merge, dissolve or shift according to context and over time. Using this concept, then, we can examine how, why, when and under what conditions certain boundaries become, or do not become, relevant.

Symbolic boundaries: definition, dimensions and types

Symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont, 1992: 9). This boundary drawing or boundary work is an intrinsic part of developing both a personal and a collective identity, as social actors set boundaries to define who they are and who they are not, discriminating between 'us' and 'them' (Barth, 1998; Jenkins, 2008b; Lamont, 1992). Social actors compete over the definitions of these boundaries and use them as a tool to acquire status and to develop a sense of security, dignity and honour (Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2013). Social actors generally aim to present themselves as 'worthy' and use a 'comparative self' to place themselves on symbolic hierarchies (Sherman,

2005). Symbolic boundary making, in this sense, is largely a matter of how people evaluate each other. It is not the boundaries themselves which are most relevant, but the fact that people on either side of the boundaries are evaluated differently (Jenkins, 2008b). Lamont (1992) discerns three types of symbolic boundaries set to evaluate one's own and others' moral worth. Social actors draw 'moral boundaries' when they categorize others based on moral character, such as their (lack of) honesty, work ethic, personal integrity and solidarity. 'Socio-economic boundaries' are drawn on the basis of people's social position, their wealth, power or professional success. 'Cultural boundaries', lastly, distinguish between people according to characteristics such as intelligence, education, tastes and command of high culture. These different types of boundaries are mostly entangled (Jarness, 2017) and drawn upon to evaluate and demarcate, among others, ethnic/racial (e.g., Ajrouch, 2004; Albeda et al., 2017; Lamont, 2000; Van Kerckem, 2014; Wimmer, 2013), social class (e.g., Álvarez-López, 2019; Lamont, 1992; Sherman, 2005) and religious groups (e.g., Dahinden and Zittoun, 2013; Driezen et al., 2021).

The lines that people draw are not merely cognitive but also have a behavioural dimension (Mitchell, 1974). While the cognitive or categorical dimension refers to the ways in which social actors categorize and represent the other, the behavioural dimension concerns everyday acts or practices. When social actors distinguish between 'us' and 'them', this generally structures how they will relate to both groups (Lamont, 1992), or, as Jenkins (2008b: 6) notes: 'to identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her.' People generally behave in a more reserved way, for instance, towards those against whom a boundary is set, and preferably mix socially with those they identify with (Lamont, 1992; Wimmer, 2013), as the considerable literature on ingroup preferences or favouritism has shown (Aboud, 2003). This relation between categorization and behaviour, however, is not entirely straightforward or predictable, as the ways in which individuals draw boundaries against social groups (e.g., ethnic groups) may conflict with how they categorize specific individuals. People, for example, may argue 'I hate all As, you are an A; but you are my friend' (Jenkins, 2008b: 6): this is often reflected in statements such as 'I do not like [ethnic background] people, but you are a good one'. Furthermore, when symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon and 'ways of seeing the world correspond to ways of acting in the world' (Wimmer, 2013: 9), they may structure social interaction and even become objectivized forms of social differences (e.g., segregation, discrimination). These objectivized forms of differences are also called 'social boundaries', which are more durable and institutionalized than symbolic boundaries, and manifest themselves 'in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168).

Symbolic boundaries do not arise out of nowhere, but generally 'exist prior to situational interactions and are determined by available cultural resources and by spatial, geographic, and social-structural constraints, i.e., by the particular set of people with whom we are likely to come in contact' (Lamont, 1992: 11). As this research examines children's symbolic boundary making in a context with strong ethnic inequalities, I draw on Lamont et al.'s (2016) explanatory framework to distinguish between three different but interrelated dimensions which impact how individuals experience and respond to inequality: (1) historical, socio-economic and institutional elements, (2) cultural repertoires (i.e., shared historically constituted narratives) and (3) perceived groupness (i.e., the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as part of a group).

Historical, socio-economic and institutional elements

Social actors' experiences are partly shaped by the socio-political and institutional context they find themselves in. The ways in which they draw symbolic boundaries may depend, for instance, on societies' diversity. Research shows that in super-diverse societies, diversity may become less exceptional and that people in such a context place less emphasis on ethnic boundaries (see Wessendorf, 2013 but see also further). However, the history of group relations and inequality is important too. In this sense, in certain contexts characterized by a history of major conflicts or strong inequalities between ethnic groups, boundaries may well be perceived as predominant and durable (see e.g., Lamont et al., 2016: 192). Alba (2005) distinguishes between 'bright' and 'blurred' boundaries. Bright boundaries are unambiguous distinctions which divide groups into clear-cut categories so that 'individuals know at all times which side of the boundary they are on' (22). In a Western European context, as we saw above, religion is used to set bright boundaries against minority groups. Especially Muslims are perceived and categorized as 'the other'. In this context, language also forms an unambiguous boundary, as minority ethnic groups are expected to master the language in order to be accepted as members of the national or subnational group (Alba, 2005; Bail, 2008; Wimmer, 2013).[2] Blurred boundaries, on the other hand, are ambiguous and fuzzy. The ways in which people tend to experience and draw symbolic boundaries are also influenced by the extent to which, for example, minority groups are overrepresented in the lower classes of society (see e.g., Killian and Johnson, 2006; Lamont, 2000; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019), spatial and institutional segregation (see e.g., Agirdag, Demanet, et al., 2011; Vermeij et al., 2009), institutional and legal reforms (such as anti-discrimination laws) and political transformation (such as the rightward shift in society).

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[2] In Flanders, mastering a basic level of Dutch is even necessary to qualify for certain social rights, such as social housing (Gysen et al., 2009)

Cultural repertoires

Cultural repertoires are socially constructed frames of reference in which individuals are (partly) socialized and through which they make sense of their environment (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986). These repertoires are made available by national historical traditions, within the proximate environment, or by various sectors of cultural production and diffusion, such as the education system or mass media (Lamont, 1992; Lamont et al., 2016). The relative availability of repertoires varies according to the national context, and they entail various elements, such as widely spread myths and ideologies (e.g., the American Dream, meritocracy), models of incorporation into the polity (e.g., multiculturalism, assimilation) and transnational anti-racist repertoires (e.g., Black Lives Matter). The ways in which social actors make sense of boundaries may also depend on the available repertoires of group disadvantage and shared experiences, which serve as ready-made scripts about exclusion, such as a strong awareness of the stigmatization of Muslims (see chapter three). Lastly, there are also class-specific cultural repertoires, like the widely held idea in the middle classes that one should map out an individual life trajectory and invest in self-actualization (see e.g., Lareau, 2011). The concept of cultural repertoires is particularly interesting for this research as it includes a behavioural component: repertoires are seen as a 'set of tools' or 'toolkit' (Swidler, 1986) on which individuals can *actively* draw to make sense of the world. However, as individuals are socialized in different cultural environments, they do not all have the same set of repertoires of action at their disposal (Lamont, 2000). Calarco (2018), for instance, has shown that lower-class children are less likely than their middle-class peers to ask for assistance in class, because asking for assistance (which is a 'tool') in an educational setting is part of a repertoire ('set') which especially middle-class children are socialized into (see also Lareau, 2011; Rivera, 2015). Therefore, this concept allows us to stress the connection between repertoires differentially available to children, and their individual agency to choose between the narrative templates through which they aim to make sense of their reality (see chapter three).

Perceived/imposed groupness

While social groups are made and unmade through symbolic boundary making, groupness as experienced by and imposed on social actors in turn influences boundary dynamics. Boundary processes can depend, for instance, on the self-identification and the experienced strength of perceived group boundaries among social actors. When social actors racialize differences and start to believe that ethnicity is 'in the blood', they may be more likely to set clear boundaries between different ethnic groups. Similarly, when it is believed that white people are 'inherently' privileged, boundaries between white people and people of colour may become hyper relevant (see e.g.,

DiAngelo, 2018). The perceived network composition may also play a role, such as the extent to which one's personal social network is perceived to be diverse or not (e.g., Colak et al., 2019). Census categories which, as it were, 'impose' groupness by defining distinct ethnic categories, may also influence boundary-making processes. Research shows, for instance, that some minority ethnic people's self-identification is influenced by the category they were institutionally assigned to, although they are also known to challenge these strongly (see e.g., Alba and Foner, 2015; Kasinitz et al., 2008).

Boundary shifts and negotiation

As we have seen, boundary work is an intrinsic aspect of the process of identity construction; through symbolic boundaries, people aim to define themselves and others. The lines they draw are not set from scratch and are strongly affected by historical, institutional, and socio-economic elements, cultural repertoires and perceived groupness (Lamont, 1992; Lamont et al., 2016). Throughout their lives, social actors are confronted with many classifications, as they are externally attributed to social categories, such as ethnic or racial, social class and gender groups (Jenkins, 2008b). In this sense, rather than drawing them out of nothing, people *negotiate* existing boundaries as they respond to clear-cut categories. In doing so, people are not 'disinterested classifiers' (Jenkins, 2008b: 6) but behave strategically and emotionally; they foreground certain types of categorization to gain recognition, a sense of worth and dignity and even power (Lamont, 1992; Wimmer, 2013). While all social actors – irrespective of social standing – engage in boundary-making processes, some actors are more likely than others to be attributed to 'spoiled' or stigmatized categories (Goffman, 1963), which may stimulate them even more to contest the lines that allegedly demarcate their group. In this sense, boundary making is indeed also a fruitful strategy of 'identity work', defined as 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept' (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1348). Social actors can negotiate boundaries in myriad ways, at different levels, and their negotiation may be aimed at 'revaluing' their own individual position or that of a whole group.

Over the past decades, several attempts have been made to grasp the complex dynamics of how minority ethnic groups mobilize a wide range of resources to negotiate their place within an ethnic classification system in their society (see Wimmer, 2013 for a comprehensive overview). According to Zolberg and Woon (1999), for instance, there are three possible outcomes of the negotiation between migrants and the majority group: boundary crossing, boundary blurring and boundary shifting. 'Boundary crossing' is a process whereby migrants adapt themselves to the

majority group by acquiring the attributes of their host society. They, as it were, 'cross the boundary' to become part of the majority themselves, but this identity negotiation does not change the structure of the boundary itself, which distinguishes the 'migrants' from the 'majority' (Zolberg and Woon, 1999). Identificational assimilation (Gordon, 1964), which happens when minorities start to self-identify with the ethno-national identity of the 'host' country (e.g. 'Belgian'), is an example of such boundary crossing (Wimmer, 2013).

While Zolberg and Woon (1999) conceptualize 'boundary blurring' in institutional and structural terms (see Zolberg and Woon, 1999: 8), I draw on Wimmer's definition, as it also enables us to study this form of negotiation on a micro level. According to Wimmer, boundary blurring 'reduces the importance of ethnicity as a principle of categorization and social organization. Other, nonethnic principles are promoted and the legitimacy of ethnic, national, or ethnosomatic boundaries undermined' (Wimmer, 2013: 61). These blurred boundaries are hence less exclusionary and less relevant in social actors' everyday lives. Lamont and colleagues (2002), for instance, describe how Northern African migrants in France rebut racism by emphasizing that people of all races and nationalities are 'human beings' and thus equally worth of respect. They hence use universal moral criteria (equality, respect) to de-emphasize ethnic or racial categories; being 'human' becomes more important (see also Lamont, 2000).

'Boundary shifting', finally, occurs when social actors 'reconstruct' group identities by relocating the line between members and non-members (Zolberg and Woon, 1999: 9). Boundaries are shifted to become more inclusive through boundary expansion, or more exclusive by boundary contraction (Wimmer, 2013). In a previous study, for example, I discussed how Moroccan-Belgian Muslim youth expand boundaries on an individual subjective level by emphasizing their self-identification as 'Arab' or 'Muslim' rather than 'Moroccan', to include other ethnic groups in their 'in-group'. Although there is no structural shift in ethnic boundaries, they use this strategy to gain a sense of belonging to a broader category and thus to reduce the feeling of being a 'minority' (Kostet, 2019b). Boundaries are contracted, on the other hand, when social actors aim to dis-identify from a specific category, which can, for example, be achieved by splitting the category in two. A study among French North-African women in France, for instance, analysed how some of these women distance themselves from other minorities by distinguishing between 'well-adapted' and 'less adapted' migrants (Killian and Johnson, 2006). In the same line, research among Arab American adolescents showed how these minority youngsters distinguish themselves from 'boaters', a pejorative term to describe recently immigrated people who are not yet familiar with the dominant culture (Ajrouch, 2004; see also Kibria, 2003).

It is not just, however, the topography of boundaries which is challenged (through crossing, blurring or shifting), but also the hierarchical ordering within them. 'Transvaluation strategies', for instance, aim to change the normative principles or the valuation of certain categories, without changing the lines as such that define the groups. Wimmer (2013) distinguishes between normative inversion and equalization to describe two such transvaluation strategies. Normative inversion 'reverses the existing rank order' and equalization 'aims at establishing equality in status and political power' (57). An example of normative inversion are 'Melanin theories', which claim that black people are superior to white people because they have more melanin in their skin and brains (see Ortiz, 1993 for a discussion of this theory). The proponents of these theories hence aim to challenge white superiority by reversing the supposed hierarchy underlying the 'white-black divide'. Equalization strategies, however, are much less radical and are aimed at moral and political equality – for instance, by emphasizing the equal worth - rather than superiority – of all people, irrespective of their race (Wimmer, 2013).

The strategies used by social actors to negotiate ethnic boundaries are thus related to their particular interests and the economic, political and symbolic resources which they have at their disposal. As the above illustrations show, social actors may choose between different strategies and interpretations of the ethnoracial order, and are most likely to select those which will allow them to claim a privileged position vis-à-vis others from the same ethnic category (Wimmer, 2013). Research, for instance, has shown how highly educated French women of Northern African descent distinguish themselves from other Northern African 'migrants' based upon their educational level and French language skills (Killian and Johnson, 2006). In a similar vein, research also has shown how Syrian refugees in Flanders distance themselves from 'established' migrants by stressing their higher education level and so-called refined cultural taste (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019). These minority groups, therefore, from their educational position of power, emphasize cultural characteristics that they know are socially evaluated as more desirable or worthy in their context. Individuals' position of (symbolic) power not only impacts which strategies they can draw upon, but also which means of boundary enforcement are at their disposal. The ways, indeed, in which boundaries are actually transformed (or not) largely depend on the majority group in control who 'police the borders'. Some groups have more power than others to influence the existence, maintenance and strength or salience of the boundaries which distinguish the one group from the other. When, for instance, minority ethnic individuals aim to cross boundaries and become part of the ethnic majority by changing their name and fully identifying with the majority group, they may still not be accepted by this latter group, who have the power to discriminate against minorities (Wimmer, 2013). Although ethnic boundaries may shift, then, in most contexts minority individuals'

boundary making is largely insufficient to redefine categorical inequality or to shift the boundaries distinguishing them from the national imaginary. Both at the state level and through interactions at the micro-level, symbolic boundaries against the most stigmatized groups are constantly reinforced, as we saw earlier, no matter how minority groups aim to challenge them (Beaman, 2017). Macro structural factors, such as the strength of the correlation of these minority categories with the distribution of resources, may also continually reinforce the existing ethnic classification system (Safi, 2020). However, to understand the dynamics of ethnic boundary making, it nevertheless remains highly important to analyse and acknowledge the ways in which minority groups, despite their 'subordinate' position, develop other modes of group distinctions than those imposed on them. As Wimmer argues:

> The possibility and existence of such counterdiscourses – or of "resistance" in more romantic terms – is crucially important (…). It allows us to avoid equating strategies of classification by powerful actors with the formation of groups in everyday life and, thus, to ask an important question: under what conditions do subordinate actors pursue counterstrategies, and when do they embrace the categorical distinction imposed upon them (…) (Wimmer, 2013: 95)?

An interesting and more recent thread in the scholarship on boundary making focuses on the extent to which ethnic boundaries may dissolve in super-diverse cities. These studies argue that due to increasing ethnic diversity, people tend to give little weight to others' ethnicity when they narrate their perceptions on who belongs to 'us' and who does not, which will result in blurred ethnic boundaries (Wessendorf, 2014). In this vein, it is also argued that demographic shifts, such as the increasing birth-rate among interethnic couples or the transformation to 'majority-minority cities'(Crul, 2016), cities where minority ethnic citizens become a numerical majority[3], will change the ethnic classification order mechanically. This is not to say that ethnicity will become irrelevant or that people will no longer attach importance to their ethnic background. Rather, these authors suggest that ethnic differences as such will become so commonplace that the 'mainstream will be remade' and ethnic boundaries will become less important as a structuring principle in people's everyday lives. However, as Safi (2020: 135) argues: 'if the principles of human classification in ethnoracial categories remain stable, the future white quantitative minority may remain a white qualitative majority and the racial order will persist unchallenged'.

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[3] Majority-minority cities were first observed in North America (New York, Los Angeles and Toronto), but in recent years, Western European cities too, such as Antwerp, Brussels, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, have experienced a rapid growth of minority ethnic groups. Nowadays, each ethnic group in these cities (including the 'native' majority group) are in a numerical minority (Crul, 2016).

Children negotiating boundaries and the New Sociology of Childhood

While, in recent decades, the boundary approach has become an important analytical tool in various disciplines, it is less frequently adopted in research with children[4] (see e.g., Cangià, 2015, 2017; Seele, 2012; Thorne, 1993; Visser, 2016 for important exceptions). However, although not drawing explicitly on this analytical framework, a growing body of literature examines how children perceive and challenge ethnic and social class categories (e.g., Connolly, 2002; Devine et al., 2008; Hagerman, 2010; Kustatscher, 2015; Mistry et al., 2015; Sedano, 2012; Spyrou, 2002; Sutton, 2009; Vandebroeck, 2020; Vincent et al., 2016, but see also further). This relatively recent scholarship differs strongly from earlier studies on the cultural dimension of inequality among children, which generally framed them as rather 'passive' subjects who are primarily 'enculturated' or 'socialized' by adults (Qvortrup, 1994). Before I continue discussing, in the next section, how children are shown to negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries, it is therefore important to briefly situate this research within what has become known as the 'New Sociology of Childhood', which foregrounds a paradigm shift in research with children (see Corsaro, 2005 for an extensive discussion).

From the mid 1980s onwards, scholars (e.g., James and Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Qvortrup, 1994; Thorne, 1987) increasingly challenged hegemonic socialization perspectives, which had mainly approached children as passive subjects or as 'adults in the making' (Matthews, 2007; Qvortrup, 1994). Research into childhood was primarily concerned with 'what kind of future adults' would result from 'which kind of socialization', rather than with understanding children as social actors with their own ongoing lives, lived experiences, needs and desires. These early socialization perspectives not only failed to properly recognize children's experiences and agency[5], but also to examine how children's experiences differ according to their social position and relationships (Corsaro, 2005). Therefore, scholars advocated a paradigm shift, which would result in the 'New Sociology of Childhood' (also referred to as 'New Social Studies of Childhood')[6], a research strand

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[4] There is much debate on the age limit of 'childhood', but I will mainly focus in this literature study on those under sixteen years old. Most of the literature, however, concerns children aged nine to fourteen (middle to late childhood). I specifically use 'early childhood' when referring to children under seven.

[5] However, there has always been a debate on socialization and children's agency. Generally, two models of the socialization process have been put forward: a deterministic model and a constructivist model. While the first viewed the child as passively internalizing the norms of society, the constructivist model has come to see children as active members of the social world who construct their own interpretations of their environment. Yet, this second perspective has also failed to acknowledge children's interpersonal relations, because of its overly strong focus on the individual child's experiences. Further, a limitation of this model was the strong concern with the 'endpoint' of socialization or the process from immaturity to adulthood (Corsaro, 2005).

[6] Ryan (2008), however, challenges the idea that a paradigm shift occurred with the establishment of the 'new' sociology of childhood, as he argues that its basic premises (such as the notion that children construct social life too) were not entirely new.

that recognizes that 'children are not simply internalizing society and culture but are actively contributing to cultural production and change through innovative and creative aspects of childhood' (Corsaro, 1997: 14).[7] In the same period, children's participation was promoted in policy and decision-making, and the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child was established in 1989. Researchers started to draw on this convention to defend children's 'right to be properly researched', an approach that has become known as 'rights-based research with children' (Ennew et al., 2009). One of the principles of rights-based research is that 'children can speak for themselves', resulting in a growing scholarship *with* instead of *about* children (Johnson, 2010). These two parallel evolutions have also resulted in the formal presence of childhood studies in academic institutions (Moran-Ellis, 2010).[8] By now, more than three decades later, childhood studies and their principles have become embedded in the social sciences (Beazley et al., 2009; James, 2009) and studies take place of children's perspectives on various life domains, such as education, friendship, family life, gender, race and ethnicity (Hagerman, 2010).

With regard to the study of culture and inequality in childhood specifically, Lareau (2003) has made a major theoretical contribution to the field with her widely recognized *Unequal Childhoods*. In her analysis of socialization processes among lower-class and middle-class families, she has shown how children are socialized in very different ways, responding to the criticism of traditional socialization theories, which did not recognize the variety in childhood experiences. While Lareau clearly has shown how middle-class parents secure advantages for their children – so that they fit within the education and labour market systems which privilege them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) – her influential work has been less outspoken about how children secure these advantages themselves. Calarco (2018), however, has aimed to highlight children's agency and convincingly demonstrated that middle-class educational advantages are, at least partly, *negotiated advantages*. As a result of their 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003), middle-class children feel entitled to more often ask for assistance at school compared to their lower-class peers, but also to more often prompt parental interventions and to influence their teachers' decisions to their advantage (Calarco, 2018; see also Streib, 2011). Calarco's study builds on a small but growing body of

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[7] This is why Corsaro (1992) prefers the notion of 'interpretive reproduction' over 'socialization'; 'the term *interpretive* captures the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. In fact (…), children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction. That is, children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members' (Corsaro, 2005: 18; but see also Spyrou et al., 2019).

[8] The American Sociological Association's section 'Children' was developed in 1992, the International Sociological Association set up a research committee on childhood in the 1990s and at the same time three new journals (*Childhood, Journal of Children and Poverty* and *Childhood and Society*) were inaugurated (Matthews, 2007).

literature which not only acknowledges children's agency to shape their own experiences, but which also recognizes children's ability to produce and reproduce structural inequality through cultural processes. Earlier, Thorne (1993) had already demonstrated how children act, resist, rework and create gendered expectations themselves, which makes them able to impose categories on others. However, although this literature is emerging, attention has, to date, been predominantly paid to how structural inequality and unequal access to cultural (as well as social and economic) resources impact inter-individual interactions, in particular the interaction between children themselves and between children and adults, rather than vice versa (Calarco, 2018).

Ethnic and social class boundaries in children's everyday lives

Children's awareness of ethnicity

Along with gender, ethnicity is quite salient in primary socialization, as already in their early childhood, children are taught that they belong to a specific ethnic group and how this group differs from others (Jenkins, 2008a; Phinney and Rotheram, 1986). [9] At about the age of three, children develop the capacity to recognize 'visible' racial differences and even begin to display different attitudes towards racial groups (Aboud, 1989; Milner, 1983). There is some debate, however, about whether children become aware of physical differences before they develop racial attitudes, or the other way round (see Quintana, 1998).[10] Research in contexts with a history of strong conflicts between ethnic groups (e.g., Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland), demonstrates that children as young as three are able to distinguish between ethnic groups, even when there are no clear physical differences between them (Bar-Tal, 1996; Connolly et al., 2009). However, there is also evidence that young children in less ethnically divided environments understand ethnic distinctions too (Seele, 2012; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001), although they supposedly develop this ethnic awareness at a slightly later age compared to racial awareness (Bernal et al., 1990).[11] In around their middle childhood (approximately 7-10 years old), children acquire a more complex understanding of ethnicity, and categorize groups based on rather intangible and abstract features, such as ancestry. Furthermore, children at this age make considerably more accurate associations when classifying

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[9] See Quintana (1998) and Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) for an extensive discussion on children's understanding of ethnicity and race.

[10] Hirschfeld (1994), for instance, proposed that children develop racial attitudes without understanding to whom those attitudes are directed (Quintana, 1998).

[11] While definitions of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are contested and vary according to publication, these authors mainly conceptualize 'race' based on physical characteristics, and more specifically as 'black and white'. By 'ethnic awareness', however, they refer to characteristics such as customs and beliefs.

ethnic groups, for instance by determining which languages are spoken by which ethnic groups (Aboud and Ruble, 1987; Quintana, 1994, 1998; Rogers et al., 2012; Ruble and Frey, 1991). It is especially around this period that children start to self-identify in a relatively constant manner with an ethnic category, based on their descent, home language, customs, and more (Bernal et al., 1990).[12] Unlike what is often believed, young children's racial and ethnic categorizations and attitudes are not necessarily predicted by their parents' attitudes only, although later in childhood their attitudes and categorizations become more closely associated with those of their parents (Aboud, 1993; Quintana, 1998; Spencer, 1983). As children and pre-adolescents start to hang out more often with their peers, their friends also become important agents of ethnic socialization (Nelson et al., 2017). Research has also shown that children's attitudes reflect their society's ethnic and racial bias, which often has more impact on children's perceptions than their parents' own attitudes (see also Devine and Kelly, 2006; Quintana, 1998).

Although children develop ethnic or racial attitudes already in preschool, research suggests that it is only through their primary schooling that they gradually begin to realize that others hold prejudices and may dislike people because of their ethnic background (McKown, 2004; Quintana, 1994, 1998). McKown and Weinstein (2003) argue that while six-year-old children are already aware of racism, this awareness increases significantly between the ages of six and ten. By the age of ten, most children display insight into racism, especially if the children have a minority ethnic background themselves. Moreover, at this age, children develop complex ideas of what racism is, as they refer to a range of phenomena when explaining racist mechanisms, such as stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and ethnic conflict. They thus mention cognitive, affective and behavioural components when explaining racism. Further, especially minority ethnic children are shown to refer to those dimensions of racism which reflect power relations, such as discrimination and ethnic conflict, while other children generally tend to focus on individual stereotypes or prejudices (McKown, 2004).

Children's awareness of social class

Arguably, the development of social class awareness is less straightforward. Children are told at an early age what their gender and ethnicity are or ought to be, but few parents would impose a class identity on their toddlers. Compared to ethnicity and gender, there is also considerably less research

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[12] At a younger age, children are shown to self-identify with an ethnic category because they were told to do so (e.g., "I'm Mexican because my mother told me so") or to identify with one or various ethnic categories of their friends (Bernal et al., 1990).

on class conceptions among children (Rauscher et al., 2017). Surprisingly few contemporary sociological studies aim to grasp children's developing ideas of the social hierarchy (see Rauscher et al., 2017; Vandebroeck, 2020 for notable exceptions). The vast body of literature on social class awareness has been conducted within developmental psychology, showing that children develop both their perceptions and judgements of social class at an early age. Early studies showed that children display class awareness at the age of about six[13], but that they do not attach evaluations to class groups until the later grades of primary school (Estvan and Estvan, 1959; Stendler, 1947; e.g. Tudor, 1971). Recent research, however, has demonstrated that children as young as five or six already display an evaluative dimension when discussing class differences. Rauscher and colleagues (2017), for instance, has demonstrated how five and six-year-old children associate wealthier families with 'being nice' and poorer families with 'being sad'. Vandebroeck (2020), in turn, has shown how children of the same age group, having attached certain occupations to family figures depicting stereotypical status attributes (e.g. a father in suit and tie, a father with a sports cap and sleeveless shirt), most often point to the father they identified as the 'banker' as most likeable, while the father categorized as a 'lorry driver' was most often selected as the one they would not want to live with. Over the course of primary school, however, children's conceptions seemingly change. Children's reasoning on social class becomes more complex (Mistry et al., 2015; Rauscher et al., 2017; Vandebroeck, 2020), most likely because of both maturational and experiential factors. As they grow older, children are indeed cognitively better able to decode, categorize and retrieve information, but they also have more personal experiences on which to base their judgements of others (Woods et al., 2005). Drawing on Leahy (1983) and Naimark's (1983) work, Ramsey (1991) states that:

> As children approach adulthood, their understanding of social class differences shifts from perceptions of peripheral cues such as possessions (ages 6 to 11 years), to psychological concepts such as motivation (ages 11 to 14 years), to sociocentric concepts in which an individual's status is seen in the context of the overall system (ages 14 to 17 years) (Ramsey, 1991: 71–72).

Studies show that during their primary schooling, children also develop awareness of the relative prestige ranking of occupations (Simmons and Rosenberg, 1971) and the relative importance of money – which they start to associate with differences in quality of goods – (Rauscher et al., 2017). Their value judgements of different social groups also start to change, as they begin to draw on

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[13] However, at this age, children's awareness of the causes of inequality is limited (Elenbaas et al., 2020). During their middle childhood, children start to explain wealth differences based on various factors, ranging from income differences to external causes such as the impact of warfare (Chafel and Neitzel, 2005). Supposedly it is only around the age of 10-11 onwards, that children start to identify the role of structural factors such as equity in education, unequal labour market chances, besides individual factors such as intelligence and work discipline (Chafel, 1997a; Leahy, 1983, 1990).

different stereotypes. Research into children's status stereotypes, however, produces very different and conflicting results, probably related to the different socio-political contexts in which they were conducted (e.g., public stigmatization of the poor vs. egalitarianism), variations in methodology, and the large span of time over which research on class concepts among children has been conducted – as there is a lack of research between approximately the mid 1980s and the 21st century. While some studies show that children's preference for the 'rich' decreases with age, and that they begin to internalize stereotypes about the rich and to recognize that desirable or undesirable behaviour can be shown by both rich and poor people (Burkholder et al., 2019; Stendler, 1947; Vandebroeck, 2020; Woods et al., 2005), others discuss how children become less sympathetic towards socio-economically disadvantaged people as they grow older (Chafel and Neitzel, 2005; Stacey, 1987).

Research into children's and adolescents' perceptions of the relationship between race/ethnicity and social class differences is relatively scarce (see Ghavami and Mistry, 2019; Seider et al., 2019 for exceptions), but a few studies among US children have suggested that primary school children and middle-school pre-adolescents are aware of the unequal distribution of wealth among racial groups and that African Americans are relatively more disadvantaged, both regarding financial resources and chances in life (Bigler et al., 2003). However, again, there are important age differences. Younger children (5-6y), for instance, generally report an over-representation of African Americans on the lower ranks of the social ladder, without assuming an under-representation at the higher positions. Older children (10-11), however, identify both an over-representation of African-American families in the lower positions and an over-representation of European-American families in the higher positions of the social spectrum (Elenbaas and Killen, 2016). Simmons and Blyth (1987) have shown that US primary school children also believe that some children have fewer chances in life than others, and that the majority of these children attribute this problem to socio-economic, racial or ethnic disadvantages.[14]

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[14] Yet, although children generally acknowledge that their less advantaged peers have no access to some opportunities and that they are hence less likely to expect success, research also shows that children are rather optimistic about their own personal prospects. As Simmons and Blyth (1987: 243) note: 'the young person frequently does not seem to apply his knowledge of the general structure to his perception of himself, his family, or his peers.' The authors refer to a 'middle-class bias' among children, reflected in their aspirations, as they generally aspire to middle-class professions, and how they assess their own chances in life. Of the working-class primary school children in their study, Simmons and Blyth (1987: 240–241) write that '64% of working class elementary school children (…) desire middle-class occupations (…). These working-class respondents seem desirous of exceeding their fathers (…), that is, they have significant intergenerational mobility aims.' By the time they are in secondary education, 63% of these children further expect to be richer than their fathers and 85% of working-class boys report that they wish for an occupation of higher prestige compared to their fathers (see Himmelweit et al., 1952 for a similar early study in the UK). Similar patterns are evidenced in more recent studies on the aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged children and youth, and young people with a migration background (e.g., Archer et al., 2014; Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019; Van Praag, D'hondt, et al., 2015), which point to 'doxic aspirations' among these young people, which I will discuss in chapter five.

While there is ample research on children's perceptions of different social groups, and in particularly their (stereotypical) perceptions of the poor and the rich (Chafel, 1997b; Ramsey, 1991; Vandebroeck, 2020; Weinger, 1998, 2000; Woods et al., 2005), less attention has been paid to the ways in which children assess their own social position, whether or not in relation to others. Much of the scholarship on children's subjective social position has mainly approached children in pre-defined groups, such as 'poor children' or 'affluent children', to gauge their class-based experiences (e.g. Hagerman, 2018; Trzcinski, 2002; Weinger, 2000). Only a small number of studies, however, have aimed to address how children define the class they themselves believe they belong to (Sutton, 2009). Strikingly, the limited number of studies all come to the same finding, that children – irrespective of their 'actual' social position – tend to place themselves in the middle of the social spectrum.[15] Whether they belong to the (upper-)middle or lower-class, children report their own 'average' social position, as they aim to present themselves as 'normal' (Feddes et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2000; Kustatscher, 2017b; Mistry et al., 2015; Simmons and Rosenberg, 1971; Stendler, 1947; Sutton, 2009). Yet, although there is clear evidence of a middle-class bias among children, the existing studies shed little light on the boundary work that must be done to construct this 'normalcy' (see further).

In sum, both regarding ethnicity and social class, most of the abovementioned literature has produced interesting conclusions on how awareness of ethnicity and social class develops during childhood and how children experience and identify with these social categories; it does not, however, fully grasp the dynamic process of children's negotiation.

Negotiating ethnic boundaries

As Connolly's (2002) seminal work has shown, children do not uncritically adopt adults' classifications but are also able to challenge ethnic or racial categories, even at preschool age (see also Seele, 2012). Especially in ethnically diverse contexts, children are shown to contest ethnic boundaries and reductionism by imposing their own complex self-identifications and multiple identities (Ali and Sonn, 2010; Moinian, 2009; Visser, 2016). Children shift their ethnic self-identifications in myriad ways, to create a sense of belonging to groups they consider important, and to broader society (Kustatscher, 2017a). Concerning the relationship between ethnicity and peer or friendship group formation, ample attention has been paid to the ethnic prejudice of pupils (e.g., Quintana, 1998; Van Houtte et al., 2019; Vervaet et al., 2018), whether or not children prefer intra-

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[15] This finding, furthermore, corresponds to research among adults (see e.g., Savage, 2015; van Eijk, 2012).

ethnic friendships (e.g., Baerveldt et al., 2007; Bagci et al., 2014; Fortuin et al., 2014; Schachner et al., 2015), and how the ethnic composition of schools is related to peer victimization and bullying (e.g., Agirdag, Demanet, et al., 2011; Myers and Bhopal, 2017; Stark et al., 2015; Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014; Tolsma et al., 2013). By and large, although the findings point in different general directions, these studies suggest that schools serve as important settings where children have the chance to interact across ethnic and social lines. While some studies provide evidence of ethnic mixing among pupils in diverse schools (Bagci et al., 2014), others reveal that children aim to hang out with those of the same ethnic background (Fortuin et al., 2014). Research also points to the impact of children's transition to secondary education, and suggests that while children build friendships across ethnic lines in primary school, these friendships are often disrupted once enrolled in secondary (Bruegel, 2006; George, 2007; Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012)

In this dissertation, I particularly engage with (mostly sociological-anthropological) studies on the role of ethnicity and social class in children's peer and friendship group relationships, from the perspective of childhood studies (see Pache Huber and Spyrou, 2012), which, although not explicitly, adopt a boundary approach by examining how children themselves demarcate social groups. These studies differ from the aforementioned research, not only in their highlighting of children's agency, but also in their 'de-ethnicized' research design. Rather, then, than examining how particular ethnic groups relate to each other, they use methodologies that reveal a variety of outcomes of boundary-making processes, and also show non-ethnic standards of social structuration at play. In doing so, these studies also shed light on the variety of boundary-making processes among those who share a similar ethnic background (see Wimmer, 2013) and suggest that ethnicity may not always – not even often – be highly relevant for children in deciding whom to hang out with. In her study carried out among children in Spain, for instance, Sedano (2012) proposes that:

> ethnicity might not be a relevant principle according to which children structure their social world, even when this is apparently the case. When children are the agents of social construction, there are other criteria that are much more relevant to them. When the structure of social networks depends on the agency of the parents and adults of the domestic group, ethnicity becomes more or less important depending on several factors. When it comes to bureaucratic institutions such as the school, ethnicity becomes hyper-relevant (Sedano, 2012: 375).

Sedano argues that while children shape their belongings ethnically (self-identification) and use ethnonyms when they quarrel with others, they do not necessarily decide whom to hang out with based on ethnic criteria (see also Devine et al., 2008). According to the author, children rather shape their friendship group based on collectively constructed conventions, such as seniority (how long has

the child been part of a group?), age, gender, kinship (are children related?) and habitus. With 'habitus', Sedano seemingly refers to differential manners, habits and communication styles, which distinguish 'established' children from those of foreign descent who have recently arrived in the neighbourhood:

> Local children do not place the boy who came from Morocco seven years ago, who speaks the local language perfectly and moves and expresses himself like the rest of the children around him, in the same emic category that will be applied to the boy who has just arrived. Although both of them are perceived in the same way as *Moroccans* by teachers (and some researchers), children in the neighbourhood establish a clear difference between the first case and the second one. (…) Yasmina had arrived just a few days earlier from Morocco and she did not speak a word of Spanish. Nobody spoke to her, not even other children who could speak Moroccan Arabic (Sedano, 2012: 383).

The study indicates that the 'established' children are less inclined to hang out with those who have recently arrived, not so much because they are of foreign descent as such but mostly because they are new in the neighbourhood and do not embody shared cultural patterns (see also Ajrouch, 2004). Elias and Scotson (1994) describe these perceived dividing lines as the 'established-outsider' boundaries.

Another example of a de-ethnicized research design that tackles children's own classifications is Knifsend and Juvonen's (2013) research, which examines how social identity complexity[16] relates to children's (12-14) interethnic relationships. Their results show that children who perceive their multiple identifications as complex, in the sense that they do not consider their different social identity categories as highly overlapping, display more positive attitudes towards other groups. When children do not believe that belonging to one group (e.g. being 'Latinx') implies membership of another group (e.g. loving volleyball), boundaries between in-group and out-group members become diffuse 'as members of multiple, fairly distinct groups can be considered in-group members' (Knifsend and Juvonen, 2013: 624). Hence, by shifting the attention to how they themselves demarcate the boundaries between their multiple identifications, the authors clearly show that boundary-making processes vary strongly within groups as well, and that ethnicity as such may not be a dividing principle. 'Cultural matching', in the sense that children more or less share similar

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[16] Social identity complexity is defined as 'the perceived membership overlap among the groups with which a person aligns himself or herself. For example, the question for a teen who identifies himself as Latino and as a volleyball player is to what degree these groups overlap in their memberships (i.e., how many volleyball players are also Latino, and how many Latino peers are volleyball players?). When an individual perceives the members of his or her social in-groups to substantially overlap, social identity complexity is low because groups converse across categories (…). In contrast, when the members of various social in-groups are seen as largely non-overlapping (e.g., only a few volleyball players are also Latino, and only a few Latino peers play volleyball), the teens' social identity is complex because each social in-group has some members who do not belong to his other in-groups' (Knifsend and Juvonen, 2013: 624).

interests, is on the other hand very important in children's social worlds (Devine et al., 2008; see also Devine and Kelly, 2006).

That is not to say that ethnicity is never relevant to children's friendship group formation. On the contrary, research shows that intra-ethnic friendships may also provide a 'safe space', especially for minority children, allowing them to explore their identities (Hoare, 2019; Zemblyas, 2010). Studies have also evidenced a lack of mixing across different ethnic groups. Especially in ethnically divided societies, children seem to keep the 'out-group' at a distance and display stereotypical images of the other (Spyrou, 2002). Yet, even in 'less hostile' environments where children generally claim to value diversity and even draw on repertoires of 'cultural celebration' (Hajisoteriou et al., 2017; Partasi, 2011), some studies indicate that a relatively large group of children and adolescents nevertheless 'stick to their own kind' (Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012; Rhamie et al., 2012). On the other hand, there is also evidence that children – even in ethnically divided societies - challenge publicly shared stereotypical images of ethnic groups and reconstruct their own world independently of those of adults, in a more nuanced way (Christou and Spyrou, 2012; Spyrou, 2006).

Overall, existing research highlights the need to gain more in-depth insight into the conditions under which ethnicity becomes relevant (or not) in children's friendships and everyday lives. In recent years, for example, there has been a growing interest in research on whether the super-diversification of societies will result in blurred ethnic boundaries. Iqbal and colleagues (2017: 129) argue that primary schools in super-diverse cities 'have the potential to be one of the few sites to facilitate friendships between adults and between children from different social class and ethnic backgrounds'. Their study among London children indeed shows that children generally have close friendships with those from a different ethnic group to themselves and that they mix with each other without major tensions. Moreover, children seemingly understand diversity as quite unexceptional and ordinary, an orientation which Wessendorf (2013) describes as 'commonplace diversity'. Similarly, in their study in Rotterdam, Visser and Tersteeg (2019) show that young people are rooted in their super-diverse environment and interact across ethnic differences quite easily. Moreover, these children do not appear to be intentionally or outspokenly 'culturally open', as this rather 'natural' orientation is not particularly noteworthy for them.[17]

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[17] There are, however, indications that children's inter-ethnic friendships in school or in the neighbourhood are not replicated in the private sphere, such as the home, where children are more dependent on their parents' social networks (Iqbal et al., 2017; Vincent et al., 2016; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019).

Negotiating social class boundaries

Regarding social class, past sociological studies generally took a rather positivist approach and aimed to assess whether children were able to identify their own and others' social standing 'correctly' (Sutton, 2009). If lower-class children, for instance, identified as 'middle-class', researchers concluded that they have a 'false consciousness' (Simmons and Blyth, 1987) or even that '[i]t may be well that the overestimation [of their class position] by the [lower-class] Modern School boy is in part, at least, the result of being less intelligent' (Himmelweit et al., 1952: 160). Remarkably, these studies hardly considered how children *deliberately* appropriate and rework identity categories within interactions to develop a positive sense of self-identity.

Over the past two decades, however, a small but growing body of literature has aimed to fill this gap, and has examined how children strategically and creatively negotiate existing boundaries to develop self-descriptions that fit their self-concept. Sutton (2009), for instance, shows that children talk about their own social class position as 'average' because they desire to fit in. To do so, estate (lower-class) children, when interviewed, 'talk up' what they own, while private school (upper-class) children downplay their material possessions and financial resources (see also Backett-Milburn et al., 2003). However, children are seemingly well-aware of their relative position and how they are perceived in wider society, which they challenge through boundary work to achieve a sense of dignity. The estate children, for example, stress their own morality by describing wealthier children as 'posh', 'spoiled', 'mean' and 'greedy', while the private school children distinguish themselves from the 'chavs' and 'troublemakers' (see also Kustatscher, 2017b). Children, however, not only engage in boundary work by describing others in stigmatizing terms, but also challenge hegemonic representations of their own group and develop counter spaces of representations (see Fattore and Fegter, 2019; Reay, 2004). Nayak and Kehily (2014) show how children identifying as 'chavs' manage group stigmatization by emphasizing their strong intragroup solidarity and tight-knit friendships. Furthermore, social class boundaries are not only challenged discursively, but also through children's everyday practices. Research has shown, for instance, how upper-class children challenge their parents' taste by desiring cheap, poor quality goods marketed to them on television (Pugh, 2009).

While there is a long tradition of research into the role of ethnicity in children's and adolescents' peer and friendship group relations, much less is known about the extent to which children bridge social class boundaries when interacting across these differences. The scarce literature has focused on how young children relate to economically disadvantaged peers (Dys et al., 2019) and whether they engage in inter-class peer and friendship group relations (Elenbaas, 2019;

Horwitz et al., 2014; Vincent et al., 2016). These studies show that children are less likely to mix across social classes than across ethnicity (Ford, 1969; Hey, 1997; Hollingworth and Williams, 2010; Iqbal et al., 2017; Papapolydorou, 2014; Reay, 2008; Reay et al., 2007). That is not to say that children and adolescents deliberately choose not to hang out with those of another social class. Children do not explicitly refer to social class differences and often explicitly state that they would not exclude socio-economically disadvantaged peers (Dys et al., 2019), but it does seem that children are inclined to hang out with those who share similar lifestyles, linguistic styles and consumption patterns (e.g., Iqbal et al., 2017; Kustatscher, 2017b).

In sum, existing literature clearly calls for further investigation into the ways in which children negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries and on which repertoires they draw while doing so. With regard to social class, there is a large gap in research into how children negotiate social class boundaries to construct a positive self-identity and how class dynamics affect children's everyday intergroup relations. While, on the other hand, much more attention has been paid to the role of ethnicity in children's peer relations, more research is needed on how and when ethnic boundaries are made relevant (or not) – especially in super-diverse cities where these boundaries are supposed to become more blurred.

Research questions

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the above-mentioned literature by examining how children negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries in their everyday lives. The main research question of this study is:

How do children negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries in a super-diverse city characterized by ethnic and social inequalities, and on which repertoires do they draw while doing so?

More specifically, this central and descriptive research aim can be divided into various sub-questions. Regarding children's negotiation of ethnic and social class boundaries, I will analyse following questions: (1) On which repertoires do children draw when they narrate their perceptions of ethnic and social class diversity? (2) How do children draw symbolic boundaries to demarcate ethnic and social class groups? (3) How do they negotiate their own social position and ethnic and national identities? (4) In which ways do both their symbolic boundary making processes and their identifications change over time? (5) And how do children's repertoires on diversity and racism

interact with those of their parents and teachers, two of the most important 'agents of socialization' in children's lives?

As discussed in the previous sections, and as I will further elaborate on in the methodological chapter, children in many Western European cities negotiate boundaries in an environment characterized by strong inequalities between different ethnic groups, which result in unequal life chances. Against this background, I also aim to analyse following questions: (6) Which aspirations do children hold for their futures, as they grow up in an environment in which inequality is structured along ethnic lines? (7) How do they assess their life chances within such a context? (8) And on which repertoires do they draw to explain the relationship between inequality and opportunities in life?

The last research question is methodological in nature and asks (9) how power dynamics may shift when conducting research with children through the perspective of a researcher who, in terms of both ethnicity and social class, belongs to the minority groups against whom boundaries are set.

Overview of the chapters

The further structure of this dissertation consists of a methodological framework, seven chapters which were originally written as academic articles, and a general conclusion. The empirical chapters are chronically ordered, considering the various research rounds. In chapter one, I discuss the research context and approach. I first set out the societal context in which the child-participants are growing up and the inequality they encounter in their everyday environment. The children go to school in the city of Antwerp, a socially and ethnically diverse city characterized by strong inequalities between different groups. Thereafter, I describe the methods used and different research rounds in detail. The study entails three rounds of in-depth interviews with children over a period of two school years, and (single) interviews with some of their parents and teachers. I will give a short description of the participating children, parents' and teachers' characteristics and I will discuss the ways in which the interviews were processed and analysed. In this section, I will also share some general reflections on shifting power dynamics in qualitative interviews, the researcher's positionality and social desirability.

In chapter two, I focus more specifically on shifting power dynamics in interviews with children, drawing on my experiences as a minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background. I discuss how middle-class children confronted me with language stigma and how they, while drawing boundaries vis-à-vis those who 'lack' cultural capital, (unintentionally) drew boundaries against me. This chapter, in turn, illustrates how during the interviews with working-class

children, manners had to be adopted with which I am no longer familiar. I call on ethics committees to more strongly consider how researchers may become 'vulnerable' themselves during fieldwork and to acknowledge intersectional experiences that potentially cause power dynamics to shift, even in research involving groups that are socially believed to have little power, such as children.

Chapter three examines how children in super-diverse primary schools draw on cultural repertoires to construct ethno-cultural similarities and differences. Based on the interviews of the first research round, I show how children draw on four broad repertoires to make sense of the ethnic diversity in their environment. First, I discuss how they talk about diversity as a commonplace aspect of daily life. Although the children acknowledge classroom diversity, they do not necessarily consider it to be exceptional or worth discussing. Second, I describe how the children draw on cosmopolitan arguments as they claim that they explicitly experience ethno-cultural, religious or linguistic diversity as a great benefit. Third, I illustrate how some groups of children experience bright boundaries between different ethnic groups and how they draw on repertoires of 'otherness' and cultural deficiency to set boundaries vis-à-vis other minority groups. Fourth, I show how children also draw on repertoires of group disadvantages. Although they say to value diversity themselves, they are well aware that some groups are treated 'less nicely' than others because of their ethno-cultural or religious background.

In chapter four, I shed light on children's understanding and negotiation of social class boundaries. Based on the first two research rounds, I highlight how the children give meaning to social inequality and assess how they position themselves vis-à-vis different socio-economic groups. I argue that children not only show an acute awareness of social differences, but also engage in symbolic boundary making to secure a positive self-identity. I analyse how children describe their own position as 'middle-class', to present themselves as neither rich nor poor but as 'normal' or 'ordinary'. However, as the children's narratives reveal very different life chances, they use different identity management strategies to construct their own 'ordinariness'.

In chapter five, I analyse children's aspirations, expectations of the future, and reasoning about social inequality in the context of an early tracking education system. Based on the first two research rounds, I highlight the conflicting yet creative ways in which children make sense of unequal life chances. Although our child-respondents prefer structural explanations of inequality, they strategically draw on repertoires of individual social mobility to express their faith in personal agency and meritocracy. In doing so, these children use narratives of upwards mobility that have arisen in very different socio-economic and political contexts to make sense of inequality in their own locality.

Chapter six discusses the various ways in which the children negotiate ethnic and national identities. I examine which identity labels children identify with, what significance they attach to

these labels, how they define these inclusively or exclusively and what these labels reveal about their senses of belonging. Children negotiate identity in myriad and creative ways and, when doing so, challenge public and political discourses by creating inclusive categories which transcend ethnic or national boundaries. I further show how, approximately 20 months after the first research round, the children retrospectively reflect on their self-identifications, may alter their initially chosen identity labels, and critically question the importance they once attached to those identities.

Chapter seven examines how pupils talk about interethnic friendships, and which boundaries they draw when doing so. Four patterns emerge, each situated on a continuum of two axes. One axis relates to the sharpness of the boundaries children set ('bright' or 'blurred') and the second to whether they claim to have interethnic friendships. This results in four quadrants; some children express blurred boundaries and say they have interethnic friendships; others claim to have homogeneous friendship groups although they express blurred boundaries; yet another group draw bright boundaries but nevertheless report that they have interethnic friendships; and a final group draw bright boundaries and report that they only have friends from the same ethnic background. Yet, symbolic boundaries and friendship groups are fluid, and after the transition to secondary education, differences occurred in some of the described networks and boundary-making processes.

Chapter eight is based on the interviews with both children and their parents and teachers, and discusses the various ways in which children and adults claim to value ethnic diversity, and how they challenge each other's understandings of racism and performances of everyday cosmopolitanism. I illustrate how certain speech norms are provoked during the interviews, and how especially adults seem to perform their cultural openness in such a way as to be perceived favourably. I distinguish between three different types of cosmopolitanism. While parents mainly perform 'cultural cosmopolitanism' – that is representing themselves as open towards those of other cultures – their children display 'social cosmopolitanism', which is grounded in their everyday social interactions. Teachers, in turn, seem to be especially concerned with performing 'moral cosmopolitanism', demonstrating social engagement and non-racism.

In the concluding section, I reflect on how the results of my study centre children's agency and how to conduct research on ethnic boundaries in a super-diverse society. I also discuss the limitations of this study and raise some directions for further research.

1

Research context and approach

Growing up in a majority-minority city with strong inequalities

With more than a half million inhabitants, Antwerp is the largest city in Flanders and, after Brussels, the second largest in Belgium. As a port area, Antwerp has traditionally been a place of arrival for immigrants[1] (Oosterlynck et al., 2017). However, it was especially after World War II that immigration flows to Belgium started to drastically increase, due to the bilateral agreements to bring migrant workers over from countries such as Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco and Turkey (Timmerman et al., 2017). In response to the economic crisis in the 1970s, the Belgian government, from 1974 to 1989, officially stopped recruiting migrant workers from outside Europe, but the share of immigrants kept growing because of family reunification programmes and immigration of EU-workers. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, diversity grew further as people sought asylum in Belgium, where – even more so since the establishment of the European Union (1993) and the Schengen Agreement (1995) - immigrants from Eastern European countries have also made their homes. In the last few decades, people have continued migrating to Belgium for a myriad of reasons, and these demographic changes have become highly visible in cities such as Antwerp (Martiniello, 2013). Recently, with 179 nationalities[2], Antwerp has become a 'majority-minority city' (Crul, 2016), as the different minority ethnic groups – including the Belgian-born (grand)children of migrants – constitute a majority of the population (51.5% in 2020).

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[1] I generally prefer using the term 'migrants' (or migration background) instead of 'immigrants' (or immigration background), to acknowledge that individuals are impacted by both their emigration and immigration. As Sayed (2007: 29) argues: 'Any study of migratory phenomena that overlooks the emigrants' conditions of origin is bound only to give a view that is at once *partial* and *ethnocentric.* On the one hand, it is only the *immigrant* – and not the *emigrant* – who is taken into consideration, rather as though his life began the moment he came to France.' Here, however, I use the term 'immigrant' because I am explicitly referring to an 'influx'; the process of 'coming' to Belgium/Antwerp.

[2] All the figures on the city of Antwerp are taken from the city's online database – unless specified otherwise -, which can be consulted via stadincijfers.antwerpen.be. The figures are based on the most recent statistics (generally 2020).
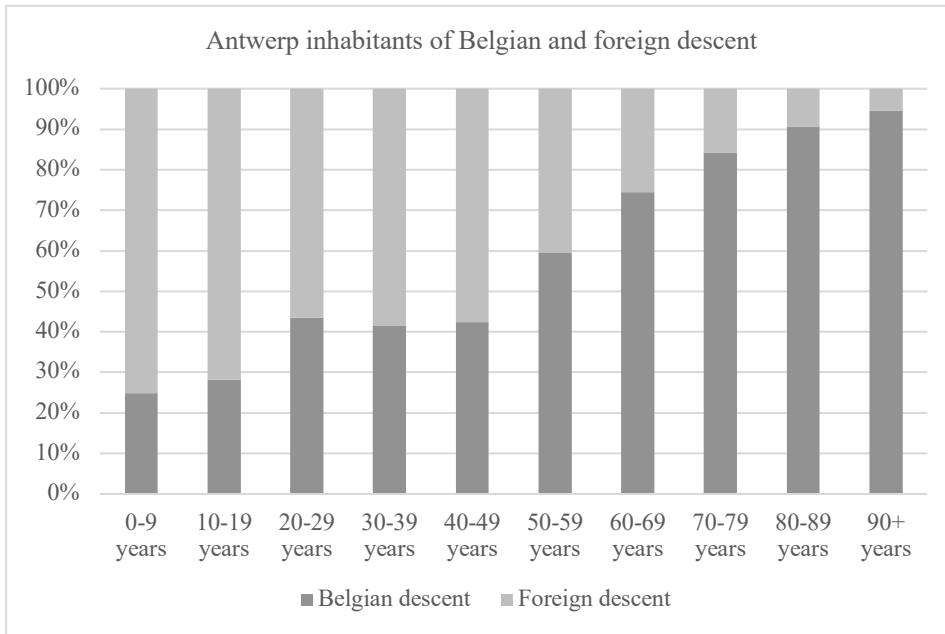
Figure 1: Antwerp inhabitants of Belgian and foreign descent, by age group.
Source: Stad in Cijfers
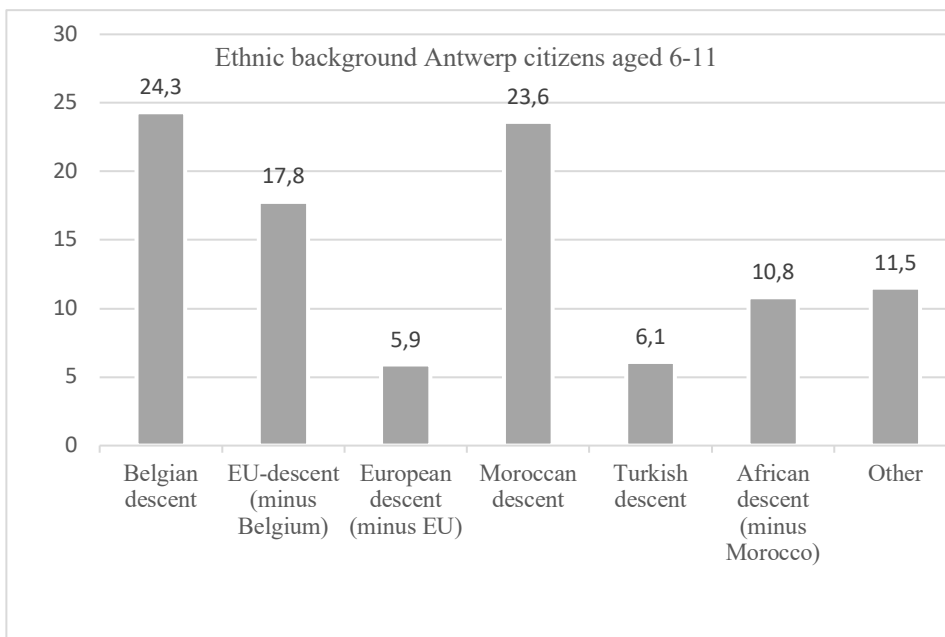
Figure 2: Ethnic background of Antwerp children aged 6-11.
Source: Stad in Cijfers

The largest groups originate from the Maghreb (14%), Western Asia (8.6%) and Eastern Europe (8.4%).[3] Overall, the city's street scene is characterized by people whose origins can be found across the globe and who differ greatly from each other in terms of migration history, cultural and religious beliefs, and social class background, among other things. Because of this diversification of diversity, also called 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007), Antwerp is a very rich site to study boundary making among children, especially since the diversity is most pronounced among children and youngsters under 19, as Figure 1 and Figure 2 show.

While Antwerp is a majority-minority city, however, ethnic diversity is not equally spread over the neighbourhoods. Antwerp citizens with a migration background[4] mainly live in the industrial areas to the north of the historic city centre and south of the city centre (Oosterlynck et al., 2017). Neighbourhoods such as Kiel and Borgerhout Intra Muros, for instance, have a much larger share of minority ethnic inhabitants (78.8% and 69.6% respectively) than districts such as Berendrecht-Zandvliet-Lillo (16.5%) or Ekeren (24.7%). Areas with a super-diverse population are socio-economically strongly disadvantaged, which is indicative of the disadvantaged position of Antwerp citizens with a migration background. This is illustrated in the deprivation index[5] of the aforementioned neighbourhoods (see Table 1).

As the numbers in Table 1 refer to the total population, regardless of whether families have children, the Flemish organization for preventive family support has mapped out the share of children born into disadvantaged families.[6] These figures also point to a large ethnic gap. Of the children of non-Belgian descent in the province of Antwerp, 37.8% are born into deprived families, compared to 6.2% of the children of Belgian descent (Kind & Gezin, 2018). The most recent figures for the

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[3] Compared to many other countries, migration from the former colonies (such as Congo) to Belgium was limited, as the colonial population were not granted Belgian citizenship (Schoonvaere, 2010; Oosterlynck et al., 2017).

[4] Antwerp citizens of 'Belgian descent', according to the local government, are residents whose first nationality is Belgian, and both of whose parents also had Belgian nationality at birth. If individuals do not have Belgian nationality, or if at least one of their parents did not have Belgian nationality at birth, they are categorized as 'of foreign descent' or 'with a migration background'. Hence, a native-born child of native-born parents but with at least one grandparent who did not have Belgian nationality at birth is still labelled by the government as 'of foreign descent', or in Antwerp even pejoratively as 'non-native' or 'allochthon'. The term 'allochthon', commonly used in Belgium and the Netherlands, although recently attacked publicly as controversial, stems from a nativist understanding in which a distinction is made between the 'original' habitants of a country, the 'autochthons', and the habitants who are not from 'the land' and thus are 'allochthonous'. The term 'allochthons' is generally used to refer to (non-Western) migrants, their Belgian-born children and even their grandchildren (see Slootman and Duyvendak, 2015 for a detailed discussion). If we, however, were to consider all native-born Antwerp children effectively as 'native', those 'of foreign descent' would no longer be in the majority.

[5] This index is determined on the basis of three indicators: (1) the ratio of long-term unemployed jobseekers aged 18 to 64, compared to the total population of the same age group; (2) the ratio of people aged 18 to 64 receiving welfare support (OCMW), compared to the total population of the same age group; and (3) the proportion of taxpayers with a net taxable income lower than 10,000 euros, compared to the total number of taxpayers.

[6] Kind & Gezin (2018), however, uses indicators other than the deprivation index of the city of Antwerp. Families with children are categorized as deprived if they are at or below the lower limit of at least three of the following six criteria: (1) monthly income of the family; (2) level of education of the parents; (3) occupation of the parents; (4) housing quality; (5) level of stimulation of the children; (6) and health condition. It is important to note, however, that this registration takes place only once and usually a few months after the birth of a child. Hence, this measurement is done before the children potentially benefit from equality-promoting initiatives (such as education).

city of Antwerp[7] point to a concentration of deprived families with children in super-diverse neighbourhoods (see Table 2).

Table 1: Deprivation index (2015)

Kiel	Borgerhout Intra Muros	Berendrecht-Zandvliet-Lillo	Ekeren	City of Antwerp
7.7	8.0	1.9	1.7	4.9

NOTE: The deprivation index has a value from 0 to 10. 0 stands for a complete absence of deprivation and 10 for a very high degree of deprivation.
Source: Stad in Cijfers

Table 2: Children born into deprived families, by neighbourhood or district (2015)

Kiel	Borgerhout Intra Muros	Berendrecht Zandvliet Lillo	Ekeren	City of Antwerp
54.2%	39.0%	4.4%	6.6%	27%

Source: Stad in Cijfers.

Educational inequality

The significantly high share of minority ethnic and socio-economically disadvantaged groups in certain neighbourhoods, is also reflected in concentrated primary schools. Antwerp primary schools have the most unequal distribution in Flanders of pupils according to ethnic and social background (Nouwen and Mahieu, 2012). To gain insight into the diversity and inequality in which Antwerp children grow up, we can therefore also look at the number of primary school-aged pupils[8] that meet one of the so-called 'GOK-indicators'[9] described in Table 3.

As most children attend a nearby primary school, some neighbourhoods are characterized by a particularly high share of 'indicator-pupils'. There is also an unequal distribution of ethnic diversity in Antwerp primary schools, which is only partly related to residential concentration. 'White' schools and schools with mainly minority ethnic children can also be found in the same neighbourhoods, which suggests that residential concentration in itself is not the only explanation of this school concentration. Approximately a quarter of Antwerp primary schools deviate from their

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[7] These figures are also based on measurements by Kind & Gezin (same indicators).
[8] Flemish primary schools are intended for children aged 6 to 12 and consist of six grades. After the sixth grade of primary school, children enrol in secondary education, for children aged 12-18.
[9] The 'GOK-decree' (*Gelijke Onderwijskansen-decreet*) aims to counter inequality, social segregation and discrimination and therefore measures the share of disadvantaged pupils in schools. Schools with a large pupil population in disadvantaged positions receive additional government support.

neighbourhood composition, which means that – in relation to the neighbourhood population – some schools have an overly strong concentration of minority ethnic (15%) or majority ethnic (12%) children.[10]

Table 3: Share of 'indicator-pupils' in Antwerp primary schools (2019)

Indicator-pupils in Antwerp primary schools	
Pupils receiving study allowances	49.9%
Pupils of lower educated mothers	43.2%
Pupils temporarily or permanently separated from their families	0.4%
Pupils from itinerant populations	1.1%
Pupils with a foreign home language	45.9%
Total share of 'indicator-pupils'	**62.7%**

Source: City of Antwerp
Note: Study allowances are (subject to certain conditions, such as regular school attendance) paid to families with school-aged children with a relatively low income. Lower educated mothers are mothers without a secondary education qualification.

Looking more closely at the situation in Antwerp primary schools, we note that 2.7% of children with a foreign home language repeat at least one year of schooling, compared to 0.8% of children whose mother tongue is Dutch (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, 2018). However, to map out educational inequality, it is best to look at the Flemish and federal data, which are much better documented – especially regarding secondary education. Among the OECD-countries, the achievement gap between middle- and lower-class children is almost nowhere as striking as in Flanders; this is also the case for the performances of majority and minority ethnic children. Minority ethnic children are more than twice as likely as their majority peers to fail to achieve baseline levels of academic proficiency in reading, mathematics and science at the age of 15 (OECD, 2017, 2018). Whereas it is often claimed that this ethnic gap can be traced back to the social gap – which would mean that this gap is only pronounced because children with a migration background are overrepresented in the lower income groups –, research however shows that social class differences do not completely explain this ethnic divide. Indeed, an ethnic gap can be observed in each social class group, which means that also *within* the same social class category, minority ethnic children obtain lower test scores than their majority peers (Jacobs and Danhier, 2017; Agirdag, 2020).

One of the main reasons for this inequality is the early tracking system in Flanders (OECD, 2017); already at the age of 12, pupils are prepared for a particular track, whereas many education systems in other countries only start tracking around the age of 15 or 16 (see Schleicher, 2018). More

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[10] See Nouwen and Mahieu (2012) for explanations.

specifically, when they transition from primary to secondary education, Flemish children are first referred to a specific 'stream'. This streaming into the 'A-stream' – for children who successfully completed primary education – and the 'B-stream' – for children who did not complete it successfully –, consists of a two-year preparation for a specific track. After these two years, children are channelled into (1) the general or academic track (*ASO)*, which prepares them for tertiary education, (2) the technical track (*TSO)*, which prepares them for both tertiary education and the labour market, (3) the artistic track (*KSO*), or (4) the vocational track (*BSO)*, which prepares pupils explicitly for the labour market. Although the latter does not exclude access to tertiary education, pupils are much less prepared – or completely unprepared – for higher education after this track.[11] While the track choice is formally up to the pupils and their parents, at least if the pupil has reached the necessary attainment levels, the teacher's advice is very important in guiding pupils towards a track. Research has shown that Flemish teachers are often biased by pupils' background characteristics when giving advice, and that they often refer children with a migration background and/or children who are socio-economically disadvantaged to technical or vocational education, even in cases where they have sufficiently high grades and motivation to enter the general track (Boone et al., 2018; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013; Sneyers et al., 2018). This leads to an overrepresentation of minority ethnic and other disadvantaged pupils in the technical and vocational tracks, which are generally perceived as less prestigious and valuable (Stevens and Vermeersh, 2010; Van Praag et al., 2014). Once tracked, inequality only increases further, with drastic consequences for minority ethnic and socially disadvantaged groups. The OECD (2017) shows following figures:

Table 4: Enrolment and grade repetition in vocational tracks in Belgium, by socio-economic status

Percentage of students enrolled in a vocational track		Percentage of students having repeated a grade	
Advantaged students	**Disadvantaged students**	**Advantaged students**	**Disadvantaged students**
20.3%	60%	53.3%	15.7%

NOTE: These results are based on self-reports by students. The OECD considers socio-economically disadvantaged students as those in the bottom quarter of the distribution of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) within their own country. Socio-economically advantaged students are those in the top quarter. See OECD (2017) for more information.

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[11] It is important to note, however, that the streams in which pupils end up in the first two years of secondary education do not determine their future choice, but that mobility from the B-stream to the general or technical track is much less encouraged (and feasible) than vice versa, as the vocational track is considered to be academically 'easier'. However, it often happens that children start in the A-stream and aspire to a general track but are referred to the technical or vocational track during their school career, also known as the 'cascade system' (Van Praag et al., 2014).

Studies further indicate that these pupils are more likely to display a higher sense of futility and to drop out of school unqualified, compared to those in other tracks (Lamote et al., 2013; Van Houtte and Stevens, 2015, 2016). Flemish children, hence, are exposed to an educational system with strong social and ethnic inequalities.

Discourses on diversity and inequality and its consequences

Although I will not elaborate thoroughly on policy discourses on diversity and inequality (see Oosterlynck et al., 2017 for an overview of govermental policy; and Van Praag et al., 2019 for education), I would like to briefly mention three points which are important for my further analysis. First, while Antwerp has a highly diverse population, the Flemish far-right (*Vlaams Blok/Belang)* gained landslide electoral victories in the city during the 1990s and 2000s. This made anti-immigration discourses very visible and created a political atmosphere highly receptive to resurgent neo-assimilationist tendencies and the backlash against multiculturalism. Against the background of these sentiments, the established Social Democratic Party (*sp.a,* now called *Vooruit,* which was the ruling party providing the city mayor from 1944 until 2013), also began to tighten their diversity policies. In 2007, the Social Democrat mayor of Antwerp, for instance, introduced a ban on religious attire in municipal front-office positions, which would become known as the 'headscarf ban', as it has mainly affected Muslim women. The main reason for this ban was to guarantee the 'neutrality of the public service', and it has sparked heated debates - both in the political and public sphere - which continue to this day (Bracke and Fadil, 2012; Brems et al., 2017; Saeys et al., 2019; Van Puymbroeck et al., 2014). In most Flemish primary and secondary schools, it is now also prohibited for either teachers or pupils to wear religious signs (whether attire or symbols).[12] The government-provided schools (*GO!*)[13] introduced a general ban, while the private school network decided to leave the decision about whether or not to prohibit these religious signs with the individual schools, of which most have chosen a ban. In addition to the argument of 'neutrality', this ban has been justified by claiming that Muslim girls should be protected from peer pressure to wear religious symbols,[14] and some schools – which in principle are not against wearing the headscarf – nevertheless maintain the

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[12] With an exception for teachers of the religious classes provided by the government-provided schools.
[13] The Flemish education system consists of different networks, mainly 'government-provided schools' (*Gemeenschapsonderwijs), '*Government-aided public education' (*Gesubsidieerd officieel onderwijs)*, and 'Government-aided private education' (*Gesubsidieerd vrij onderwijs)*, which is the largest network, mainly organized by Catholic Education Flanders. See also further.
[14] This argument was put forward particularly after the principal of an Antwerp secondary school introduced the ban, as, she claimed, Muslim girls in her school would be pressurised by others to wear a headscarf.

ban because they fear that they would otherwise attract a large group of Muslim girls wearing headscarves, which would threaten the school's diversity (Brems et al., 2017).

A second point concerns the way in which both policy makers and educational actors in Flanders have dealt with multilingualism. From the beginning of the 19th century, Flemish nationalists were strongly focused on language, as they fought for the institutional recognition of the language of the Flemish people, 'Flemish Dutch', among the Francophone establishment. French used to be the language of instruction in various domains, such as in education and policy making. After years of language struggle, Dutch gradually became more institutionalized until Belgium officially became bilingual, with Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia and bilingual Brussels (Blommaert, 1996). In recent decades, with the diversification of the Flemish cities, language skills have also increasingly been seen as the most important means to assimilation. Although the currently established Flemish nationalist party '*N-VA*'[15] (New Flemish Alliance), has sharpened the symbolic boundaries against minority groups based on language,[16] politicians across the spectrum have strongly urged immigrants to embrace the Dutch language. Although this may seem obvious at first – speaking the established language is indisputably important – this focus has, however, taken a problematic turn at times. Flemish citizens who do not speak a basic level of Dutch, for instance, have been denied access to the social housing market (see Gysen et al., 2009). Specifically regarding education, the so-called 'weaker language skills'[17] of children with a migration background are moreover presented as the main explanation for their educational disadvantage, at least in public and political debates, while the impact, backed by evidence, of social disadvantage and institutional biases against minority children receives much less attention. Whereas it has indeed been shown that there is an achievement gap between those whose mother tongue is Dutch and those with a different mother tongue, these results require a more complex analysis. Within the group of Flemish pupils who have a non-Dutch home language, for instance, studies indicate that those who only speak their mother language at home outperform children who speak both languages, and even children who usually only speak Dutch at home (Agirdag, 2020; OECD, 2019). Despite these results, both policy makers and teachers keep insisting that minority children should predominantly speak Dutch with their families, to strengthen their educational position. In general, in Flemish education, multilingualism is not encouraged and is even undervalued – if not stigmatized (Agirdag, 2010; Clycq, 2017; Peleman et al., 2020; see also Pulinx et al., 2014). In many

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[15] N-VA is currently the largest party locally (City of Antwerp), regionally (Flanders) and federally.
[16] Language is now one of the most symbolic boundaries against minority groups in Western European countries, such as Belgium (Bail, 2008; Wimmer, 2013)
[17] While these children are usually bilingual or even multilingual, they are indeed referred to as having 'poor language skills' if they score less well on Dutch, the language of instruction.

schools, it is not only prohibited to speak a language other than Dutch outside the language classes provided,[18] but those who speak another language, and more specifically minoritized languages such as (Moroccan-) Arabic and Turkish, are even sanctioned (Agirdag, 2010; De Houwer, 2003).

By foregrounding minority ethnic groups' foreign home language as the main cause of educational disadvantage, indeed as a 'deficit', policy and educational actors shift the responsibility to overcome educational inequality to these children and their parents. Language, however, is only one of the factors underlying this deficit thinking, which brings me to the third important point. Flemish education is permeated with meritocratic discourses, reflected in how educational actors explain success and failure based on alleged deficiencies in the children's home environment. Besides linguistic skills, minority ethnic parents and pupils are also said to lack motivation to succeed in education (Clycq et al., 2014), although research has shown that minority ethnic children have high aspirations, even higher than their majority peers (D'hondt et al., 2016; Van Praag, D'hondt, et al., 2015). Minority ethnic parents, too, are shown to consider a good education as one of their greatest parenting goals (Vancoppenolle and Dupont, 2018). Overall, these results indicate that for many Flemish disadvantaged pupils, let alone for those with a migration background, the school is not the welcoming place it should be, where each student gets the chance to flourish. Teachers' biased track recommendations, the headscarf ban, the omnipresent negative attitudes towards minorities' home language, and the assumption that minorities are not strongly motivated, arguably do not contribute to a safe environment for these youngsters.

While the direct impact of these structural inequalities and institutional biases on children's identifications, aspirations and peer relations is beyond the scope of this study (but see, for example, Van Houtte and Stevens, 2015, 2016; Van Praag, Boone, et al., 2015; Van Praag et al., 2019; Nygård, 2017), this brief description of the research context illustrates the inequality that my child-participants encounter daily in their proximate environments. I will show how they, against this background, creatively draw on inclusive or exclusive repertoires to make sense of the diversity in their environment, and whether and how they build friendships across social and ethnic lines (see chapter three and seven). This is the setting in which they challenge ethnic reductionism (see chapter six) and assess their own social standing, and the relationship between inequality and life chances (see chapter four and five).

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[18] The government-provided schools, however, have revised their policies and now allow pupils and students to speak their home language in the playground and, under some conditions, in the classroom. This has led to much debate, however, and the decision mainly lies with the individual principals, who still may choose to prohibit the speaking of foreign languages at school.

Research approach

The initial research proposal

In its original formulation, my research proposal was to study boundary drawing among children in six to eight different schools. This would be done through multiple in-depth interviews while tracking them during their transition from primary to secondary education, by ethnographic observations in each of these schools, by organizing focus groups with the children's peers and in-depth interviews with some of their parents and teachers. I had ambitious plans. Although I still believe that this would have been an interesting research approach, I am also as convinced that it would not have been feasible within my timeframe. Once my fieldwork started in the schools, it soon became apparent that I had to drop the ethnographic observations. Not only was it very difficult to organize these observations in collaboration with most of the teachers, who, after agreeing to participate, stopped replying to my emails and telephone calls, but this method also turned out to be ineffective in studying children's boundary work. During the few classroom observations I conducted, for instance, I have gained considerable insight into how much I have forgotten from what I should have learned in primary education, but little to no insight into children's boundary making processes, as they sat quietly behind the school benches – in seats they had not even chosen themselves – while the teachers taught. Although more relevant classes and activities could undoubtedly have been sought in consultation with the teachers, communication was so difficult that I chose to drop the ethnographic observations, as my initial schedule was in any case hardly feasible. The intention, hence, was to involve the schools more strongly in the research than happened in practice. While, given the final nature of this study, I might just as well have opted to reach children in various other ways, this approach has nevertheless brought some advantages: (a) through the schools, I came into contact with a very diverse group of child-respondents, some of whom I might otherwise not have reached; (b) despite the difficult communication, the schools did provide me with a time and place to interview the children, which was an accessible way to interview the most vulnerable pupils; (c) although the focus groups with children's friends did not finally take place either (see further), interviewing multiple children at school did enable me, although individually, to reach several friends of respondents. In this way, I gained insight into the children's friendship groups, which would be helpful in the further analysis.

School selection

Antwerp has about 190 primary schools, so it was no easy task to decide which schools to write to and which not. Ideally, I wanted to interview pupils who went to schools that differ from each other in terms of socio-economic and ethnic mix. Using the Flemish governments' online database,[19] I began identifying schools that might provide this school diversity. Since the government does not keep data on the ethnic background of pupils, I could only use the indicator 'home language non-Dutch' to get an idea of the ethnic diversity in a school, bearing in mind that this indication alone is rather inaccurate. For socio-economic diversity, I considered the percentage of pupils whose mothers do not have a secondary school qualification and who receive a study allowance. As I was born and raised in the city myself, into a huge close-knit extended family with dozens of relatives who went to Antwerp schools, I also used my own knowledge of the local schools to further select those I would approach. In addition, I took the school neighbourhood's diversity, the diversity in the teacher corps (as indicated on some of the schools' websites), and the school network into account. The Flemish education system is organized into three educational networks: 1) 'GO! Education' is organized by the Flemish community 2) 'Government-aided public education' schools are official schools provided by the municipal or provincial governments. 3) 'Government-aided private education', finally, has schools which are organized by private social actors. Most of these schools are Catholic schools[20], but this network also includes alternative schools such as those based on the ideas of Freinet, Montessori or Steiner. Furthermore, there are a small number of schools which are not recognized by the government, but these are not included in the research.

To approach the schools, I first drafted emails with a concise explanation. I presented the research as a study of the ways in which children in super-diverse cities shape their identity and future dreams. After sending emails to the principals and teachers, in a cold sweat of anxiety, close to believing that no one would like my research, I immediately received some enthusiastic responses. However, I had to email and call several other schools multiple times. I received an especially positive response from mixed and disadvantaged schools. It was, on the other hand, rather difficult to reach schools with a predominantly white, advantaged pupil population. I, hence, had to contact more of these schools than others to find one willing to participate. I eventually approached 16 schools, of which six would agree to participate (see Table 5). Eight schools, most of which were populated with relatively advantaged and white pupils in relation to the general urban population,

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[19] https://www.agodi.be/cijfermateriaal-leerlingenkenmerken
[20] Catholic Education Flanders is the largest educational player. Although this organisation combines, in a way, education, Church and society, it is important to mention that the schools are open to everyone, irrespective of religious or ideological background.

did not agree to participate – some said they were busy or that they were already cooperating in other studies, others did not give a reason. Two white schools never replied.

Table 5: Participating schools and characteristics

	Foreign home language	Study allowance	Mother no secondary qual.	Deprivation index score of school neighbourhood	% of inhabitants with a migration background in neighbourhood
School 1	23%	20%	15%	5.1	43%
School 2	8%	16%	14%	0.7	25%
School 3	49%	57%	49%	5.2	48%
School 4	27%	30%	17%	4	46%
School 5	78%	78%	85%	4.3	59%
School 6	66%	68%	72%	8.2	72%

NOTE: The figures for pupils who do not have Dutch as their home language, who receive a study allowance and whose mothers do not have a secondary diploma are taken from the Flemish government database. The deprivation index and share of inhabitants with a migration background in the neighbourhood are taken from the database of the city of Antwerp. All percentages are rounded.

School 1

The first participating school is a Catholic school, situated in the city centre. While, according to the online database, only 23% of the pupils have a home language other than Dutch, the school is ethnically more diverse. According to the coordinator of the first grade, the minority pupils are mainly from the third generation and speak Dutch to their parents at home, which probably also explains the relatively low percentage of mothers without a secondary education qualification. This school has three sixth-grade groups, and all three teachers are of Belgian descent.

School 2

The second school is a Catholic school, located in a white and advantaged neighbourhood, which made me believe that I had found my classes in which the ethnic diversity would be limited. However, while the table – which is indicative of the school population and not the classroom population - shows that only 8% of the children have a non-Dutch home language, the sixth grade of the school was clearly more diverse than the lower grades, as also confirmed by the teacher. According to the teacher, many of the minority ethnic pupils' parents speak Dutch fluently, meaning that the children are probably also third or even fourth generation, and most pupils come from a

middle-class background. The classroom teacher is of Belgian descent but had been replaced during the course of the study by a teacher with a migration background.

School 3

School 3 is a local government school, which also means that the pupils have the right to follow ethics classes or classes in one of the five recognized religions.[21] The school environment is diverse, both ethnically and socio-economically. In this residential area, there are detached houses as well as various large social housing blocks, and the inhabitants originate from all over the world. The sixth grade consists of two classes, each with a teacher of Belgian descent.

School 4

This school is located in a gentrified neighbourhood and is also a Catholic school. Like many gentrified neighbourhoods, there is a large white middle class in the neighbourhood and in the school, but there are also a significant number of families with a migration background, who are generally socio-economically disadvantaged. Since, at the time of the study, several of my relatives were attending this school,[22] I had a fair amount of insight into the school composition, which makes this one of the schools I consciously approached – after another school with a similar pupil population had declined to participate. The teachers of the two sixth-grade groups are of Belgian descent.

School 5

Located on the border with a social housing area, this government-provided school is socio-economically strongly disadvantaged. The figures show that the deprivation index of the school neighbourhood is 4.3, yet the adjacent zone has a deprivation index that is almost twice as high. According to the teacher, nearly all pupils have a migration background. In the sixth-grade groups, there are no pupils of Belgian descent at all. Since this school offers classes for foreign language-speaking newcomers, there are also many pupils who have only recently (less than 5 years ago) migrated to Belgium. Many children are from the second generation, which means that their parents were not born – in many cases also not raised – in Belgium. The percentage of mothers without a secondary education qualification is significant and, according to the teacher, there is also a relatively large group of illiterate mothers. The school is strongly committed to recruiting teachers with a

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[21] In government-provided schools, children have the right to attend classes in one of the five officially recognized religions or in ethics. The recognized religions are Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Parents can also apply for an exemption if they do not wish to enrol their children in one of these six classes. Pupils who attend Catholic schools generally attend Catholic classes.

[22] To protect the school's privacy, I will not specify which relatives.

migration background. There are three sixth grade groups; however, only one group participated. Its teacher has a migration background.

School 6

The last school is a government-provided (alternative) private school situated in a neighbourhood with a strong concentration of families of Moroccan descent. This is also the largest ethnic group in the school – in the sixth grade all children have a Moroccan background. As the above figures show, most children are from socially disadvantaged families. There is one sixth-grade group whose teacher has a migration background.

Obtaining consent and selecting child-participants

After an introductory meeting with the principals or teachers, information letters and consent forms were handed out to all sixth-grade children in the participating schools. I handed out copies for the adults as well as copies for the children in more accessible language. Additionally, the project was presented orally to the children by the teacher or myself, according to the schools' preferences. I presented the research in the same way as I did to the schools, namely as a study of urban pupils' identity construction and dreams for their future. The letters stressed that participation was voluntary, that the data would be handled confidentially, and that there would be no consequences at school if the children or parents did not want to participate. For non Dutch-speaking parents, the letters were translated into English, French, Arabic and Turkish. They were written briefly, at the request of the teachers, but I added an appendix with more detailed information about the course of the study, for those who wanted to have more information.

I stumbled over the question of whether to provide information on the long-term aspect of the research from the outset. I saw both an advantage and disadvantage in this. The advantage was that both parents and children would immediately understand that I intended to follow the latter in their transition to secondary education, and that they could make an informed decision based on this. A disadvantage, on the other hand, was that they would be probably overwhelmed with information, as the letters would become too detailed. Eventually, because it would not be easy anyway – especially for the children – to estimate what the research would require in the long run, and because, in any case, I would have to ask their consent again for each subsequent research round (see further), the teachers advised me to explain the research step by step. Since I intended to follow up only half of the children interviewed in the first round, it was realistic to assume that enough children would want to participate in the long term, so I followed the teachers' recommendation and would only ask

for their further participation several months later. In total, information and consent forms were handed out to 205 pupils: I received 129 back, and 94 agreed to participate in the study. I received consent in each of the languages.

The next question was how to select the children I would interview. In the context of this study, I considered it important to consider a diverse range of pupils, with regard to their ethnic background, social class position, gender and, where possible, their school performances. Because of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the EU data protection law, I could not access children's background information through the schools, which made it impossible to select children based on these figures. I had to use other techniques, which, although somewhat arbitrary and problematic, nevertheless led to a diversity of backgrounds:

a) I first sorted the forms according to school, language of the consent form – which gave an indication of whether or not Dutch was their home language – assumed gender and whether or not the pupil was likely to have a migration background based on their or their parents' surnames. For schools one, three and four, I subsequently randomly picked forms from all categorized groups. I took into consideration the city's share of minority ethnic children in this age group (approximately 70%), who hence had to be in the majority. I also took into account the size of the school. In larger schools more children were chosen than in the smaller schools.

b) After this selection, I went through all the forms and deliberately picked out some additional forms myself when I felt that some groups of children might not yet be adequately represented, or if particular forms aroused my interest. I chose, for instance, forms with names that indicated an ethnic background which I presumably did not have yet (e.g., Eastern European and Scandinavian). I also chose some forms from children I assumed were of mixed ethnic descent, because the parent's name indicated a different background from that of the child. Finally, I also chose two forms that had been filled in in a kind of script which was very familiar to me, as a child of an illiterate father and a mother who only writes in Arabic: forms which I suspected had been filled in[23] by the children themselves or by parents who do not fully master the Latin alphabet.

c) In the most disadvantaged schools (school five and six), I received only a few consents: four and five respectively. Since the communication with the teachers in these schools was moreover difficult – they hardly answered my emails or telephone calls – I expected that children in these schools were more likely to drop out of the study in the long term.

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[23] Yet, of course, not signed by the child itself.

For both reasons, I chose to interview all pupils who gave consent. I took the same decision for school two, which stood out regarding the pupils' relatively privileged social position, and where I got consent from only seven children.

d) In the schools where I would only interview a selection of the children, I asked the teacher whether the selection was sufficiently diverse, regarding ethnicity, social background, gender and school performances, which was often the case. Two teachers, however, questioned the selection. The first (school four) said that two of the four children I would interview in her class were 'cognitively the weakest' in class and that I did not have any child who was among the best performing. I therefore changed one form – I chose randomly, and she agreed. The other teacher (school one) was rather negative about the behaviour of one of the pupils and was not sure if he would be polite during the interview. I said that I wanted to interview him anyway.

This procedure resulted in the selection of 47 children to be interviewed in the first round. Out of this group, 24 children would participate in the second round and 21 in the third (see further). Before I delve deeper into the characteristics of these child-respondents, I will first describe some ethical issues which were taken into consideration and explain the design of the study.

Ethical considerations

In developing my research, I was guided by several methodological articles and guides on ethical research with children (e.g., Christensen and James, 2000; David et al., 2001; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Ennew et al., 2009; Farrell, 2005; Gallagher et al., 2010; Grover, 2004; Heath et al., 2009; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Richards et al., 2015). Drawing on these valuable sources, the research was also submitted to and approved by the university's ethics committee. However, as Hamilton (2020) argues, there is often a gap between what ethics committees ask of researchers and what effectively takes place in the field. As receiving ethical approval does not necessarily mean that one is fully prepared for fieldwork, Hamilton proposes that reflexivity in particular must be adopted as an ethical principle. It is this reflexivity that I indeed put forward in my research as key when conducting my interviews and I relied to a large extent on my own ability to estimate 'what is happening' in the interaction with the children. Nevertheless, there are several principles I adopted from early on, although this list is not exhaustive.

Voluntary participation

As mentioned before, I handed out information letters and consent forms to the children and their parents or legal guardians. Since I reached respondents through schools, I did not want them to feel obliged to give permission, and therefore made it clear that the research had nothing to do with the child's learning outcomes and that participation was without obligation. Permission of both children and parents was necessary to participate. Consent was not only asked at the beginning, as this project extended over a period of two school years. A few days before each interview, I sent the children consent forms by mail or email, which they brought with them, signed, on the day of the interview. Further, I also asked them verbally whether they still wanted to participate and if this was their own choice. I reminded them that they could withdraw, without any consequences, whenever they wanted to.

Data and confidentiality

Permission was asked to audio-record the interviews. Participants were informed that the recordings would not be shared or published, would remain in the possession of the researcher and would be processed anonymously. All names in this dissertation are fictional. As I involved the children's parents and teachers in the study, I did not share any information about each other's personal narratives. All those involved had been informed that the interviews are private and that they can only access their own interview(s), but not those of each other, not even from parent to child. Respecting this privacy was a condition to participate and no one appeared to have a problem with this condition.

Selection of respondents

As I had to make a selection from the 94 children who gave consent, not every child was able to participate. The teachers and I had already agreed in advance that they would communicate to the pupils that not everyone would be able to participate and that no one had to feel personally rejected. There were no complaints or questions afterwards. After the interviews with the children, I handed out some sweets to the whole class and thanked them all for considering participation, whether or not they were interviewed and whether or not they gave consent.

Ensuring children's privacy

To create a safe environment, it was highly important that the interviews would take place in a room where privacy was guaranteed. This was quite easy in most schools as they were informed of this condition from the beginning. However, some other schools said they did not have enough space and

asked if the interview could take place in the staff room, which I did not go into. Usually, a solution was quickly found as it turned out that there was space after all. During the interviews, the child-respondents and I were several times interrupted by teachers, who had to be in our room for one reason or another. In these cases, I stopped interviewing the children about personal subjects and made small talk with the teacher or the pupil so as not to create an uncomfortable atmosphere. Some children were interviewed at home (see further) under the same conditions. Mostly there was enough home space to guarantee privacy. One child living in a small apartment made sure that she was at home alone at the moment of the interview, with the permission of her mother. I met a few other children in a coffee bar or in a park, again with the permission of their parents, once COVID-19 broke out. In most cases, the parents indicated which coffee bar was most suitable for the interview (which was often one close to their homes).

Discussing themes such as social class and ethnicity

During the interviews, it was also important not to reproduce any stereotypes while talking about social class and ethnicity and to not create an uncomfortable situation. When talking about ethnicity, I used the children's own terms when they referred to ethnic groups. When they, for instance, talked about 'Moroccans', 'allochthons' or 'non-Belgians', I also used these categories so as not to sound as if I was correcting them. I would – unless completely unintentionally – never say 'children of Moroccan descent' when they say 'Moroccans'. I believe that in this way, the barriers to talking about groups were kept as low as possible. I never adopted stigmatizing terms, but the children hardly used such language. When talking about social class, I aimed to avoid reproducing existing status stereotypes, which is why I did not use photos, for example, and ask children to link them with 'poor' children or 'rich' children. Rather, it was the children's own descriptions and images which were important for this study. Although I showed appreciation for and interest in their own description of social classes, I deliberately did not answer in the affirmative, or tell them that their answer was 'correct'. When talking about the social position of their classmates, children were told that they did not have to mention names, unless they wanted to. Overall, as mentioned above, when talking about these themes, I above all aimed to estimate 'what was happening' in a particular moment, in order to decide whether or not the research could have a negative impact on children.

In-depth interviews over a period of two school years

The data on which I draw in this dissertation have been collected through three rounds of qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of two school years with children, parents and teachers (see Table 6). Semi-structured interviews are one of the main methods used to grasp people's worldview (Legard et al., 2003) and are proven highly appropriate to study symbolic boundary making (Lamont, 1992).

Table 6: Overview of the research rounds

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
In-depth interviews with 47 children in the sixth grade of primary school	In-depth interviews with 24 children in the first grade of secondary school In-depth interviews with 12 parents and 13 first-grade teachers	In-depth interviews with 21 children in the second grade of secondary school, and one child who repeated her year in the first grade

Round 1

In the first round, I interviewed 47 children in the sixth grade of primary school. After getting to know the children and explaining the research objectives to them, I questioned them on their perceptions of social inequality within and outside their school, their aspirations and expectations for the future, their identifications, perceptions of ethnic diversity and their friendship groups. A translated copy of the topic list is included in the appendix on page 248.

There is much debate within childhood studies about which methods are or are not proper when conducting research with children. In general, the premises are, among other things, that research should be 'child-friendly' with regard to location, language and duration of the interview (Hagerman, 2010), which I took into account. To support children, if needed, in expressing their experiences and feelings, I used emojis as a projective technique (Cameron, 2015).[24] To gauge their identifications, children were provided with different identity labels, which had to be categorized as 'very important', 'a bit important' or 'not important' (see Figure 3). They could also choose not to identify or explicitly to disidentify. Some identity labels were provided (e.g., gender, national identity, urban identity, religious identity, ethnic identity labels of the largest immigrant groups, age), but the children were of course given the opportunity to fill in their own identifications, which could

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[24] Children, however, were very comfortable in expressing their feelings and I felt that this technique was unnecessary, so I dropped it in the subsequent research rounds.

transcend these topics (see appendix, page 252). To gain insight into how children place themselves and their schoolmates on the social ladder, I used the youth version of the MacArthur scale of Subjective Social Status (see appendix, page 251), which I retrieved from Goodman et al. (2001). I also used a child-specific list to analyse feelings of deprivation (see Guio et al., 2018), which I adapted slightly to fit the children's time and context[25] (see topic list round 1). It is important to note, however, that these techniques in themselves were not the most essential thing, but rather the stories they told while applying them. All interviews with the children, both in this and the following research rounds, were conducted in Dutch – except for some minor English, French or Moroccan-Arabic (stop) words or Islamic sayings such as *'in sha Allah'* (God willing) or *'alhamdulillah'* (praise be to God).
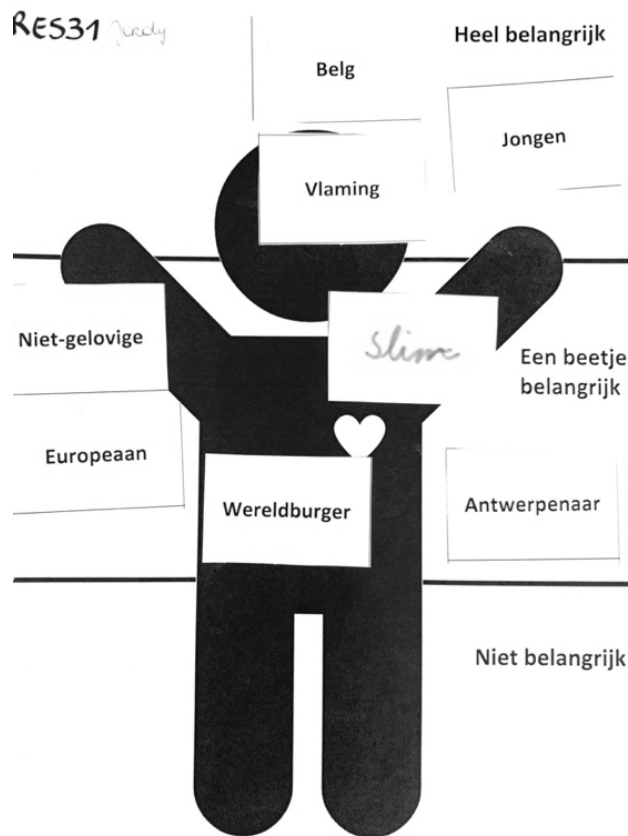
Figure 3: example of Jordy's identifications.
NOTE: Jordy placed 'Belgian', 'Flemish' and 'boy' above, in the row with identities which are 'very important'. Under 'a bit important' (middle row), he placed 'non-believer', 'European', 'World citizen', 'Antwerp citizen' and he also wrote 'smart' down. He did not place any identity in the lowest row, which stood for 'not important'.

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[25] I, for example, added 'Netflix' to the question of whether the children have television with channels at home.

The teachers advised me not to interview the children for more than 45 minutes because I would not be able to keep their attention. However, although I took this advice to heart during the first interviews, I soon noticed that while this applied to some, other children greatly enjoyed talking about their experiences for over an hour. The interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes and took place at school. After the interviews, I asked the children whether they were interested in participating in the subsequent research rounds. Most of the child-respondents were very enthusiastic to do so, one pupil said she had to think about it, and another one said that she preferred not to because 'one time was enough' for her.

As the children would make the transition to secondary education after this round – most would go to another school –, I had to keep in touch with their parents so as to be able to re-interview them, as the schools were not allowed to provide me information about their secondary school. I gave all children who were interested in continuing to participate new information letters, which stated the objectives of the subsequent research rounds, as well as participation forms so that the parents could fill in their contact details. The children who agreed to participate in the following rounds were offered two cinema tickets (which some of the teachers suggested) per round as a small incentive. Some children did not return the forms, a couple of the other children did not receive permission from their parents. Of the ones who gave consent, I selected 25 children for the follow-up studies, aiming for diversity in ethnic backgrounds, gender, school and study choice as well as their personal life stories. One interview did not take place since I could not arrange an appointment with the parents or the school, hence 24 children participated in the second round.

Round 2

Interviews with children

In first instance, I aimed to schedule the follow-up interviews with the selected children through the school, as I also planned to interview teachers in this round. The children moved up to 14 different secondary schools, some as a group, some individually. Especially those in the third school enrolled in the same, nearby secondary school. Since the research had now become more strongly child- than school-focused, I will not elaborate on the schools' characteristics, although I will – if relevant – refer to some figures in the empirical chapters. Most relevant for the broader analysis is the extent to which the children ended up in schools with a similar or a different pupil population composition, compared to their primary school. The transition to secondary education created new reference groups, for some more than others. There are, for example, children who went from a class with only children from the same ethnic background (e.g., school six) to an ethnically diverse class. Some other

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children, in turn, went to a school that is socio-economically more vulnerable or otherwise (see appendix on page 268). Ten schools agreed to participate, four schools did not reply to my emails or telephone calls.

In this phase, I interviewed the children on how they experienced their transition to secondary education, and I gauged the ways in which they draw symbolic boundaries between different ethnic and social groups. I also interviewed them in more depth about their identifications, aspirations and future dreams and how they assess their own life chances to climb the social ladder. We also considered the repertoires on which they draw to explain the relationship between inequality and life chances. The specific questions are described more in detail in the methodological sections of the empirical chapters, and the topic list is included in the appendix on page 253.

In this round, I met most children at school. Eight children – many of whom attended schools that did not reply – were met at their homes, and one child was interviewed in a coffee bar. These interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 100 minutes. Except for one, all children agreed to participate in round three. Ayman, the only pupil in the vocational stream (*B-stream)* of secondary, reported that he did not want to participate anymore because, as he reported, he did not like 'all the talking'.

After the interview, I asked the children if they would be fine with me approaching their parents and teachers to ask whether they were willing to participate in the research themselves. The children's assent was necessary for this. I informed them about the conditions and ensured them that I would not pass any information to the parents and teachers. While all children agreed that I could approach their teachers, they did not all want me to contact their parents (see below).

Selection of the parents

All children from middle-class families and of Belgian descent agreed. Some of them asked me, however, to promise again not to reveal any information about some personal things they said – which I evidently did. Of the children with a migration background, those from socio-economically advantaged families or whose parents speak Dutch fluently more frequently agreed, although I assured the children that I could also interview parents in their mother tongue, if necessary with help of an interpreter. Some children offered to ask their parents themselves and texted me afterwards that their parents did not have any time to participate. A few other children, especially those who are most vulnerable, did not want me to contact their parents, according to them, 'because they would not participate anyway' or because 'they have too much on their minds'. I did not want to pressurise these children, but I would ask again in round 3 (see further).

I called or emailed the parents of the children who gave their assent to set up an appointment. As I approached them, COVID-19 was starting to spread through Western Europe. Most middle-class parents were enthusiastic to participate. Jordy's parents, however, never answered my emails or telephone calls. Of the socio-economically more vulnerable parents, Niyah's mother also immediately agreed, and Layla's mother was happy to invite me to her home. The parents of the other disadvantaged children, however, I was less successful in convincing. Ana's mother said she was too busy with her youngest child. I suggested meeting at an indoor playground or other place – at the expense of the research project – where her son would be able to have fun, but she replied that he is 'a very naughty boy' and that she therefore really needs some rest. I respected this. Jeremy's mother initially agreed to participate but kept postponing our appointment. As I – after she had postponed a few times – strongly suspected that she did not want to participate but was afraid to say so, I let her know that she was free to say if she would rather not meet, after which she indeed replied that she had too much on her mind since the lockdown. The same goes for Tomasz's mother, who first invited me to her home (pre-lockdown) but then lost her job and texted me to say that she was downhearted and did not want to meet anyone for the time being.

Interviews with the parents

I told the parents that I would like to interview them to gain insight into the context in which the children grew up, that I was interested in their perception of their child's aspirations and in what they consider important while raising their children in a diverse environment. The topic list is included in the appendix on page 257. I arranged an appointment with 12 parents individually, including one couple, so parents of 11 children were interviewed. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face, at home or in a coffee bar. One interview with a fishmonger took place at her store, since she could not find time outside of her working hours, which means that we were interrupted from time to time because customers came in or because she received a telephone call. The other interviews took place by videocall during the first lockdown. These generally went smoothly, but the internet connection of three parents was unstable. Because it was hard to understand, I was unable to transcribe certain parts of the interviews. One interview went so badly due to technical reasons that I unfortunately had to stop it prematurely, after approximately 40 minutes. This was the shortest interview; the longest lasted 96 minutes. Eleven interviews were conducted in Dutch, one interview was conducted in French with the help of a student-interpreter who speaks French fluently.

Interviews with the teachers

Recruiting teachers for the interview was a hard task as well, as some who initially agreed to participate never replied to my emails or telephone calls afterwards. As I could not email teachers directly,[26] I had to communicate through the principals or coordinators, so I had no insight into how many teachers were actually approached. One teacher, whom I approached directly after I received his email address from one of his colleagues, would tell me later that he had never received a message from the principal about the research. Furthermore, several principals and teachers replied that they were too busy reorganizing their work to teach online, and that they did not want to take on additional work. The teachers were informed that I was interested in the group formation of their pupils and how they, as teachers, deal with social and ethnic differences in their classrooms (see appendix, page 259, for the topic list). I eventually interviewed 13 teachers from eight schools, who teach one or several of 14 child-respondents. Three interviews were conducted face to face (pre-lockdown) – at the teachers' home, at school and in a coffee bar – the other interviews took place via videocall due to the pandemic. There were no technical difficulties this time and the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours 16 minutes.

Round 3

Twenty-one of the 24 children were re-interviewed in the third and last research round. These interviews took place after the first COVID-19 'wave' once the schools were re-opened for external visitors. Because of the existing COVID-measures and the prospect of new and even stricter measures ('code orange' in Flemish schools) as a new wave was emerging, I was only given about 30 minutes to interview the children in some schools, which meant that I was unable to question all the children as extensively. As in round two, most children were interviewed at school, a few children at home (once allowed and respecting the social distancing rules), in a coffee bar or in a park. One child was interviewed via WhatsApp video. As we saw before, Ayman did not want to participate in round three. Alexander and Julie, whose schools did not participate in the research, and who were interviewed at home in round two, did not want to participate via videocall. Since the lockdown had already started at the time of our appointment, I was no longer able to interview them within my scheduled time.

In this round, 20 children had entered the second grade and one child, Layla, had repeated her first. I devoted this last round mainly to studying whether, and to what extent, the children's

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[26] Because of the law on data protection, the principals were not allowed to provide me with their email addresses. While some schools have the email addresses on their websites, most did not.

friendship groups, identifications, aspirations and boundary-making had changed. I also looked a little deeper into their perceptions of the relationship between ethnicity, social inequality and life chances. The topic list is included in the appendix on page 256. I reflected with the children on the sheets they had prepared in the first two rounds, where they filled in their identifications, top five friends and dreams for the future. The interviews lasted between 30 and 82 minutes.

I asked the children whose parents I had not interviewed yet, again, whether they would mind if I tried to approach them. Generally, I received the same answers as before. Some children appeared to become rather awkward when I asked this, I therefore did not probe too deeply so as not to put them in an uncomfortable position:

> Researcher: I asked you last year if you'd be ok if I contact your mum or dad…
>
> Yassine: (interrupts) No.
>
> Researcher: Why wouldn't you like that?
>
> Yassine: Uhm, she doesn't speak Dutch.
>
> Researcher: We can do the interview in French?
>
> Yassine: But she just wants to stay at home. I already asked her, and she said no.
>
> Researcher: She prefers not to?
>
> Yassine: Yes.
>
> Researcher: How about your dad?
>
> Yassine: He neither. He sleeps a lot.

After the interview with Ana, whose parents had been undocumented for about eight years, I walked her home to meet her mother in real life. Although she was very open and interested, she said that she was still too busy with her son and with learning Dutch on her own, as she aimed to improve her chances of receiving a permanent residence permit. Ikram, Adar, Sahar and Sam said they were going to ask their parents themselves and texted me afterwards that they were not willing to participate. Hala's mother had already communicated that she was dealing with personal issues. Again, I respected the children's and parents' decision without probing too deeply.

Impact of COVID-19

I have already mentioned in the previous paragraphs how the pandemic has had an impact on my data collection. However, the most unfortunate consequence of the COVID-19 crisis was that I had to cancel the focus groups which were to be scheduled with the child-respondents and some of their self-chosen peers. Besides parents and teachers, I also aimed to involve some friends as 'agents of socialization' in the third research round. I believe that these focus groups would have been very fruitful in examining the extent to which children draw on the same or different repertoires on diversity and social class inequality in the presence of their friends, compared to in an individual interview, and to examine which symbolic boundaries are drawn by children collectively.

Participating children

Ethno-religious background and gender

When first meeting my child-respondents, it would very soon become clear that the ways in which I had categorized the consent forms for my blind selection (e.g., presumably European or non-European descent, based on their and their parents' surname) mainly reflected how I, too, failed to take into account the increasingly complex diversification of the population. Although I was of course very aware from the beginning that my approach was largely arbitrary, and therefore asked the teachers to confirm whether the selection was diverse, which was effectively the case, I soon realised that the group was not diverse in the way that, it would appear, *I had expected*. I would indeed be confronted with how I had unintentionally imagined certain faces with certain names.

When I went to School two to interview Noah[27] and Liam, I assumed that the black-haired boy with large dark eyes had to be the latter – whose first name is cross-cultural but whose surname was recognizably Moroccan – and that his classmate with shiny golden-blond hair had to be Noah, whose surname was, in turn, typically Flemish. It was, however, the other way around.[28] Similarly, as I was waiting for Olivia, who I had deliberately selected because of her Scandinavian-sounding name, a dark-skinned girl with little black curls, who would tell me that she has roots in Sweden, Finland and Sierra Leone, walked towards me in the interview room.

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[27] While all names are fictional, I aimed to choose fictitious names comparable to the children's actual names. Although there is much debate in childhood studies about whether children should choose their own fictitious name (see Hagerman, 2010), I chose not to as I wanted to protect children's privacy. Since I interviewed several children in the same classroom, there was a risk of them telling each other which names they had chosen.

[28] The fact that I was sometimes misguided by family names is especially remarkable because I myself have a Scandinavian surname, although I have no Scandinavian roots at all. Rather, the name is the result of the very arbitrary way in which it has been converted from Arabic (القسطيط) to Latin script.

Table 7: selection of children and ethnic backgrounds

School	Ethnic backgrounds	Selected pupils	Participation in R2	Participation in R3
1	Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, Morocco, Turkey, Ghana, Congo, Lebanon, Sweden, Sierra Leone, Poland	12	7	7
2	Belgium, Morocco, France, Brazil, Nigeria	7	3	2
3	Belgium, Afghanistan, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Ireland, Kurdistan, Tunisia	11	7	7
4	Belgium, Guinea, Georgia, Morocco	8	4	3
5	Turkey, Morocco, Algeria	4	1	1
6	Morocco	5	2	1

Based on the government's definition and information provided by the children and parents, therefore, 10 children can be considered 'native' and 35 children have a parent or grandparent of foreign descent.[29] The children's ethnic background and other characteristics are described in detail in the appendix on page 262.

I interviewed 25 children who identify as girls and 22 as boys. In the first round, 24 children explicitly identified as Muslim, 12 children as Christian and nine children as non-religious or atheist. Two children mentioned that they are Muslim and non-religious, respectively, although they did not explicitly identify in this way. The ways in which the children's self-identifications changed in the subsequent rounds is described in detail in chapter six.

Social class background

There is much sociological debate on how to categorize social class groups (Savage, 2015), and while I do not intend to engage in these theoretical and analytical debates, I had to decide in which ways I would – when necessary for the analysis – divide the children into class categories. As mentioned earlier, I did not have access to information regarding the children's socio-economic background. In deciding how to categorise them, I chose to follow a Weberian definition, which conceptualizes social class as a group of individuals who share similar life chances. In the context of this study, therefore, social classes can be identified based on the extent of the accumulation of different forms of 'capital' – in Bourdieu's terms, economic, social and cultural capital – which, in combination with other important factors such as race, ethnicity and gender, result in a socially advantaged or disadvantaged position and related life chances (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage, 2015). However, despite

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[29] This does not mean, however, that the children identify in this way. See chapter six and the appendix on page 265 for children's self-identifications.

this definition, it remains difficult to group children into clear-cut categories. Following Lareau's (2011) seminal work, I settled on two broad categories in my analysis: middle-class and working-class (or lower-class) children. Based on the information I received from the children and parents – yet sometimes also from the teachers – about, for instance, parents' occupation, education level, unpaid bills and housing quality,[30] I assessed whether children were more advantaged or disadvantaged in terms of their life chances when assigning them to a group.

It is important to note, however, that these groups were heterogenous, although internal variations are concealed by using such categories. Yet there were also some similarities. The middle-class children, for instance, all have parents who report that they are financially comfortable, all their children have their own bedrooms, and had the opportunity to take part in various (paid) extracurricular activities, although they did not all want to. The children who are categorized as 'working-class', all reported that (one of) their parents (is) are doing manual work or is/are unemployed, whether or not job-seeking, and is/are lower-educated (max. secondary education). In this group, there are also several children living in social housing estates. By categorizing children into classes, I could analyse the different ways in which children negotiate social class boundaries (see chapter four) and see whether they are aware of their privileged or restricted chances in life (see chapter five). As we will see in these chapters, nearly all children self-identify as 'middle-class'. If I, then, had to work solely with children's self-identifications regarding social class, this would not have accurately reflected how social class matters in their everyday lives.[31] Of the children who participated in the various rounds, approximately three fifths are from a working-class background. Overall, there is an ethnic gap regarding social background, with all working-class children being of non-Belgian descent.[32] Whenever children's social class background is relevant for the analysis, this is explicitly discussed in the empirical chapters or mentioned under the citations.

Educational trajectory

After the first research round, all the selected children made the transition to the first grade of secondary education. Except for Ayman who entered the vocational stream ('B-stream') and who would drop out of the study, all the child-participants attended the general track ('A-stream'). During

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[30] I also went to the houses of eleven children to interview them.

[31] I did not ask parents to provide information about their income, for various reasons. 1) I did not interview all parents, so this information would be missing for half of the respondents anyway. 2) It seemed rather inappropriate to do so as I had intensive contact with the parents as a result of the small-scale study. Since there is a certain 'taboo' on talking about income, I did not want to create an uncomfortable situation. 3) Social class was a subject of study. Since I aimed to examine how parents draw social class boundaries, I did not want to influence their responses by making them focus on income. 4) Most of the children of the parents I had contact with were interviewed in their homes, so I already had insight, besides their jobs and education level, into their living conditions.

[32] I, unfortunately, did not interview working-class children of Belgian descent.

the course of her first year, Layla was referred to the vocational track by her teachers. However, at the end of her first year, she would be told, as she and her mother reported, that she was 'too smart for vocational education', after which she eventually had to repeat her first year so she could start over in the general stream.[33] In the third research round, therefore, Layla repeated her first year while all the other child-respondents were enrolled in the second year of the general stream. Doha went to a different school in the third round; the other pupils remained in the same. The children's topics of study are described in the appendix on page 262.

Participating parents and teachers

I interviewed 10 mothers and two fathers. Two of them are in a relationship (Victor's parents), so parents of 11 children were involved. Most of these parents are of Belgian descent, although Malika – who converted to Islam 25 years ago – reported that she does not 'feel' Belgian anymore. The other parents are of Moroccan, Finnish-Swedish, Dutch or Belgian-Portuguese descent. Most of them are middle-class and highly educated, in highly skilled jobs. A few have a manual job (Kristien, Sahira and Malika) and a secondary education qualification (Maria, Kristien, Malika and Saïd) or lower (Sahira). The parents' ethnic backgrounds, education level, occupation and number of children are described in more detail in the appendix on page 271. Most parents live with a partner – who is not always the parent of the child-respondent. Kristien and Vera are single parents.

The 13 teachers work in eight different schools and teach one or more of our child-respondents. They teach different classes, such as Dutch, French, Ethics, Catholic religion, Natural Science, History and Geography. They are all highly educated and middle-class. I interviewed eight female and five male teachers. Mehdi is of Maghrebi descent; the others are of Belgian or mixed ethnic descent (Belgian-Spanish and Belgian-Italian). The lack of diversity among teachers is less striking, however, as teachers with a migration background are in an extremely small minority in Flanders. More details on the teachers' characteristics can be found in the appendix on page 272.

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[33] As the general or academic stream is considered academically more difficult and challenging than the vocational stream, children have to repeat their year if they 'move up' from the B to the A-stream.

Data analysis

To analyse my data, I applied some general strategies of the Generic Inductive Qualitative Model (see Hood, 2007; Maxwell, 2013), while taking an abductive-interpretivist approach (see Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). This means that my analysis can be situated in the constructivist-interpretivist research tradition, based on:

> (…) a belief in the existence of (potentially) multiple, *intersubjectively* constructed 'truths' about social, political, cultural, and other human events; and on the belief that these understandings can only be accessed, or co-generated, through interactions between researcher and researched as they seek to interpret those events and make those interpretations legible to each other (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 4).

Already while conducting the interviews, I applied principles of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), in which empirical observations and theoretical propositions amplify each other. I did not go into the field without theoretical expectations, nor did I let theoretical literature determine my interviews. Rather, theoretical insights partly guided which questions I would ask (for instance when formulating questions intended to gauge children's 'boundary making processes'). To concretely analyse my total number of 117 interviews and about 114 recorded hours of audio-material, I drew on the Generic Qualitative Model in the sense that I used coding strategies which allowed me to answer descriptive questions; that I already started doing analysis while I was still collecting data, and moved 'back and forth' among the various steps of scientific research (see Hood, 2007; Kahlke, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Here, I will elaborate on these steps.

All the interviews were fully transcribed using a naturalistic approach (Oliver et al., 2005), which means that everything was typed out in as much detail as possible, including grammatical mistakes, stutters, pauses, stop words and sighs, among other things. I transcribed most interviews myself, but I also received assistance from social science students who were given clear instructions and had to sign a confidentiality agreement. Subsequently, with the use of the qualitative software programme NVivo, I thoroughly went through all the passages multiple times while attaching various codes. The objective here was, as Lareau (2021) puts it, to gain insight in my material through an iterative process of 'going deep' in and 'stepping back' from my data. To 'go deep', I applied codes entailing both organizational and substantive categories (see Maxwell, 2013). The organizational codes mainly served to order my data into the main research topics (e.g., code 'identification' or 'aspirations'). These general categories corresponded for the most part to my topic list. The substantive codes were primarily descriptive and based on my understanding of what was said –

trying to stay as close as possible to the respondents' meaning-making (e.g., code 'faith in achieving dreams' or 'feeling different from others'). After transcribing and coding a few interviews, I chose to combine both the organizational and substantive codes, rather than using separate ones, as I aimed to keep my codebook structured (leading to codes such as 'belonging: feeling different from others'). I did so for codes which could be easily linked to a theme, and evidently, I considered that the same substantive code could fall under different organizational ones.

The fact that my research was iterative also means that I did not wait until my data collection was completed to analyse and code my material, as qualitative researchers often opt to 'think as they go' (Lareau, 2021). After interviewing about 10 children in the first round, I already started transcribing, reading and coding, while taking analytic notes. This strategy helped me to further sharpen my focus in general, and my research objectives and topic list in particular, as I reflected on which questions yielded interesting information and which were too vague or weakly formulated, or which themes were already becoming salient and potentially would require more in-depth information.

After immersing myself in my material by reading the content of the relevant codes per theme multiple times, I aimed to 'step back' by working with more abstract and conceptual codes, which increasingly became more important than the substantive ones. Although many of these codes were inductively identified (e.g., code 'aspects affecting feelings of happiness'), I also used my theoretical knowledge to capture themes such as 'identity work' and 'boundary work', among other things. Combining these theoretical insights with my empirical observations, I refined the data by constantly asking myself questions such as 'what is this a case of?' When I, for instance, observed boundary making processes (e.g., code 'boundary work'), I aimed to determine what kind of boundaries were drawn (e.g., code 'boundary work: moral'), vis-à-vis whom boundaries were set (e.g., code 'boundary work: established-outsiders boundaries') and how this is related to self-identification (e.g., code 'identity: not-me-identity'). While doing so, I aimed to remain as critical as possible, to allow new patterns to emerge, especially when an observation did not fit existing frameworks. The themes were given the same codes across the various rounds, so that I would be able to compare the data and to analyse changing patterns. To code the interviews with the adult-respondents, I first used the same category labels as those applied after round one to the interviews with the children (e.g., 'diversity social network'). Subsequently, I assigned – where possible – the codes that arose inductively from the data of adults to those of the children, so that I could compare the different perceptions in depth. Importantly, I kept on taking analytic notes on my findings and the first patterns or questions that emerged.

While transcribing, note taking and coding were very crucial in my analysis, these steps were not yet sufficient to gain in-depth understanding. When studying specific themes, I hence read and reread relevant coded passages multiple times, fully immersing myself further in the data. However, as Maxwell (2013) rightly argues:

> Categorizing as an analytic strategy has one significant limitation: it replaces the original set of contextual relationships within an interview transcript or observational field notes with a different, categorical structure. This can create analytic blinders, leading you to ignore the actual relationship of things within a specific context (Maxwell, 2013: 112).

To address this limitation, I did not stare blindly into the different codes, as – when necessary – I went back to my full transcripts to consider the broader context of the quote and the connections to the broader narrative of the respondent. I also worked with case classifications in NVivo, meaning that I created a case per respondent to whom I attached so-called 'attributes', containing relevant information on his or her background (such as SES, identifications, whether the parents are separated/divorced or not etc.). While this was a helpful tool, more importantly, I also summarized the interviews per respondent to become even more familiar with their stories. The illustrative vignettes in the introduction of this dissertation, for instance, are a direct result of this 'familiarization' with the respondents' individual and contextualised narratives. Evidently, contextualization would only become easier in the following rounds, as I would always reread the entire transcripts while preparing for the follow-up interviews (see further).

A great deal of the analysis in fact happened when I was talking to my supervisors, taking long walks, doing cardio exercises, reading books, or – much to my annoyance – when I was trying to sleep: I therefore kept a notebook on my bedside table. Especially helpful were the conversations with my friends – middle-class friends of Belgian descent and working-class friends with a migration background. The different ways in which they responded to my findings – some were highly surprising for my middle-class friends while not for the others, and the other way around – helped me understand class-based experiences in the data (see also Lareau, 2011: 353–354). Overall, it was precisely when I was away from my laptop screen and NVivo that patterns began to crystalize, which I then studied further using (handwritten) coding schemes, in which connections were made between categories. This means that I linked the various codes into a conceptual framework, setting out the themes and structure which would result in the various empirical chapters. To strengthen my analysis, I also made spreadsheets (in Microsoft Excel) and handmade matrices to analyse patterns in children's self-identifications and positioning on the social ladder, based on, among other things,

their ethnic and social class background. I further developed my analysis by reading theoretical literature, which, in turn, often resulted in revised coding labels and schemes.

As I conducted my research in various rounds over a period of 20 months, I also needed to analyse 'what kind of changes occur, in whom or what, at what time and in what context' (Holland et al., 2006: 35). To do this, I assembled in chronological order all passages that had been similarly coded (e.g. 'identification: Belgian; 'identification: Belgian R2'; 'identification: Belgian R3'), a basic technique in qualitative longitudinal research (Saldaña, 2003), and then analysed them. I compared the data for each respondent individually, but I also studied changing dynamics across the sample. Since I only followed a small number of children, I had become very familiar with their individual narratives and found it quite easy to spot changes. In this sense, much of the analysis also happened while interacting with the children and discussing their changed perceptions, identifications and friendship groups. Again, handmade matrices and schemes were used to support my analysis. In the course of the study, eventually, the line between data analysis and reporting became blurred.

Some reflections on shifting power dynamics, the researcher's positionality and social desirability

In the brilliant French documentary film *Chronique d'un été* (1961), by filmmaker-anthropologist Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, a mixed group of ordinary people are interviewed on then current socio-political themes, such as working-class happiness, the Algerian War, the Holocaust, racism, colonialism, migration and alienation. Towards the end of the film, after watching the footage together, the filmmakers reflect with the interviewees on the extent to which it is possible to gain insight into one's lived experiences when in front of a camera. The respondents' authenticity is discussed at length by the attendees, who all appeared in the film themselves. While Morin describes a scene in which a white worker and a black foreign student become familiar with each other's concerns as 'one of the most authentic scenes' they shot, because it depicts, he says, 'friendship as it develops', one of the other interviewees claims that 'it's all unnatural' and even 'completely phoney'. Similarly, when reflecting on the poignant narratives of two other characters, an attendee explains: 'Mary Lou doesn't act in front of the camera. The camera doesn't inhibit her, it prompts her to search for herself. The same goes for Marceline, she talks to herself. And we're embarrassed because we feel we're intruding', while another contends 'you say it's truer than true, but it's because she's acting'.

Figure 4: Morin talking to Rouch in *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer) by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961.

After this gathering, Rouch asks for Morin's thoughts on the interviewees' reflections, to which the sociologist responds:

> I found it very interesting. It can all be summed up in two arguments. Either our characters are blamed for not being true enough (…) or they're being blamed for being too true. (…) As soon as they're more sincere than in life, they're labelled either as hams or as exhibitionists. That's our basic problem. If the audience thinks these are actors or exhibitionists, our film's a failure. But I know and I feel that they're neither. (…) I thought the audience would like the people I liked.

However, you do not need a camera to elicit discussions on trustworthiness and the extent to which interviewees are authentic or otherwise. By taking a dramaturgical perspective on social life, interview encounters may be seen as theatrical performances in which the respondents play a part by managing their self-presentation and the impressions they give (Goffman, 1978). They, then, are acting to an audience in highly scripted ways (Goffman, 1981). Especially when discussing sensitive themes such as diversity or inequality, interviewees may feel encouraged to 'perform' openness and to answer in socially desirable ways (Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Boli and Elliott, 2008; Bonnet, 2014). In this sense, after presenting my results, one of the main questions asked by colleagues and reviewers was 'how can you make sure that the respondents are saying what they think?', and more specifically for the child-respondents, 'how can you 'make sure that they are not simply saying what their parents make them say?' When confronted with these comments, like Morin, I also often wished that the readers of my empirical chapters would simply look at my data and citations with the same

level of trust *and expertise* with which I thoughtfully selected and analysed them. I strongly believe that, as professionals trained in qualitative research, we should at least be able to 'sense' which respondents are probably answering in socially desirable ways and which not, and that we should recognize these basic skills and professionalism in each other rather than assuming that the researcher has not yet reflected carefully on this.

On the other hand, as interview interactions – which are arguably impacted by the personal backgrounds of the researcher and respondent – are highly subject to potential power imbalances, it is important to be aware of one's positionality and how this may play a role when conducting fieldwork (Arendell, 1997; Conti and O'Neil, 2007; Egharevba, 2001; Hamilton, 2020). In what Morin described as the 'most authentic scene' of the film, for instance, we witness the following dialogue on the so-called 'inferiority complexes' among some Black people:

> White worker: Some people have an inferiority complex.
>
> Black student: When I talk about inferiority complex, I'm talking about myself.
>
> Worker: But I wanted to ask you… Can I say *tu*?
>
> Student: *Oui, oui, oui.*
>
> Worker: What I wanted to ask is... do you still have this complex?
>
> Student: No, not anymore. When I got here, I soon realized that the French in Paris aren't like the French in Africa.
>
> Worker: So, you don't mind being black?

This short but very interesting dialogue is illustrative of how power relations may be present in interview interactions, potentially influencing one's answer. It is highly doubtful that the white worker, who conducted the interview, was in a position to gauge inferiority complexes in a black student. Not only did the worker himself belong to the racial group to which the student, if he had such a complex, would have to explain feeling inferior, but also because his 'white gaze' may be interpreted as a form of problematic voyeurism. There are indeed several challenges and implications when conducting interracial or interethnic research, which have been well-documented (Sin, 2007). Some hope to pre-empt such challenges by 'ethnic/racial matching' (Davis, 1997), in which respondents are interviewed by researchers of the same ethnic/racial background to create a more open environment; yet others argue that this background is less significant and that a safe interview context depends in particular on the kind of questions asked (Schaeffer, 1980). More recently, however, scholars – and particularly feminist scholars – have called for recognition of power relations as complex, reciprocal relationships which reflect the dynamics of intersectional

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experiences (Conti and O'Neil, 2007; Hamilton, 2020; Råheim et al., 2016). They have stressed that research encounters can develop in such a way that the researchers may also become 'vulnerable' themselves (Bashir, 2019), especially when certain dimensions of their identity are socially less recognized than those of the groups being interviewed (e.g., Arendell, 1997; Egharevba, 2001; Råheim et al., 2016 see also next chapter). This is what makes Rouch and Morin's film particularly fascinating. Later on in the film, after the worker has asked the student about his potential inferiority complexes, he seeks to gauge his opinion about the working class. At this point, it is the interviewer himself who may find himself in a 'less valued' social position. Although he belongs racially to the dominant group, he does not belong educationally, which possibly makes him now more 'vulnerable' in the discussion (see also e.g., Arendell, 1997; Poulton, 2012).

To contribute to a deeper understanding of how these mechanisms are experienced, I will now reflect on how, when conducting research on diversity and inequality, my position as a minority ethnic researcher from a working-class background, may have played a role, specifically with regard to intersectional experiences and reciprocal, shifting power dynamics. I will, therefore, not only consider how my position may have influenced the interview encounters and the ways in which a rapport was built, but also how these encounters at times became a place of symbolic violence affecting me as well. While I will highlight some dynamics in this section, I will say more about shifting power dynamics in the interviews with children in the following chapter.

As the notion of reflexivity can be conceptualized and practiced in various ways according to one's epistemological position within the social sciences, my reflections should not be read through a positivist, realist-oriented view – which would suggest that I reflect so as 'to locate potential biases (…) with the aim of being able to minimize these' (Hammersley, 1995: 117) and hence to produce knowledge that is allegedly more 'objective'. On the contrary, as Brubaker (in Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 173) argues: 'We may see through gendered and racialized eyes, but we also see through the theoretical lenses of the training we went through.' Rather, by aiming to grasp how this research is co-constructed by 'situated selves', I am to highlight how the interviews generated certain social effects (Romm, 2010), for instance, when feelings of similarities or differences emerged between the researcher and the interviewees. Finally, although I will discuss the relevance of my ethnic and social class background, it must be remembered that this is for the sake of clarity and that these identities are intertwined and interact with each other. However, I do believe that, in some encounters, certain dimensions were more salient than others. When I write about class, for example, it is because I personally believe that class processes rather than ethnicity were decisive here, but this does not mean that ethnicity was completely insignificant. Furthermore, some of the minority respondents probably believed that ethnicity rather than class ensured a 'shared habitus'.

Ethnicity

One of the most noticeable characteristics of my identity, at least in the Flemish context, is my minority ethnic background. I am a black-haired and dark-eyed daughter of Moroccan migrants. I would learn at an early age that people enjoy 'guessing where others come from', so rather than simply being asked, my family origin was often 'guessed' as being from Morocco, Turkey, Spain, Italy, Brazil, and many other countries. My surname is arbitrary (see footnote on page 62), but I do have a traditional and common Arabic-Islamic first name, although people with a homogenous white network may well not be familiar with it. In either way, my name, just like my appearance, is clearly not 'native' Flemish.

I felt that the ways in which this visible minority ethnic background was made relevant during the interviews, strongly depended on whether I was interviewing adults or children. Generally, the child-respondents came across as hardly concerned with my ethnic background and did not ask where I come from. A few, however, mostly with roots in Morocco themselves, assumed that I was Moroccan too, and therefore used some Moroccan-Arabic words during the interviews. Although I do not believe that my minority ethnic background *inherently* provides me with more 'advantages' compared to those of majority ethnic background, I do think that in these specific interactions - in which topics such as racism and identity were discussed - this assumed 'shared' background contributed to a safer environment for the children where they could freely talk about their experiences and concerns as 'minorities'. Not only children of Moroccan descent, but minority ethnic children in general, were quite comfortable drawing boundaries towards what they call ('native') Belgians, a group to which I was not assigned, especially when describing racist incidents or feelings of lack of recognition.

The children of Belgian descent appeared in fact quite comfortable too when, for instance, giving their opinion about children of Moroccan descent, who some of them see as more likely to become angry and aggressive - and in the case of one child even expressing a certain aversion to this group. It is not clear to me, however, whether the children were aware that I have a Moroccan background myself – although it seems likely. I do believe that most of the children would draw the same boundaries, even if they were certain, as no one seemed to feel that anything 'wrong' or 'racist' was being said. Overall, the interviews with the children felt quite 'natural' and easy-going, as if my ethnicity was not really an issue, which is probably largely due to the ubiquity and for them 'normalcy' of ethnic diversity in their lives, as they grow up in a majority-minority city. In this sense, I did not have to pull out a box of methodological tricks nor am I extraordinarily talented in building a rapport; the children – I believe – were simply comfortable since our different ethnic backgrounds

appeared rather irrelevant. This was only different when interviewing Jordy, who drew bright boundaries towards 'Moroccans', as I will discuss in the following chapter.

Whereas I hardly felt like 'a minority' in the interviews with children, I found that ethnicity – at least, *my* ethnicity – was made hyper relevant in the interactions with some of the adult-respondents. Several of them asked about or referred to my ethnic background, and although I generally have few problems with people asking me about this, in many of these cases I almost 'sensed' that with some, their question would be followed by essentialist or reductionist claims. While it might be argued that this indicates a biased attitude on my part, I contend that, growing up as a minority ethnic person, one at least develops a certain sense for the undertones of the question 'where you are from?' – just as many women, by experience rather than by theory, learn to recognize subtle yet sexist undertones. When Pieter, an interviewed parent, for instance, asked me where I am from, it did raise a red flag, and indeed, he thereafter immediately asked whether I knew [Moroccan name], as if I would be familiar with every single one of the thousands of Antwerp-based persons I happen to share an ethnic background with.

While this is rather an exceptional case – other adults referred to my ethnic background but did not necessarily reduce me to it – it was clear that they generally were very aware of who they were talking to, which most likely had an effect on their answers. I indeed felt as if some adults, since the topic was diversity but even more because of my ethnic background, were utterly positive about diversity, perhaps more positive than they would be otherwise, suggesting that they were partly answering in socially desirable ways. However, building on the work of Bonnet and Caillaut (2015), I chose, rather than perceiving this social desirability as a methodological obstacle to the research, to employ it to examine what interviewees believe they are supposed to answer when interviewed on diversity and racism. Therefore, I will discuss these interactions as part of the empirical analysis in chapter eight.

Childhood habitus

My social class background, although less visible than my ethnicity, is another important dimension. In an essay (Kostet, 2019a), I wrote how higher education has fundamentally changed me and the relationships I built during my youth. Since a couple of years ago, I speak, behave and think differently and my 'taste' has profoundly changed too – that is to say it has become more what is constructed as 'middle class taste'. As is the case with ethnicity, conducting research from this position brought benefits, but repeatedly fabricated forms of symbolic violence as well. In terms of benefits, I strongly believe that my personal experience with deprivation has helped me to ask the

'right questions' and to see patterns when discussing social class inequality with the children. Moreover, my sensitivity to many of the lower-class children's home situation allowed them to freely present their situation as 'ordinary', as I was seldomly visibly 'surprised' by children's answers. One of the parents, Malika, appeared to know my family very well and did not hesitate to invite me to her home, a very small two-bedroom apartment in which she lives with her family of eight. I believe that she might have been less likely to do so, if she had not realised that I grew up in a large working-class family myself and so would not be surprised by her living conditions (see also Lareau, 2011: 353). My, to put it somewhat succinctly, 'middle-class lifestyle', on the other hand, allowed me to connect with the middle-class children and adults as well, as I also share some of their experiences and interests (such as travelling and literature), which they clearly enjoyed.

There were also times, however, when I felt exceptionally tired after the interviews. The finding that many of the minority ethnic, working-class respondents assumed a shared background made me sometimes feel uncomfortable myself, as I felt that I had to adopt manners with which I was no longer familiar (see next chapter). Most surprisingly, I felt much more at ease among the middle-class parents, as it took much less effort to connect with them. I am not sure whether this was because I shared more interests with them, or since I felt much less a 'traitor' talking to them – but I am inclined to assume the latter. While interacting with the working-class respondents, and especially with the parents, I indeed often felt as if I was betraying them, because I knew they assumed a shared background, while I felt estranged.

In sum, although I believe that my ethnic and working-class heritage have been valuable in this research, this often made conducting interviews most exhausting. Whereas for social class the fatigue arose mainly from 'internal' processes, identity issues that I myself struggle with, this was different for ethnicity. My ethnicity was *made relevant* by some of the adults. I felt that they would have to scratch the Moroccan in order to see the researcher. In *Brit(ish),* former barrister Afua Hirsch (2018: 220) writes:

> And the whole time I was at the Bar, I was conscious of resembling the clients I was defending from criminal charges much more closely than almost all of my colleagues. There was, and still is, a movement to abolish the wearing of wigs and gowns by barristers – a tradition which is often regarded as outdated and unhelpful in reinforcing the archaic reputation of the profession. And it was a movement I empathised with. I even had to begin straightening my hair, so that it could be smoothed down underneath my wig - laying it on top of a head of Afro curls would only have made me look more absurd than I already did. But I surprised myself by defending the tradition. In a world where no one thought the way I looked was what a barrister was *meant* to look like, this uniform gave me legitimacy, and let everyone know that I was a professional just like all the others. If it seems absurd that I needed to put on a wig and gown to make this point, it just tells you how bad perceptions are.

At this point in my career, advocating a strict uniform for sociologists does not even seem like a ridiculously bad idea. Perhaps I would suggest that we collectively dress as 1960s existentialists.

2

Shifting power dynamics in interviews with children

Introduction

Power dynamics and the researcher-interviewee relationship have been of major concern within qualitative research. Over the past years, these dynamics have especially been studied when there are socially unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched group, in terms of social class, gender, race and ethnicity (e.g. Arendell, 1997; Bain and Payne, 2015; Hamilton, 2020; Pincock and Jones, 2020; Swartz, 2011; Vanner, 2015). In childhood studies specifically, since 1989, scholars have drawn on the United Nations 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' to call for children's rights to be properly researched (Ennew et al., 2009), also raising the question of power dynamics in research with children (Christensen and James, 2000; David et al., 2001; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Farrell, 2005; Richards et al., 2015). Initially, researchers across disciplines mainly emphasized the privileged position of the researcher vis-à-vis the interviewee and how this would result in an inherent power imbalance. However, scholars, and particularly feminist scholars, have challenged these hierarchical, asymmetric notions and conceptualized power relations as complex, reciprocal relationships, which reflect the dynamics of intersectional experiences (Conti and O'Neil, 2007; Hamilton, 2020; Råheim et al., 2016). Research encounters, indeed, can develop in such ways that the researchers may also become 'vulnerable'[2] themselves (Bashir, 2019), especially when certain dimensions of their identity are socially less recognized than those of the interviewed groups (e.g. Arendell, 1997; Egharevba, 2001; Råheim et al., 2016). Despite the urge to consider these reversed experiences, however, methodological reflections generally focus on the challenges that white, middle-class scholars face (Sin, 2007). It is only recently that a growing but still scant body

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[2] The concept of 'vulnerability' is defined in various ways (see e.g., Butler, 2004; Butler et al., 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Vulnerability may refer, for instance, to an ontological condition of human life as all human beings have bodily and material needs, which makes them depend on the care of others. People may also become situationally 'vulnerable' when they are confronted with feelings such as uncertainty and risk. Although these different forms of vulnerability are generally intertwined, I am here mainly concerned with 'socio-political vulnerability' (Mackenzie et al., 2014), e.g., vulnerability caused by disadvantage.

of methodological reflections have been written from a minority ethnic (Egharevba, 2001; Hamilton, 2020; Törngren and Ngeh, 2017) or working-class (Hurst, 2008) perspective.[3] Moreover, methodological reflections from the experiences of researchers whose minority ethnic descent intersects with a working-class background are even scarcer, just as shifting power dynamics in research with children are underexplored.

This paper, therefore, aims to contribute to current discussions on researchers' positionality in two ways. First, it highlights the qualitative interview experiences of a female minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background in Flanders (Belgium), a region characterized by large ethnic and social class inequalities, both in education and in the labour market. Among the OECD countries, the educational gap between middle and lower-class children is almost nowhere as strong as in Flanders, which makes it structurally difficult for disadvantaged children to climb the social ladder (OECD, 2017). Unsurprisingly, as a result, working-class academics, let alone those with a minority ethnic background, are exceptionally underrepresented in Flemish academia.[4] This paper, therefore, brings in a marginalized and unrecognized perspective, which can support a growing number of first-generation students with similar class-based experiences in their research work, to improve understanding of the diversity of experiences, and by doing so to provide a headwind – however insignificant – to the ubiquitous reflections from a middle-class perspective.

Second, this paper takes an uncommon approach as it underlines how power dynamics shift, whether in fact or in the mind, in research with children aged 11 to 12. That is to say that despite the strong focus within childhood studies on children's agency (James, 2009; Stoecklin and Fattore, 2018), both methodological literature (Ennew et al., 2009) and ethics committees usually have very strict guidelines regarding working with children, as this group (and rightly so) needs 'to be protected'. This article does not claim that such a focus is unjustified – on the contrary – but it does aim to approach children as social actors who are also able to impact adults' everyday lives. As Corsaro's (1992) seminal work on 'interpretive reproduction' has shown, children are not passive actors in social life. Rather, they creatively draw on adults' repertoires to make sense of their own world and actively contribute to social production and change (see also Pache Huber and Spyrou, 2012). Calarco (2018), for instance, has analysed how middle-class children are actively involved in securing school advantages themselves, rather than 'passively' enjoying a biased education system which privileges them (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2003). In a similar fashion, Thorne

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[3] There are, however, a number of essays on working-class academics' general experiences (see e.g., Binns, 2019; Brook and Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020; Mazurek, 2009 for an overview).

[4] In most European Union countries, collecting data based on race and ethnicity is prohibited, so data on the numbers of academics with a migration background are not available. The only available statistics concern gender, which show that Belgium belongs to the EU-countries with the lowest share of female early career scholars. Moreover, of the Full Professors, only 18.3% are female (European Commission, 2019).

(1993) has clarifyingly demonstrated how children resist, rework and create gendered expectations through boundary-making processes. The ways in which children draw on symbolic resources to challenge, but also to create and maintain inequality has also been studied in research on ethnicity/race (e.g., Connolly, 2002; Devine et al., 2008; Sedano, 2012) and social class (e.g., Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021a; Kustatscher, 2017b; Vandebroeck, 2020). Indeed, if we aim to consider children as active social actors, we should also recognize their ability to produce and reproduce inequalities, to affect and harm the other – not only in interaction with their peers and parents or teachers, but while interacting with other adults, such as researchers, as well. Yet, as both professors in childhood studies and the ethics committees involved urged me to think twice as hard about my methodological steps as I would do when working with adults, as a novice researcher within this field, I did not even consider that the researcher-interviewee interaction might affect *me* negatively. Obviously, as an adult researcher, I continue to bear an enormous responsibility when conducting research among children (see also Bashir, 2019) and my power relation towards them is structural, which is evidently not the case from the opposite angle. However, children can (unintentionally) nevertheless affect the ways in which I understand my overall position as a researcher whose experiences are already underrepresented in academia. As a result, I often have felt as if I was standing on unstable ground when conducting interviews.

This article is not so much about how to overcome obstacles when interviewing children, nor does it provide clear-cut answers to the ethical dilemmas described. Rather, it aims to foster a discussion on how researchers are emotionally affected by interview experiences and how difficult it is for underrepresented academics to discuss these encounters with others. It is about problems which I have not resolved, but which have just remained as problems. This paper is about recognizing that social inequalities can be reflected in interview interactions and how this affects one's personal and professional identity.

My position as a researcher

My social position differs strongly from that of the vast majority of my academic colleagues because of both my social background and educational trajectory. My parents migrated as newly-wed young people in the 1970s from a remote rural commune in the Rif, Northern Morocco, to Belgium, where their children would be born. My father, who is illiterate, worked in a recycling factory for about 30 years, until the workers were collectively fired in 2010, due to the financial crisis. My mother, who did not attend primary school either but learned basic Arabic reading and writing in the local mosque, took care of the six children. Unsurprisingly, my father's income was not sufficient to live

comfortably with a household of eight, which caused financial problems throughout our childhood. My oldest brother did not finish secondary education, my other four siblings have a vocational secondary qualification. I am, hence, the only one among my siblings with a tertiary education degree, and the first among our huge extended family to pursue a PhD. However, my school career was a 'bumpy ride', which left me far behind my peers.

Flemish education is well-known for the inequality it reproduces, and studies have shown that lower-class and minority ethnic children are more likely to be referred to the vocational track (which prepares the student to enter the manual labour market) in secondary education because of teachers' biases, among other things. Teachers appear to expect less from these vulnerable groups, irrespective of their grades, whereby they discourage or even prevent them from joining the academic track (which prepares for tertiary education), leading to a large underrepresentation of minority ethnic and lower-class children in academic programmes (Boone et al., 2018; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013). This is what happened to me, when a teacher had said that I should consider 'doing something with my hands' as, according to her, 'Moroccan girls do not pursue higher education anyway'. However, as I immediately felt out of place in the vocational track with my two left hands – I was embarrassingly bad at cooking and sewing, which were my two main classes – I lost motivation, started skipping school frequently, and thus had to repeat many years of schooling. I dropped out of school unqualified at the age of 18, started working as a salesperson in a large clothing company, but since that did not work out either, I enrolled in adult education to obtain my secondary diploma anyway. I acquired my vocational qualification at the age of 22, whereafter I successfully and passionately pursued higher education while working part-time. I achieved my MSc in Sociology at the age of 27. Currently, I am in my early thirties, a third year PhD student, and at the time of writing this article, I have almost five years research experience.

One might ask whether, with my university degree and comfortable doctoral scholarship[5], I still can call myself 'working-class'. Needless to say, I would never identify as a 'worker' and do not necessarily identify as 'working-class' as such either, but I do strongly identify *with* my working-class background. I am fully aware that with my socio-economic status, that is my level of education, income, and current position as a doctoral researcher, I occupy a privileged position in this society. However, although I have a high socio-economic status, I definitely do not identify as *middle-class.* When I use the term social class, I refer to a multitude of processes that go beyond socio-economic position alone. I follow a Weberian definition of social class, which conceptualizes class as an aggregate of individuals who share similar life chances. In this sense, class refers to the accumulation

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[5] Compared to many other countries, PhD scholarships in Belgium are equivalent to the salary of people with a master's degree in some other sectors and are therefore sufficient to comfortably afford housing and living expenses.

of different forms of 'capital' – in Bourdieu's terms, economic, social and cultural capital – which, in combination with other important factors such as race, ethnicity and gender, result in a socially advantaged or disadvantaged position and related life chances (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage, 2015). My working-class background, hence, affects my current social position and further life chances in several respects more strongly than my current socio-economic position does, or at least leads to more restricted life chances compared to my middle-class, white colleagues, which evidently also has an impact on my sense of belonging and overall well-being.

The study

These reflections concern an almost completed four-year qualitative doctoral study on children's boundary making and repertoires on ethnic and social class diversity. More specifically, this research examines how a diverse group of children perceive the diversity around them (see Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b), how they navigate social class differences in their everyday lives (Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021a), which aspirations they hold for their futures and how they assess their own life chances to achieve what they aspire to (Kostet, Clycq, et al., 2021). All this is studied through cultural sociological approaches closely related to the sociology of valuation and evaluation as applied by Michèle Lamont (2012). It thoroughly examines how collective identities are differentially valued and how individuals negotiate the negative meanings associated with their social groups.

The project, of which the data collection phase has been completed, consisted of three rounds of in-depth interviews with children. The first round took place in the sixth and last grade of six different primary schools, in which 47 children (then 11-12y) were interviewed. Twenty-four of these children were selected to further participate in the following rounds, based on their willingness, their parents' consent, their ethnic and social background and their individual narratives (on diversity, their future dreams and life chances, among other things). The second round took place approximately 8 months after the first round, and hence after the children had made the transition to secondary education (1st grade), and the last research round took place 20 months after the first (2nd grade). The objective of the repeated interviews is to examine whether children's repertoires and boundary making processes are challenged once they leave their primary school and move to a secondary school, where they interact with new classmates and hence new reference groups. Based upon their ethnic descent, 10 children are governmentally considered 'native' – which means that both their parents and grandparents were born in Belgium – and the others have at least one (grand)parent of foreign descent and hence are considered 'non-native'. These children have

parents/grandparents from, among other countries, Morocco (the largest minority group in the region), Turkey, Georgia, Sweden, Poland, Congo, Ghana, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Kurdistan. Twelve of these children self-identify as Christian, 25 as Muslim and 10 as non-religious or atheist. Children's narratives reveal a strong ethnic gap in terms of their social background. Based on the information they and their parents or teachers provided about, among other things, their home and living conditions, parents' occupation and stories about, for example, unpaid bills, it becomes clear that most of the children of Belgian descent belong to a middle-class family while most (yet, not all) minority ethnic children have a working-class background.

Language stigma and shame

It is not new to argue that many social upwardly academics with a working-class background struggle with language, speech and accents in the ivory tower. Among the most prominent sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu, for example, explains in the documentary film *La sociologie est un sport de combat* (Sociology is a Martial Art) how he felt cultural shame because of his lower-class background, and that he was particularly ashamed of his accent, which he corrected when he entered the elitist *École normal supérieure* in Paris (Carles, 2001). In a similar line, in his memoirs *Returning to Reims,* Didier Eribon illustrates the identity work that must be done when navigating the academic world with a working-class heritage and the constant alertness that comes with it:

> It was also necessary to relearn how to talk, to eliminate incorrect
> pronunciations and turns of phrase along with regional usages (…), to correct
> both my northeastern accent and my working-class accent, to learn more
> sophisticated vocabulary, to make use of more suitable grammatical
> constructions, in short, to keep both my language and my delivery of it under
> constant surveillance (Eribon, 2013 p. 107).

Internationally, associations between social class and accents have a long history in which working-class accents have often been perceived as 'vulgar' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Crew, 2020). In addition, in many Western European regions such as Flanders, language also forms an important symbolic boundary against minority groups (Bail, 2008). That is to say that even if they fully master the dominant language (which is Dutch in Flanders), minorities speaking with thick accents are strongly stigmatized and these accents are generally hardly tolerated in the labour market (Wimmer, 2013). In Flanders, thick 'minority accents' have become stereotyped to such an extent that they are often used for caricature. A comic television show *'Wat als?'* (What if?), for instance, even broadcasted a short sketch titled 'What if everyone spoke like a Moroccan?', in which a white group

of people discuss a classical music concert, while imitating the so-called thick accent of Flemish Moroccans, which caused both laughter and commotion among the many viewers. Although this accent is also seen as a form of popular street language amongst youngsters, research has shown that youth of Moroccan descent are highly aware of these stereotypes and some indeed feel ashamed of or aim to conceal their accents while talking to the majority ethnic group (Jaspers, 2008, 2011).

I have also been correcting my accent since I entered academia, although I like to make myself believe that I am not ashamed of my working-class background, which I indeed have never kept secret. However, I was especially concerned, not about a so-called working-class accent, but about my highly stigmatized 'Moroccan accent' while speaking Dutch, which cannot be fully corrected. A difficulty in the Dutch language is the use of several definite articles, such as the article '*de*' for masculine and feminine words, and '*het*' for neuter words. Knowing whether to use '*de*' or '*het*' comes largely through language sensitivity that mother tongue speakers develop naturally. For those who do not have Dutch as their mother tongue, the use of the correct articles is a major challenge as there are few rules for this and language sensitivity cannot be developed easily – certainly not in my case, as I mainly communicated with those whose home language is not Dutch during my childhood. I went, for example, to kindergarten and primary schools with a majority of minority children. So, I, too, sometimes use these articles incorrectly. Symbolic boundaries based on these grammatical mistakes would also be drawn during the conversations with children.

When interviewing Jordy, an 11-year-old pupil of Belgian descent, who stated that he does not like his peers of Moroccan descent very much, he explained:

> Jordy: I do hate it a little bit that they [Moroccans] do not speak Dutch normally, they use their articles wrong. (…)
>
> Researcher: Why does that bother you?
>
> Jordy: Because you, you, you should pay attention, but they don't pay attention. You have to do your best if you're not good in something. (…) My brother now also has Moroccan friends and now he speaks differently than before. (…) He speaks a little bit Moroccan, and he doesn't use his articles correctly anymore. And he also uses Moroccan words sometimes. (…) My parents say something about it, but he keeps doing it.
>
> Researcher: What do they say?
>
> Jordy: Like 'speak normal!' or something. And, and… 'speak decently!' We don't like that very much…

Although I knew that learning the correct articles is not simply a question of paying attention or making an effort, I felt very small when Jordy was talking about the Dutch spoken by 'Moroccans'.

I must admit that I even felt intimidated. Not only did Jordy confront me with existing language stigma, but I also immediately felt an enormous pressure not to make any of these grammatical mistakes myself during the interview or during the follow-up studies. As a result, I made every effort to only use words whose article I was sure about, which was laborious work. After all, if I were to say '*de*' where it should had been '*het*', I would not only run the risk of bothering Jordy, but I might also lose his valuable openness as a child-respondent. Since he was the only pupil in the study who explicitly stated that he dislikes certain ethnic groups and does not always enjoy diversity, it was important to me that he could openly express his concerns – or his irritations – which are both relevant for my study on children's boundary making. Afterwards, I did wonder whether it was not my 'responsibility' to make him reflect about his statements, not by 'correcting' him but by asking thoughtful questions, but that possibility did not occur to me during the interview. At the moment itself, I felt mostly minoritized. This encounter stayed with me for days after the interview, for I was confronted with how I felt as if I had to 'prove myself' towards my young interviewee – not so much that I had to prove myself as a trustworthy researcher, as all qualitative researchers have to do, but rather that I had to prove that I am a 'legitimate' or 'good immigrant'. At that moment, Jordy seemingly had power over me, as if he represented the societal 'judgmental gaze' through which minorities are perceived. When Jordy made the above comment, despite his age, he as a majority ethnic pupil in fact was the one who had the power to decide which kind of language was valid, which made me effectively insecure about my speech and caused me to adjust my language use at the time. The self-regulation into which I quasi-automatically relapsed, felt like a cruel form of symbolic violence; this interaction imposed and reinforced the norms of those who possess greater social power.

The Looking-Glass Self and 'lack' of cultural capital

Language is one of the most pronounced features, but only one aspect of how children confronted me with my childhood habitus. Before I started my interviews, I had not realized how little experience I had in working with middle-class children. Indeed, although I have had much practice in working with various groups, such as vulnerable minority youth, lower-class ethnic majority youth, youngsters with disabilities and adults in poverty, encounters with middle-class children had been rare in my life. As I already mentioned, I went to schools with a concentration of lower-class minority children, and I grew up in a then disadvantaged neighbourhood as well. The first middle-class persons I intensively interacted with, except for my teachers, hence, were the friends I made in higher education.

We quite often hear of experiences of middle-class adults – be they researchers, teachers or social workers – who, when they are first confronted with vulnerable groups, come to realize that they were hardly aware of the hardship in some families' lives. For me, it was somehow the other way around. Although, as a sociologist, I was fully aware of how children's everyday experiences are powerfully impacted by social class (Lareau, 2003), I had never encountered these unequal childhoods by personally talking to middle-class children, whose life stories are not only very different to those of my lower-class interviewees, but also to that of my own childhood. It was illuminating but also quite unsettling to see major sociological theories materialized, such as the differential acquisition of linguistic skills (Bernstein, 1964) and how middle-class children used the kind of vocabulary I only learned at a much later age. It was also striking to hear the ways in which they, throughout their 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003), talked about their various leisure activities, their latest intercontinental travels, or how some show awareness of the importance of social capital as they explain how knowing the right people can help you in life. However, what struck me most, was how some of the middle-class children drew 'cultural boundaries' (Lamont, 1992) towards others, i.e. they distanced themselves from their socio-economically more vulnerable peers based on their so-called less accumulated cultural capital, not knowing they were unconsciously drawing boundaries vis-à-vis me as well:

> Olivia: I can have whole discussions about stuff like musicals, Hamilton, and my [minority ethnic] friends are not familiar with it. Then I feel a little bit… yes… I feel different than them. (…) Uhm, I know more stuff. I mean, I don't want to be rude, but I know more stuff than they do, and I already speak English very well. (…) So yeah… It just feels like they are only aware of Belgium and their country of descent, but I want more…

As Jordy reflected the ways in which minoritized groups are socially judged based on their accents, Olivia confronted me with how lower-class groups are perceived to lack cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Of course, I was already very much aware of the importance of cultural capital inside and outside the academic world, but now I also started to anxiously wonder: is this what my former colleagues would have said about me when I did not engage in a conversation about the architecture and interior of the Duomo di Milano – not so much because of a lack of aesthetic sensitivity but because of the paucity of vocabulary to describe my impressions? Did my teachers at school, among other things, believe that my world was restricted to Belgium and my country of descent? Indeed, when researching the ways in which people evaluate others' worth, through the sociology of valuation and evaluation, it is extremely difficult not to dwell on how your family's and your own value is evaluated by others. Yet, I felt less hurt by Olivia's value judgement than by being reminded

that, for most of my life, I had no access to cultural resources that actually nourish me intellectually and emotionally – I can now say. A form of exclusion that was not only due to my family background itself, but also because I was believed to 'not pursue tertiary education anyway'. In her brilliant memoir and study, Lynsey Hanley describes this inequality in much more striking terms concerning her own social mobility:

> [A] door opens into a room filled with stimuli you never knew existed: not only new things to see, but new ways of seeing (…), making the one to which you'd previously been confined feel at once claustrophobic and sparsely furnished. You start to look again, with fresh eyes, at aspects of the culture that you're used to (…). In doing so, you become attuned to the broader idea of what all but the finest examples of them are suggesting collectively about the level of your comprehension and by extension your intelligence. Over a period of time a single, strong message begins to emerge: that, as someone from a working-class family (…), you are expected to reach a certain level of understanding and no higher (…) [F]or the likes of you, entertainment is meant to be about forgetting, not remembering; for escape, not for transcendence (Hanley, 2017: 52–53).

Moreover, and more importantly, the interviews with the children made me realize once again that it is difficult to 'catch up' in cultural capital, as this is passed from generation to generation. It is only through interviewing children in the academic track of secondary education, a world which was unfamiliar to me, that I have gained insight into what I have been missing during my educational trajectory – both in terms of subject matter and in terms of speaking and presentation skills. Tomasz, for example talked about his history classes in a very confident way that is unknown to me. It was not necessarily what he said, but how he could present himself as historically aware that struck me. He referred, for example, to Minoan civilization or communism in a more fluent way than I even feel empowered to be fluent when presenting my own doctoral research. Acquiring cultural knowledge is one thing, being able and feeling entitled to exchange your knowledge with confidence is another. The children indeed confronted me with how they not only have more access to cultural knowledge than my family or I have ever had, but also with how they develop a 'sense of entitlement' (Lareau, 2003) to speak about a particular topic and how they learn to confidently share their knowledge. It is not only cultural capital as such, but also the self-confidence with which one talks about culture, which forms an important symbolic boundary between classes (Savage, 2015) – and this competence is obviously very important when building an academic career. It should not be surprising that these kinds of encounters have reinforced the feeling of being an imposter.

Further, as several children, like Olivia, drew boundaries against children whom they perceived to lack cultural capital, I needed to be very careful not to come across as lacking capital either. After all, my university degree and cultural interests – which I only started to develop at a

much later age-are not enough to effortlessly discuss their theatre and museum visits at home and abroad. When a teacher asked pupils in my presence for the name of the well-known architect who created many of the mosaics in Barcelona's *Park Güell*, I broke out in a cold sweat as I expected that he would look at me if the children did not know the answer. However, no sooner had he asked his question than an 11-year-old girl enthusiastically responded: *'Gaudíííí'*. I had to be vigilant about both how I talked and what I talked about. The interviews with my middle-class child-respondents were in this sense not so different from my everyday interactions at the university. Although not intentionally, they set the standard that I had to meet, because we were all socialized into a world in which both ethnic inequalities and social class matter, and even matter in interaction with children; a world in which the standards of the middle class are valued more than those of the working-class, and indeed, where these evaluation processes even occur when talking to children.

Split habitus and alienation

Where habitus generally operates at an unconscious level, those who find themselves in unfamiliar fields become very aware of it. The above examples should make it clear that there is a mismatch between the structures I find myself in and my embodied habitus, which Bourdieu has called 'split habitus'. This split habitus is characteristic of people who have found themselves in a radical new context, for example through social mobility, which often creates a fragmented self: '*a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities*' (Bourdieu, 1999: 511). To grasp the lived experience of this split habitus, Eribon beautifully writes:

> And so, when you return to the environment from which you came – which you left behind – you are somehow turning back upon yourself, returning to yourself, rediscovering an earlier self that has been both preserved and denied. Suddenly, in circumstances like these, there rises to the surface of your consciousness everything from which you imagined you had freed yourself and yet which you cannot not recognize as part of the structure of your personality – specifically the discomfort that results from belonging to two different worlds, worlds so far separated from each other that they seem irreconcilable, and yet which coexist in everything that you are (Eribon, 2013: 18).

The interactions with the minority ethnic children, who generally are from working-class families, also triggered strong reactions. It soon became clear that the children – because of an assumed shared background – were entrusting me with things they might not have said if I did not have a migration

background myself. This was especially noticeable in interviews with children who elaborated on how they feel uncomfortable amid 'Belgians'. However, the finding that the children assumed a shared background made me feel uncomfortable myself as I felt that I had to adopt manners with which I was no longer familiar. After the interview with Doha, for example, she gave me the kind of informal kiss and hug I had not received or given in many years.

Some of the other children, on the other hand, drew symbolic boundaries towards what they call 'Belgians', who, according to them, 'talk neatly', 'study a lot' and 'do not dare to misbehave'. They also drew boundaries vis-à-vis minority ethnic groups they perceive to be '*Belgianized*', i.e., those who are 'whitewashed' in their eyes because they aim to 'talk neatly' and 'study hard' as well. Where previously I had to ensure that Jordy would not place me in the category 'Moroccans with a thick accent', contradictorily I now had to ensure that I would not be placed outside this category. Against my own expectations, taking up this role did not come easily. It took a lot of effort to 'activate' my repressed childhood habitus. In doing so, I sometimes used the wrong words, switched on the wrong accent and caught myself losing affinity with the children's lived experiences. At those moments, I felt more than ever that the academic world – and the new middle-class friendships I have made there – have changed me to such an extent that, although I am not completely at home in my new environment, I no longer fit in my old one either. This is particularly interesting as it is generally claimed that researchers from minority backgrounds are more likely to build a rapport when interviewing minority groups. Minority researchers' personal experiences are indeed often used to negotiate fieldwork access. However, little attention is paid to the ways in which the relationship with one's background is often disrupted by the symbolic violence of academia itself. One is supposed to draw on the 'cultural codes' of a specific social group, whereas those codes had to be suppressed to navigate a middle-class institution in the first place. Because of my social mobility, I often find common ground with both lower- and middle-class groups because I have one foot as an 'insider' in both worlds. However, intellectual honesty compels me to admit that I am just as much an 'outsider' in both worlds. How to deal with this halfway position without causing harm to myself is, at least for now, an unanswered question.

Concluding reflections

In this article, I discussed how power dynamics can shift when interviewing children. Focusing on my experiences as a minority ethnic researcher from a working-class background, I highlighted how children whom I interviewed on their perceptions of diversity and social inequality, confronted me with my own minoritized subjectivity. While drawing boundaries vis-à-vis the lower-class and

minority ethnic pupils, the children unintentionally drew bright boundaries against me as well. By way of conclusion, I would like to ask myself the 'why-question'. Why did those boundaries expressed by children hurt? As a matter of fact, I was not so much hurt by the *boundary making* of the children as such, but because of the confrontation with the ever-present but often obscured cultural *boundaries* and the symbolic violence they engender. Arguably, I would have been much less 'vulnerable' had it not been that the children reminded me of those aspects of my identity that remain stigmatized within the broader society, and mainly within academia itself. This leaves me reflecting on at least two important things.

First, although I had to apply for ethical approval before I could start my interviews, the potential vulnerability of the researcher was never an issue. If the positionality of the researcher had to be discussed at all, it was mainly concerning how that position could impact the researched individuals rather than the other way around. A discussion on how researchers should be supported if needed, seemingly has little place in these applications, let alone if a project concerns research with children. This reinforces the illusion that the researcher is in a position of power at all times, which arguably has performative effects; as I hardly had to think about my own potential vulnerability, I did not the least expect that the interviews could 'harm' me. Should I, as a novice researcher, not have been better prepared? As Butler and colleagues (2016) argue, there is a widespread narrow assumption that vulnerability is no more than a state of 'victimhood' and 'dependence', in which individuals need care and protection. If vulnerability, however, were to be understood as a relational concept (see e.g. Bashir, 2019; Hamilton, 2020) that also takes into account socio-political dynamics (Mackenzie et al., 2014), should the ethics committee not rather urge researchers (and themselves) to strongly reflect on 'which power dynamics can arise/exist in interviews', 'how all actors potentially could be harmed'? Is it not because of a lack of this reflection on vulnerability, that some ethics committees seemingly hardly take into account that the university has 'people like me' in its workforce? What about other researchers who are not in a position of power in all – perhaps not even in most – circumstances? A critical reflection on what 'vulnerability' entails would benefit both the ethics committees and individual researchers; as to recognize the disadvantage within the own institution and to recognize the agency of vulnerable participants, who are often still seen as passive actors who need to be 'taken care of'.

There is indeed a gap between what ethics committees ask of researchers and what effectively takes place in the field. As receiving ethical approval does not necessarily mean that one has fully prepared for fieldwork, Hamilton (2020: 529) proposes that: 'reflexivity must be adopted as an ethical principle, in a way that is rooted in intersectionality, thus acknowledging and enabling attention to the situated, shifting nature of power'. Reflexivity is highly important, yet at times also

a lonely task, which brings me to my second point. Methodological reflections written from a minority ethnic or working-class background are relatively scarce, and these groups are generally, moreover, strongly underrepresented at universities. In that sense, it is a challenge for novice researchers to collectively reflect and to be inspired while responding to methodological issues related to these very personal identity dimensions. This observation itself illustrates the prevailing symbolic violence; the 'loneliness' reminds you that you do not belong to the 'norm', and joint reflection, at least that which is free from symbolic violence, is for those who do. This is not to claim that minority ethnic researchers with a working-class background can only engage in reflections with those sharing a similar background. On the contrary, sharing experiences across ethnic and class boundaries can undoubtedly provide fruitful answers to various ethical questions. However, a power imbalance may also be present in these interactions, especially when vulnerability is indeed perceived as a state of passivity and lacking agency (Butler et al., 2016). Not infrequently, sharing personal experiences has resulted in me being underestimated and feeling rather patronized by some fellow students and professors who felt like – and sometimes explicitly said – they have to 'take care of me', that they aim to 'open doors' for me. In a society where cultural capital is largely related to being educated, it indeed seems that as soon as I talk openly about my *subjectively experienced* – and this emphasis is highly important – lack of socially valued cultural capital, some can no longer imagine that I am nevertheless a capable researcher not lacking in intelligence or critical consciousness. And even in cases where these kinds of patronizing interactions do not occur, it should be acknowledged that it is not easy to expose one's vulnerabilities within institutions that not only largely causes these, but also may misrecognize the extent to which social and ethnic inequalities matter in its own field. Even the most open and socially aware research groups have to operate in this rather hostile social environment. Expecting that underrepresented researchers will nevertheless put their hearts on the table, not even sure whether they will be patronized or not, is another form of symbolic violence. Let us rather simply start with collectively reflecting on how we aim to position ourselves towards different forms of vulnerability, while recognizing intersectional experiences causing power dynamics to shift.

3

Repertoires on diversity among primary school children

Published in *Childhood*[1]
with Gert Verschraegen and Noel Clycq

Introduction

In recent decades, many school environments in Europe have become super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007), in the sense that pupils have increasingly diverse migrant, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Yet, how do children perceive the diversity around them? While research has shown that children are able to actively construct distinctions between ethno-cultural and religious groups (see e.g., Spyrou, 2002; Zemblyas, 2010), less is known about how super-diversity affects day-to-day intergroup relations between children. Drawing on the concept of 'cultural repertoires' (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986), this article examines the various and sometimes contradicting narratives that children in super-diverse schools develop to make sense of diversity. While diversity as a concept is a notoriously slippery and context-dependent term, we primarily explore everyday conceptions of diversity among children (see also Bell and Hartmann, 2007). We analyse how children strategically draw on different sources of meaning-making to navigate their super-diverse school environment and give meaning to the diversity they perceive around them.

Our study is based on 47 interviews with sixth-grade children in six different schools in the super-diverse city of Antwerp. We believe that this specific research context offers us analytical leverage in understanding the nuances of how children make sense of a super-diverse environment and how they position themselves within it. All the interviewed children are confronted with diversity on a daily basis, which raises questions about the meaning they attach to this diversity and how this affects their relations with other children.

We proceed by highlighting our theoretical framework, and go on to describe the research context, our methods and data. Next, and prior to our conclusion, we present four different cultural

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repertoires which children use when talking about diversity and analyse how these enable them to position their own identities in their super-diverse environments.

Children's repertoires on diversity

In the last decade, concepts such as super-diversity have stimulated scholars to investigate how different forms of diversity are experienced in European urban settings. While the discussion on super-diversity has challenged previously dominant multicultural, 'groupist' and assimilationist approaches and provided a broad recognition of the 'diversification of difference' (Oosterlynck et al., 2018), it has not yet resulted in much empirical knowledge about how super-diversity affects day-to-day intergroup relations (e.g., Foner et al., 2019), including relations between children. There is some literature showing that children are aware of and talk about the diversity in their environment. Iqbal and colleagues (2017), for instance, have shown that London children generally consider diversity as unexceptional and mix with each other without major tensions. In the same line, Sedano (2012) argues that ethnic differences are not particularly relevant for children in deciding whom to play with, even though they recognized ethnicity in their narratives. In contrast, other studies have shown that children's views of diversity have real consequences for daily interaction. This seems to be especially true in contexts with 'bright boundaries' (Alba, 2005) between majority and minority groups, such as in Cyprus, Ireland (see e.g., Devine et al., 2008) and Northern Ireland (e.g., Connolly et al., 2009), but also in less polarized contexts, such as the Netherlands (Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014). Other studies indicate that children draw on dominant discourses when narrating their opinions on diversity and can reconstruct these discourses. Hajisoteriou and colleagues (2017), for example, found that Cypriot children perceive diversity through three perspectives related to three dominant theoretical models of integration. The pupils conceptualized diversity through a 'cultural-deficiency perspective' (derived from the theoretical model of 'monoculturalism'); a 'cultural-celebration perspective' (e.g., 'multiculturalism'); and to a lesser extent through an 'intercultural-exchange-perspective' (e.g., 'interculturalism'). In the same context, Partasi (2011) showed that despite the 'monocultural character' of Cypriot society and the evidenced educational discrimination against non-Christian pupils, children themselves formulate more positive views on diversity.

While these studies emphasize that children perceive different forms of diversity and draw on dominant discourses to make sense of them, they focus less on how different children actively and situationally use these discourses to navigate their social environment and position themselves within it. To grasp these processes of active meaning-making and identity positioning, this study will draw on the notion of 'cultural repertoires' (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986). Cultural

repertoires can be conceived as socially constructed frames of reference in which individuals are (partly) socialized and through which they perceive the world. As children construct their views on diversity from culturally available narrative templates, this notion allows us to highlight the multiple, and sometimes conflicted ways in which children make sense of the diversity around them. However, the term is especially useful as it also emphasizes a behavioural component: repertoires are commonly seen as 'sets of tools' people can actively draw on to manage their social world. This means that children are not only socialized into different repertoires but can actively draw on various (elements of) repertoires to make sense of a particular situation or problem. Furthermore, since different children are socialized in different cultural environments, they do not have the same set of repertoires available (Calarco, 2018). Some have a wider array of repertoires of action than others, and therefore more possible ways to manage different situations in the social world (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986). Calarco (2018), for example, shows how middle-class children are more likely to ask for help in class than their lower-class peers, because asking for assistance ('tool') in an educational setting is part of the repertoire ('set') into which middle-class children are socialized.

Hence, the term of cultural repertoires allows us to highlight the connection between the narrative templates available to children (implying that some children have a wider array of repertoires than others) and their individual agency (i.e., children can choose to use specific repertoires to make sense of the particular reality and social relations they experience). Because of the emphasis on agency, the term also recalls recent research into the New Sociology of Childhood, arguing that children not only take part in social life but also make 'things happen'; they are not only 'socialized', but also contribute to wider processes of social and cultural reproduction and transformation (James, 2013; Pache Huber and Spyrou, 2012). By analysing the interplay of both public narratives and children's own meaning-making, we aim to provide a nuanced description of how children differentially interact with others in their environment. We recognize children's agency and their active intervention in social life as a 'relational dynamic', and at the same time we recognize the influence of the social, cultural, economic and other kinds of constraints and boundaries they have to navigate (Balagopalan et al., 2019; Spyrou et al., 2019).

Research context, data and methodology

The data we draw on are part of a larger study investigating children's identity formation in the super-diverse city of Antwerp, wherein we use in-depth interviews with children, teachers and parents. Through repeated data collection rounds, we follow a group of children during their transition from primary to secondary school to examine how they construct and re/deconstruct their differential

identities. This transition is particularly relevant as it can challenge children's repertoires on diversity. Many children, for example, leave their primary 'neighbourhood school' and move to a larger secondary school in another district with a more or less diverse school population. Previous research has shown that this transition can disrupt interethnic friendships among children (Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012).

This article presents data from the first research round in which we conducted 47 interviews with sixth-grade children aged 11 to 13 in six different primary schools. With more than 500,000 inhabitants, Antwerp is the largest city in Flanders and a good example of a 'majority-minority city' (Crul, 2016) in which there is no longer a numerical ethnic majority (see Oosterlynck et al., 2017). Antwerp has citizens from 171 different nationalities, and in recent years the population with a migration background (50.1%) has become larger than the share of 'native' Belgian residents (49.9 %). The share of residents with a migration background is expected to increase rapidly, as in the group of children aged 10 to 19 only 29.6% children are considered 'native'. The largest immigrant groups originate from Morocco, The Netherlands, Turkey and Poland (Stad Antwerpen, 2020).

Yet, while Antwerp has a highly diverse population, the Flemish far-right also gained landslide electoral victories in the city during the 1990s and 2000s with an anti-immigrant rhetoric. This made anti-immigration discourses highly visible and created a political atmosphere highly receptive to resurgent neo-assimilationist tendencies and the backlash against multiculturalism (Saeys et al., 2019). The social segregation between immigrants and the established 'white majority', characteristic of many Western European countries, is also particularly pronounced in Flanders. In recent decades, a gap has emerged in work, education and housing opportunities between individuals with and without a migration background, the former including first, second and third generation immigrants (OECD/EU, 2015). According to recent OECD figures (2017), nowhere else in Western Europe has this chasm remained so deep and persistent as in Belgium. In addition, researchers have demonstrated the continuing presence of discrimination based on racial (e.g., skin colour), religious (e.g., headscarf) and linguistic (e.g., foreign names) markers of foreign descent (Van der Bracht et al., 2015) and its impact on children and youth (Denys, 2018). We believe that the strong prominence of ethno-cultural boundaries in our research site makes it highly suited to develop a more thorough understanding of children's views on diversity.

We selected children within six primary schools (see appendix p. 261) which were, based on government statistics,[2] carefully chosen because of their location in more or less disadvantaged neighbourhoods, degree of ethnic and social mix among pupils and school network (see below). We

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[2] Data were generated from https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/?var=natcube (demographic data) and https://www.agodi.be/cijfermateriaal-leerlingenkenmerken (school composition data).

also used information available on school websites to include the criterion of teacher diversity. However, in some cases, the statistics do not accurately reflect the classroom's diversity. In school two, for example, the table in the appendix (p. 261) shows that only 8% of the children have a non-Dutch home language but this figure should be nuanced in two ways. First, this percentage only indicates the proportion of pupils who *only* speak a foreign language at home. A large number of children, however, come from bi- or multilingual families where another language is spoken in addition to Dutch. Second, this figure concerns the entire school population while the sixth grade in school two is clearly more diverse than the lower grades (this was confirmed by the teacher). Hence, in order to provide a more comprehensive overview, we mention – for both ethnic and social diversity – our own classification alongside the official figures.

In Flanders, primary education is targeted at children aged approximately six to 12. The education system consists of different networks, mainly 'government-provided schools'*, '*subsidized public schools', and 'subsidized free schools' - the largest network, mainly organized by Catholic Education Flanders. While these educational networks officially have a different ideological base, schools have large autonomy in shaping their policies with regard to diversity in reality. Our qualitative data point in the same direction: the broader ideological orientation of the network does not seem to have a crucial influence on children's narratives.

After an introductory interview with the principals or teachers, we gave all sixth-grade pupils information letters and consent forms. We handed out copies for the parents and copies in accessible language for the pupils themselves. For non-Dutch-speaking parents, letters were translated into English, French, Arabic and Turkish. Additionally, the project was verbally presented to all pupils. We stressed that participation was voluntary, and that the data would be handled confidentially. The study was also submitted to and approved by the university's ethics committee.

Based upon their migration background, 10 respondents can be considered as 'native' (i.e., both grandparents and parents are born in Belgium) and 37 respondents have at least one (grand)parent of non-Belgian descent. The table in the appendix on page 262 gives an overview of the participant's countries of origins. Yet, it is important to note that non-participating children also have origins in other countries. This means that the classrooms are even more ethnically diverse than described in the table above (except for classroom six in which all children are of Moroccan origin). 25 children self-identify as Muslim, 12 children as Christian and 10 children as non-religious or atheist. All children spoke Dutch intelligibly and no significant linguistic barriers occurred during the interviews.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 23 and 75 minutes and took place at school. After they introduced themselves, the children were asked to share their experiences on their well-

being at school, their identifications and belongings, aspirations and future dreams. After we had assured ourselves that the children understood what 'ethno-cultural diversity' meant, they were asked questions such as:

- *How diverse do you think your classroom is?*
- *How do you feel about that diversity (can you name some positive and negative aspects)?*
- *How do you think different ethnic or religious groups are being treated in our society?*
- *Do you believe that people from different backgrounds get along well?*

The authors of this paper recognized and reflected on the influence that their own background and position could potentially have on the trust and openness of children. All interviews were conducted by a female Moroccan-Belgian researcher. The fact that she, since birth, has lived in Antwerp herself, allowed her to pick up on most children's stories from an 'insiders-perspective' and to probe notions of diversity in a fruitful way. Some children seemed to believe in a 'shared background', which was expressed, for example, in their spontaneous use of Moroccan-Arabic filler words, youth language or use of Islamic sayings while claiming that they do not 'talk like this to Belgians'. To ensure that all children spoke openly about diversity – and particularly when majority ethnic children were questioned about minoritized groups (to which the interviewer belongs) – the researcher used children's own group classifications unless they were clearly racist or stigmatizing (but this was almost never the case). Hence, if the children spoke of 'children from another country', 'foreign children', 'Moroccans', 'non-Belgians', 'allochthonous children' and so on, the researcher also adopted these terms. Despite the researcher's Moroccan-Belgian background, almost all majority ethnic children spoke both positively and negatively or even stigmatizing about 'Moroccans' (see results). This may be due to established trust and openness or because the children simply did not know what the ethnic background of the researcher was (no child actively asked about her background).

The interviews were fully transcribed and coded inductively with NVivo 12. After a first analysis of the attached codes, we developed a coding framework or scheme bringing together different views on diversity. These different perceptions were analysed thoroughly and were refined through a repeated coding process. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, apart from some (Moroccan-)Arabic, English or French filler words. The quotations in this article were literally translated into English. When additional information had been necessary to clarify quotations, information was added in square brackets.

Results

While explaining their understandings of cultural diversity and narrating their specific intercultural experiences, four broad repertoires emerge in our child-respondents' narratives. First, most children talk about diversity as a commonplace aspect (Wessendorf, 2013) of daily life. Second, children appear to use cosmopolitan arguments (Pichler, 2008) to make sense of super-diversity. A third repertoire among the children emphasizes 'cultural frictions' that supposedly stem from diversity. Finally, a fourth repertoire centres around a shared strong belief in group disadvantages. These repertoires are, although sometimes contrasting, not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, various repertoires emerge simultaneously in children's narratives and children shift easily between them. In addition, all four repertoires resound in all six schools. This means that children within the same classrooms hold very different views on ethno-cultural diversity – differing from open to more essentialist perspectives. Where differences between schools do occur, we discuss them in more detail.

Commonplace diversity

Cultural diversity seems to be experienced as commonplace in daily life by many children in our study. Wessendorf (2013) conceptualizes this perceived normality as 'commonplace diversity'. Similar to the author's own research with adults in London, some children do not necessarily discuss their own or others' ethnicity directly, as diversity has become an ordinary aspect of their lives (see also Iqbal et al., 2017):

> Olivia: I have to say there are so many friends who are from Turkey. (…) I mean… I think… I'm not really sure where all my friends come from, but I think… Merve is also from Turkey and Ayse also, I guess. But I'm not really sure. And uhm… Sarani is from Bangladesh, I guess.
>
> Researcher: But you're not sure about all of that?
>
> Olivia: No, not really. We rather play [with each other], we don't really talk about where we're from, so…
> (11y, school 1, self-identifies as Swedish)

The notion that ethno-cultural diversity is not always highly relevant for some children is also evidenced by the lack of spontaneous references to this form of diversity. When we discuss diversity in their classrooms, some pupils solely refer to differences in appearances, interests and hobbies. However, they do notice ethnic, cultural and religious differences. Nevertheless, children who

strongly emphasize this repertoire tend to downplay these differences. A striking example is found in the narrative of Oskar, a boy in a super-diverse school with a strong concentration of disadvantaged minority children. While Oskar values diversity in its broad sense as positive, he is less inclined to express his normative position on ethnic diversity:

> Researcher: Do you believe that the class' diversity is positive or negative?
>
> Oskar: I think it's positive because if everyone is the same… I also don't think that you can talk if you… [if] everyone watches the same movies; everyone looks the same. (…) In that case, you can't say 'hey, he never watched that movie but it's good' because everyone has already seen it. Everyone would be the same anyway.
>
> Researcher: And when it comes down to religious and ethnic diversity?
>
> Oskar: (…) I am a bit neutral in that case, because I don't think it matters [in] what you do or who you are so… I mean, it matters if you do stuff according to your religion, but I don't think it matters a lot. (…) I don't think it's [ethnic diversity] necessarily nice, I also don't think it's necessarily bad because yeah… You're all just human.
> (11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

Children who draw on this repertoire do not draw bright boundaries between different ethnic groups but emphasize other things that are more important to them. This does not impede some of them express at the same time a high level of ethnic self-identification. As Sedano (2012) argues, it is important to analyse which aspects of children's social lives are mediated by ethnicity and which are not. Although ethnicity is highly relevant for some of our children's self-identification and senses of belonging, they simultaneously claim to attach little importance to other children's ethnicity in the formation of their peer groups.

Notably, although some children perceive diversity as 'normal', they realize that this perspective is not shared by everyone and that people can also hold negative views on diversity. These children thus combine repertoires of commonplace diversity with 'repertoires of group disadvantages' (see further), acknowledging that some ethnic groups are treated badly in society. However, a few others express no awareness of exclusion on either individual (e.g., racist name-calling) or institutional level (e.g. racism in school) and seem to hold a 'colour-blind' (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) perspective:

> Researcher: The children at this school, do they ever say anything racist to or about each other?
>
> James: No.

Researcher: Never?

James: Never.

Researcher: And if you look at the broader society, which social group is treated more badly than others? (…)

James: I think that everyone's treated equally.

Researcher: You wouldn't say, for example, that racism occurs in Antwerp?

James: No.
(11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

One could expect children who perceive diversity as commonplace to 'evidently' engage in interethnic friendships. Yet, while this is the case for some pupils (e.g., Olivia), others (e.g., Oskar) seem to have an ethnically homogenous group of friends. Some of these latter children believe that this group composition is purely 'coincidental' or that it has to do with a lack of diversity in their school or neighbourhood (see appendix p. 261, this is the case in some schools). A few others refer to hobbies and interests that they 'coincidentally' have in common with children from the same ethnic background:

Researcher: Do you feel just as comfortable with, let's say, Arne and Anton [both 'native' Belgian] as you feel with the children from another country?

Oskar: I feel more at ease with Arne and Anton because they… Those children… I mean, most children from another country, they don't… I just don't think they… They don't have my interests and that stuff. I can't talk with them that much.

Researcher: So basically, you share more interests with your classmates of Belgian origin?

Oskar: Yes, but I don't know… [With] the children in my classroom, but I don't know if that would be the case in others [classrooms].
(11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

Importantly, unlike his majority ethnic classmates, minority children in Oskar's classroom are generally from a working-class or poor family. These latter children rarely participate in paid leisure activities as Oskar does (e.g., korfball) which explains his argument. Furthermore, Oskar and his majority ethnic friends are also mentioned (by most children, regardless of background) as the best performing pupils, which probably 'connects' them. As children's ethnic background intersects with other important factors such as class position, it is hard to analyse which (overlapping) criteria are consciously and unconsciously used by children to structure their social world. Interestingly,

however, Oskar does not 'ethnicize' the perceived differences in interests and his rather homogeneous group of friends (see also Sedano, 2012).

While this repertoire is present in all schools, it is more prominent among children in school two who almost never use stigmatizing language when discussing diversity. While the sixth grade in this school contains pupils originating from, among other countries, Belgium, Morocco, Nigeria, France, Portugal, Nigeria and Brazil, the school does differ from the others in this study because of the overrepresentation of middle-class children (i.e., in the other schools almost all minority children are from working class background).

Cosmopolitan repertoires

A second repertoire widely shared among our child-respondents is the idea of cosmopolitanism, i.e., the children's emphasis on openness towards and appreciation of other cultures and their imagined shared values as 'human beings'. Generally, children who draw on this repertoire aim for a sense of belonging across borders, express trust and tolerance towards others, support equal rights and highly value respect for all human beings (Keating, 2015). While this repertoire seems rather similar to that of 'commonplace diversity' – and in some children's narratives both repertoires emerge simultaneously – the repertoire of cosmopolitanism takes a more normative approach to diversity. More particularly, children who rely more strongly on a cosmopolitan ideology *explicitly* perceive diversity and cultural openness as *goals to be pursued*. In that sense, diversity is not necessarily 'common' or 'self-evident' but is explicitly experienced as a great benefit for society.

When we gauge children's perceptions of diversity, some spontaneously emphasize their respect for other cultures and religions. We argue that in doing so, majority ethnic children, especially, aim to demonstrate their openness towards others, but also respond to a discourse of exclusion from which they wish to distance themselves. For example, some of these children mention, without being asked, that they do not have a problem with diversity:

> Researcher: Do you think there's a lot of diversity in your classroom?
>
> Victor: We do have a few but I also have a lot of respect for them. If I were from another country and they all started calling me names for another religion or something, I also wouldn't like that. I actually really wouldn't like that. (11y, school 1, self-identifies as Belgian)
>
> Researcher: Do you think there is a lot of diversity in your classroom?
>
> Louise: Yes, I think so, but I don't mind or anything. I think it's nice. (11y, school 1, self-identifies as Belgian)

These children seem to actively approach diversity in positive terms in order to construct broadly shared collective identities. By pointing out that children are above all human, they create a cosmopolitan identity: 'being human'. In a previous quote from Oskar, we saw how he uses 'humanness' to downplay ethnic or other more particular identities. Other children also stress this humanness:

> Alexander: (…) everyone should be treated equally because everyone is the same, yes, everyone is human.
> (11y, school 4, self-identifies as Belgian)

Despite this focus on a shared identity category, more particular identities are still recognized. Most children who use this repertoire do not downplay differences but rather consider this cultural diversity as enriching. In this sense, cosmopolitan ideologies are also strongly related with repertoires of 'cultural celebration' (see also Hajisoteriou et al., 2017). Diversity is appreciated because it allows cultural exchange, mainly of language skills, cuisine and general cultural knowledge.

Repertoires of cultural otherness and deficiency

While children who perceive diversity as commonplace and/or draw on cosmopolitan repertoires consciously or unconsciously downplay ethno-cultural boundaries, we also found narratives in which brighter boundaries were drawn between different ethnic groups. This is especially the case in school three, which is even more diverse in terms of socio-economic background and ethnicity than the other schools. While school five and school six have a higher percentage of pupils from lower-income families than school three, ethnic boundaries between majority and minority children are not frequently drawn within the first two schools. This is probably due to the fact that these schools have only minority children (school six even has only children with a Moroccan background). In other words, while the children in school three draw mainly bright boundaries between majority and minority children, there are arguably less reasons to do so in the other schools.

In the narratives in which bright ethnic boundaries were being drawn, children spoke in terms of 'otherness' and attributed certain (mostly negative) characteristics to certain ethnic identities. Some of our interviewees seem to believe that cultural differences lead to frictions in society. Jordy, a majority ethnic pupil, explains that 'the Moroccans' cause trouble in his neighbourhood:

> Jordy: I'd like to live in another province because here… Here are a lot of Moroccans. Moroccans…
>
> Researcher: And you think that's…

Jordy: Less nice.

Researcher: Why is that less nice?

Jordy: They… As you can see, there's a lot of dirt here [in the neighbourhood] and that's mostly because of them. And they're sometimes bad, and they do graffiti. They act a little different than us and they never want to act a little bit normal.

Researcher: How do they act differently?

Jordy: They want… They for example want to drive mopeds when they're not allowed to.
(…)

Researcher: Why do you think they act that way?

Jordy: Because… It's a bit like a colony here in Antwerp because… There're a lot [of Moroccans] here and then they feel… they feel at home here.
(11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

Jordy believes that minority groups should assimilate into mainstream society by adopting what he perceives as 'Belgian culture'. He draws clear boundaries between 'native' Belgians and Moroccans. For him, Belgian identity is an exclusive identity with clear characteristics:

Jordy: He [a Belgian] may… He may sometimes drink a beer or two, may drink beer but he also has to eat properly.

Researcher: Eat properly? What do you mean by that?

Jordy: People eat with their hands in Morocco, I don't think that's decent.
(11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

According to Jordy, the majority of Moroccans based in Belgium do not 'act' Belgian. Jordy takes his friend Sam as an example of how minorities should behave:

Jordy: Yes, my friend Sam for example is from Iran and he's a normal boy like everyone else.
(11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

These repertoires also emerge in Sam's narrative. Like Jordy, he draws clear boundaries between 'native' Belgians and pupils with a Moroccan background:

Sam: Those from Belgium do less stupid stuff. Actually, just less dangerous stuff. And then the Muslims, most of the time Moroccans actually, they try to

do stuff, like getting into a fight or doing something that's not allowed. And then I prefer to play with Belgians.

Researcher: They [majority ethnic children] get less into fights?

Sam: They just don't get into fights at all. Only if they're joking around…

Researcher: And what's the dangerous stuff the Muslim or Moroccan children get into?
(…)

Sam: Umm… In general, they act very tough and they confront others. And… throw stuff. And in school they just act very tough and then, if you, if they do something to you and you do something [back], you talk, you say stop, then they start to act very tou.. very cocky, like 'I'll knock out all your teeth!'

Researcher: And those are things that Anton or James would never do?
Sam: No, they'd never say that.
(11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian and 'partly Iranian')

Although Sam and Jordy express more negative feelings towards 'Moroccans' than others, similar narratives emerged among children in other schools concerning minority children, particularly 'Moroccans', as more likely to argue and get into fights.

While only a few children mention cultural frictions as a downside of diversity, a slightly larger group refers to language differences as a disadvantage of classroom diversity. Even children who do not adopt an assimilationist perspective in general prefer monolingualism at school, regardless of ethnic background. Their fear is that children will bully each other in foreign languages that are not understood by everyone. Remarkably, children value diversity in classroom because it enables them to learn words in foreign languages but want to limit or control the use of these languages. However, this point of view is not shared by everyone. A few children emphasize the importance of multilingualism and do not expect children to abuse this with bullying behaviour.

Repertoires of group disadvantages

Whereas most children consider diversity to be enriching, a relatively large group is also aware of exclusion based on ethno-cultural characteristics. These children believe that some groups are treated more badly than others. Pupils regardless of ethnic and social background seem to draw on such 'repertoires of group disadvantages' (see also Lamont et al., 2016), as Oskar, a 'native' Belgian pupil, shows:

> Researcher: Which group is being treated most badly in this society; you think?
>
> Oskar: Muslims because with the… Because Belgians are sometimes racist, most, some Belgians are uhm racist towards Muslims.
> (11y, school 3, self-identifies as Belgian)

Yet, these repertoires seem to affect minority children the most as they belong to the group they perceive as vulnerable to bad treatment. The children seem to have internalized primarily repertoires of exclusion of Muslims[3], but experiences of racism based on culture or skin-colour are also mentioned by a few. Some children report that they are verbally attacked by adults because of both religious and ethno-cultural factors:

> Researcher: Can you give an example of a racist incident?
>
> Layla: Ummm… Especially when they go on at us 'fucking Moroccans' and so on or 'fucking Muslim'! On the tram if they push us away all the time and then start to scold or… If the tram is overcrowded, for example, then we have to… We're forced to stand in front of the doors and when we stop people suddenly start yelling 'Go away, stupid Moroccans!'. (…)
>
> Researcher: Do you experience that kind of incidents frequently?
>
> Layla: Frequently.
> (11y, school 4, self-identifies as Muslim)

Some Muslim children not only feel exposed to racism but also mention a lack of respect and recognition for their religious identity at school. Although the vast majority of Muslim (or other minority) children do not report a lack of appreciation by their teachers and principals, a few children have experienced otherwise. A frequently mentioned concern is that their religious experiences are not taken into account and that teachers do not respect their choice to practice their religion. Children express these concerns with regard to their own school or with regard to other schools they do not attend (anymore). The feeling among some Muslim children of being disrespected is not necessarily based on personal experiences. Some pupils claim that they feel appreciated in their own school and environment but are nonetheless suspicious of other schools because of the stories they hear from others. Stories made available through the family in particular seem to have a strong impact. Ikram, for example, feels respected at her current school but expects to feel less well when she will move to secondary education. She currently attends a neighbourhood school where religious symbols are

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[3] As Alba (2005) argues, Muslims in Western European countries are confronted with bright boundaries and exclusion based on religion rather than on ethnic background, skin colour or nationality.

allowed but this will not be the case in the secondary school she will go to[4]. Although Ikram does not wear a headscarf herself, she believes that such an environment will affect her well-being:

> Researcher: What do you expect [from the transition to secondary school]?
>
> Ikram: Umm… That I'll be less happy there than I'm here at this school.
>
> Researcher: How come?
>
> Ikram: Umm yeah… At that school, for example… My sister wears a headscarf, she can't [wear it] there. Then my sister feels… feels a bit guilty that she can't wear her headscarf there and… She doesn't like that. And also… Those teachers are a little racist towards my sister. (…) Yes, they [Muslim girls] aren't treated very nicely. And yeah… Umm… Especially Muslims, a Muslim girl. They're treated less [well] than boys [in schools], much less. And yeah… A bit… racist or something at me… at Muslim girls.
>
> Researcher: Because of their headscarf?
>
> Ikram: Yes.
>
> Researcher: How would you feel, if you wore a headscarf and you had to take it off?
>
> Ikram: Uhmm, not very well. Then people aren't respecting you for who you are.
>
> Researcher: That's the feeling you have? That Muslim girls who have to take their headscarf off aren't respected [because of the school's policy]?
>
> Ikram: Yes.
>
> Researcher: Why do you think they have to take it off?
>
> Ikram: Yeah… Then they think that she's… an IS fighter or something. That a bomb will explode.
> (12y, school 6, self-identifies as Moroccan and Belgian)

Another example of how these repertoires are made available through family stories, is found in Layla's narrative. Like Ikram, Layla is satisfied with the openness in her school but expects to be confronted with racist name-calling when she moves to secondary school. Her expectations are partly based on the described experiences of her family:

> Layla: When you're Muslim, some children say: 'Oh, it smells like Muslims in here!' the whole time… and I'm also afraid of that, that they'll do that to me.

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[4] Pupils, students and teachers are not allowed to wear headscarves in most Antwerp primary and secondary schools.

Researcher: Do those things already happen? Do children bully you because you're Muslim?

Layla: No, it hasn't happened yet, but it happens a lot in secondary school. It also happened to my dad, to my uncle but he's still in secondary education. Umm… My sisters, it also happened to almost all of them and I don't like that, and I'm also very afraid that it'll happen to me too. (…)

Researcher: What did your dad tell you?

Layla: It also happened to him, the same as to my sisters and also to him like 'Oh, it smells like Muslims in here!' and like the whole time… And then he changed school again and again because he was bullied in each school he went to because he was Muslim.

Researcher: Bullied by whom?

Layla: By the students and sometimes by the teachers.
(11y, school 4, self-identifies as Muslim)

These repertoires affect children's well-being and how they imagine their future:

Ikram: Racism is getting bigger and bigger and how are we supposed to live [like this] in the future (…)?

Researcher: Where did you get that feeling? That it's getting bigger and bigger?

Ikram: Yeah uhmmm… on TV. Most of the times I see nothing but people talking about the headscarf, Muslims, and yeah…
(…)

Researcher: So you think there'll be more racists in the future?

Ikram: Yes.

Researcher: How do you think you'll act [if that happens]?

Ikram: Yeah… Stay at home and don't go anywhere. (…) I won't be welcome nowhere anymore or so...
(12y, school 6, self-identifies as Moroccan and Belgian)

In order to feel recognized and create a safer environment for themselves in a perceived 'hostile' world, most of these pupils would like to surround themselves with people 'like themselves'. Children also stress the need to stick together as minorities and are more aware of their selective peer group formation. This confirms other studies showing that pupils who feel stigmatized feel more secure in intra-ethnic friendships (e.g., Hoare, 2019).

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that children hold multiple and sometimes contrasting perspectives on diversity, as is also evidenced in other studies (see e.g., Hajisoteriou et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2017; Partasi, 2011). However, to our knowledge these perspectives on diversity among children have not been systematically analysed through the lens of cultural repertoires to highlight the multiplicity of perspectives. We argued that children in the super-diverse city of Antwerp use repertoires in flexible and differential ways to give meaning to various forms of diversity, as well as to position their own identity and support their sense of belonging. We have shown here that four broad repertoires emerge from our interviewed children's narratives.

First, many children perceive diversity as a normal aspect of their daily lives. Although these children acknowledge (and often highly value) the classroom diversity, they do not necessarily consider it to be exceptional or worth discussing. This is line with other studies in super-diverse settings, where diversity is experienced as commonplace by both adults (Wessendorf, 2013) and children (Iqbal et al., 2017). Second, cosmopolitan arguments are revealed in children's narratives to make sense of super-diversity. These children do not necessarily perceive diversity to be 'common' or 'self-evident', but explicitly experience ethno-cultural, religious or linguistic heterogeneity as a great benefit. However, a third repertoire among children reveals bright boundaries between different ethnic, cultural or religious groups. These repertoires of cultural 'otherness' and deficiency were much less present among the pupils. Yet, the few children drawing on such exclusive boundaries do so strongly. They believe that cultural diversity leads to cultural friction if minority groups are unwilling to assimilate into mainstream society. In these narratives, ethnic identities are defined very exclusively, with rather stereotypical characteristics. Fourth, we described how some children share a strong belief in group disadvantages. Whereas most children consider diversity to be enriching, a relatively large group is also aware of exclusion based on ethno-cultural or religious characteristics. Muslims, especially, are perceived to be disadvantaged in society. Children, particularly Muslim children, indeed seem to be aware of religion as one of the most pertinent symbolic boundaries in Western European countries (Alba, 2005) and the exclusion or discrimination this might entail. We argued that this reflects partly the extent to which repertoires are made available, for example within families. The respondents who narrate stories about racism or anti-Islam experiences within their family, also report more insecurity and fear about their future.

The cultural repertoires perspective thus highlighted the importance of being socialized into specific repertoires. It was also fruitful, however, as it integrates the notion of 'sets of tools' into the concept of culture (Swidler, 1986). This allowed us to highlight children's agency, their ability to

navigate their diverse environments and manage tensions or contradictions in their social environment (see also Pache Huber and Spyrou, 2012). Although the children in this study grow up in a setting where ethnic and religious boundaries are very salient (because of the strong presence of anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourses in Antwerp), most of our respondents perceive their diverse social environment to be unproblematic and construct open and positive narratives on ethno-cultural and religious diversity (see also Partasi, 2011). They actively 'shape' inclusive narratives by downplaying boundaries between different ethno-cultural or religious groups, for example by emphasizing people's 'humanness' that is more important to them than group characteristics. At the same time, they realize that this perspective may not be shared by everyone in society and that people can hold negative views on diversity.

While all four repertoires resound in our six schools, we have observed small differences between schools. Children in a school with a more or less even mix of majority and minority children draw comparatively brighter boundaries between ethno-cultural and religious groups than children in schools with a population of predominantly minorities – except for school two. In this mixed school, in which most pupils have a middle-class background, our respondents predominantly downplayed differences between groups and hardly used stigmatizing language while discussing diversity. These results seem to suggest that the ethno-cultural and social class composition of the school play a role in children's reasoning about diversity. Obviously, our small-scale and qualitative study can only provide a first indication here. Furthermore, although there was some social class diversity in our sample, the intersection between class and other forms of diversity was not at the core of our study. Further research can possibly provide more details on the conditions in which children draw on more inclusive or more exclusive repertoires to give meaning to super-diversity.

Nevertheless, several of our results resonate with findings of other European research on super-diverse cities (e.g., Iqbal et al., 2017) suggesting that processes occurring in the specific context of the super-diverse city of Antwerp resemble those in other European cities. The main finding that seems to emerge out of our research and the current state of the art, is that children generally seem to be able to navigate super-diverse environments quite unproblematically. However, given the strong resurgence of populist and extremist discourse across Europe, it will be crucial to understand how these repertoires will evolve in subsequent life stages. Will Europe's next generation indeed remain at ease in super-diverse contexts, or will boundaries become brighter if societal tensions remain strong?

4

How children negotiate and make sense of social class boundaries

Published in *Children's Geographies*[1]
with Gert Verschraegen and Noel Clycq

Introduction

Adar is an energetic eleven-year-old boy living with his two brothers, sister and parents in a two-bedroom apartment in a disadvantaged neighbourhood of Antwerp, Belgium. His unemployed father, who has migrated from Kurdistan, was a taxi driver but had to quit his job because of health problems. His mother cares for the children and has never done paid work. When we ask Adar to position his family on a socio-economic ladder ranging from one (poor) to ten (rich), he chooses six.

Eleven-year-old Roos lives in a large, beautiful house in an upper-middle-class Antwerp neighbourhood. Her parents are highly educated, and she has a brother. Roos hints that she is encouraged by her parents to fully develop her potential. In her spare time, you can find her, depending on the day's schedule, at scouts, drawing school, tennis school or at her ballet, jazz or modern dance classes. When we ask Roos to position her family on the socio-economic scale, she chooses six.

Ana is a hard-working eleven-year-old girl who aspires to become top of her class and who lives in a small apartment in Antwerp. Her aspirations are fuelled by an intrinsic motivation to achieve and she is also determined to make her parents proud, as they, she believes, came to Belgium to give her a better future. Although the Georgian family has been living in the country for seven years, they have not yet received a legal residence permit, and it is not even clear if they ever will. Because of their undocumented status, Ana's parents have to take on undeclared and thus precarious work. Her father works, as Ana describes, long hours 'in a large freezer where he has to put stickers on food, like bananas', and her mother went back to working a few hours a week as a household help after her youngest son entered kindergarten. Ana believes that the middle of the spectrum, a five, best represents her family situation.

Indeed, although these children come from very different socio-economic backgrounds, they self-identify neither as rich nor poor but as somewhere around the middle. This finding corresponds with previous studies among both adults (Savage, 2015; van Eijk, 2012) and children (Kustatscher, 2017b; Mistry et al., 2015; Rauscher et al., 2017; Sutton, 2009) which indicate that many people, regardless of background, identify this way as they aim to present themselves as 'normal', 'ordinary' or 'middle-class'. Yet, compared to race, ethnicity and gender, researchers have not examined the social construction and negotiation of class position among children in much detail, which calls for further exploration of their attitudes to and experiences of social class (Rauscher et al., 2017).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Antwerp children aged 11 to 13, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of children's active negotiation of their social position in a super-diverse urban environment. In this context, which is characterized by high rates of ethnic diversity as well as poverty (see further), we aim to study how a diverse group of children give meaning to inequality and how they position themselves with regard to different socio-economic groups. The article is structured as follows. We highlight the state of the art and our contribution to the literature before explaining the research context and our methodology. Subsequently, we present our findings and conclude with some reflections on their broader implications and suggestions for further research.

Children's meaning-making about social class

Decades of inquiry into class reproduction and unequal life trajectories have taught us that class position impacts not only how children are raised, but that it also affects children's well-being, peer group formation and educational outcomes (Iqbal et al., 2017; Lareau, 2011). For a long time, this impact of class on children has been investigated by socialisation approaches, which see children as largely 'shaped' by their environment. Yet, a growing number of researchers have criticized these approaches and shifted the focus to children's own experiences of their socio-economic status or class position (Kustatscher, 2017b; Sutton, 2009). After all, class is both a category of practice and a category of social analysis (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). As a category of practice, class is used by everyday actors to position themselves and others. In this paper, we focus on class as a, mostly implicit, category of practice among children. Although children seldomly use the term 'social class', an experience-distant category mostly used by social analysts, they clearly are aware of 'social class boundaries' and actively use ideas about class differences to make sense of their own social position, of their activities, of what they share with and how they differ from other social groups.

Our article contributes to a growing literature studying children's views on social class. Most studies, however, have mainly approached children in pre-defined groups, such as 'poor children' or

'affluent children', to gauge their 'class-based experiences' (e.g., Hagerman, 2018; Weinger, 2000). Far less attention has been paid to how children themselves define and construct differential class positions. Yet, recently, a small but growing number of studies have aimed to tackle this empirical gap by having children themselves define which social class they believe they belong to (e.g., Feddes et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2000; Mistry et al., 2015), and by showing how disadvantaged young people challenge dominant representations about their social class by constructing counternarratives (Nayak and Kehily, 2014; Reay, 2004). Children seem aware of social class hierarchies and are able to position themselves within these. Yet, research also reveals a strong middle-class bias. Mistry et al. (2015), for example, have shown that children generally refer to their own social position as 'middle-class', irrespective of their 'actual' position, and generally attribute positive characteristics to this social group (see also Rauscher et al., 2017). According to these authors, this bias may be motivated by two factors. First, children seem to describe 'the poor' and 'the rich' in such extreme terms (e.g., homeless people vs. Bill Gates) that they cannot identify with the two categories and thus choose to position themselves 'in the middle'. Second, the middle-class is generally seen as socially 'normal' or 'ordinary' and therefore probably as the most desired position to identify with.

In this article, we further analyse this 'middle-class bias' by focussing on children's ability to actively construct, negotiate and challenge perceived social class boundaries. Our research resonates with a rather diverse cultural sociological literature studying the role of meaning-making processes in class and status-group production and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992; Ollivier, 2000). Although this literature is too diverse and voluminous to fully cover here (for an overview, see Lizardo, 2010), we flag some important features. While most researchers in this field use a broad, Weberian idea of class – seen as an aggregate of individuals who share similar 'life chances' – cultural sociology, as a perspective, contrasts with sociological perspectives which focus on analysing class structures regardless of the meanings attached to them, and seldomly take into account the contingent processes of their formation and change. Rather than assuming a society-wide, fixed class hierarchy, cultural sociological research considers class position to be linked to the multi-layered and intersecting 'symbolic boundaries' of occupation, educational background, income, race, gender, and lifestyle that people draw between themselves and others in processes of inclusion and exclusion (Lamont, 1992, 2000). Traditional indicators, such as occupational status or income are crucial but only one of numerous dimensions of class position and status inequality. Contemporary research attempting to study how social actors mark the boundaries between different classes mainly follows Weber and Bourdieu in keying in on culturally variable criteria for class membership (e.g., lifestyle, specific moral qualities, occupational status, cultural sophistication). Lamont (1992), for instance, famously argued that class boundaries based on moral qualities

associated with socio-economic pursuits (e.g., work ethic, strong success orientation) tend to be more salient among the American upper-middle class, while their French counterparts stress cultural boundaries. Instead of working with occupational prestige scales, Ollivier (2000) investigated how different social groups (university professors, electricians, students) each used specific criteria for evaluating occupations and drawing boundaries around occupationally based groups, in an effort to enhance their own social position and downgrade others. Social class boundaries are then not fixed but the product of continuous symbolic negotiations about which markers of class matter most (Savage, 2015; Sayer, 2005).

However, while much research exists on the cultural dimensions of class and differential social status among adults, little is known about how symbolic boundaries are drawn by children when talking about class differences. Yet, if we aim to conduct research with children as actors with agency, we must recognise and value their own categorization of the social world. Whereas research has shown that children define their class position primarily in terms of income and consumption possibilities (Mistry et al., 2015), there are some indications that children also draw boundaries based on symbolic markers such as morality or taste. Pugh (2009) has shown, for example, how upper-middle class children challenge the 'upper-class tastes and values' of their parents by desiring cheap, poor quality goods. By focusing on the details and nuances of children's meaning, this article aims to contribute to this literature by discussing the ways in which children strategically engage in boundary-making to secure their positive self-identity and to present themselves as 'normal'.

Research context, data and methodology

The data presented are drawn from two rounds of in-depth interviews with children in various Antwerp schools (see further). With more than 500,000 inhabitants, Antwerp is Belgium's second city and the largest city in the Flemish region. Although Flanders is among the EU-regions with the lowest child poverty rates, there is a strong ethnic gap: while 6% of Flemish children of EU-born parents are 'at risk of poverty', the at-risk-of-poverty rate among Flemish children of non-EU-descent is as much as 36% (Kind & Gezin, 2018). The latter group is strongly represented in Antwerp, as 75% of the children under the age of ten have a migration background, many of them born in families of non-EU-descent (Stad Antwerpen, 2020). Antwerp thus has a higher share of children born at risk of poverty (27%) than compared to the region of Flanders as a whole (12%) (Kind & Gezin, 2018). Because of both the strong social diversity and inequality, the city is a highly interesting research context to study children's conception and negotiation of class and wealth differences. Furthermore, although these topics have been primarily investigated within Anglo-

Saxon settings (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Kustatscher, 2017b; Mistry et al., 2015; Rauscher et al., 2017; Sutton, 2009; Weinger, 2000), far less is known about children's reasoning in a non-Anglo-Saxon context. It is important to address this major gap, as research indicates that people's perceptions of inequality and different social class groups are shaped by the welfare state regime, the socio-economic context and the public discourses or 'repertoires' that are available to discuss and evaluate social class. Compared to other countries, Belgium has a social welfare system rather based on principles of 'equity' (Arts and Gelissen 2001). Others have shown how class divisions in small, Western European countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands are often minimized, misrecognized or denied. Especially adults tend to self-identify as 'middle-class', 'normal' or even as 'outside the class system' to downplay class hierarchy (Savage 2015; van Eijk 2012). All this raises the question to what extent children socialized in this specific context will use analogous schemata when discussing the differences between social classes.

As indicated, our data have been collected with children in various Antwerp schools. Based on government statistics, we carefully selected six primary schools because of their social mix and location in a more or less disadvantaged neighbourhood (see appendix p. 261). After the six schools had agreed to participate, we gave all sixth-grade pupils information letters and consent forms. We made accessible copies for the children and copies for the parents. Letters were translated into English, French, Arabic and Turkish for non-Dutch-speaking parents. The project was also verbally presented to all pupils and we stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in two rounds. The first round, in which we interviewed 47 children, took place when the children were enrolled in the sixth grade of primary school, and the second round, in which we interviewed a selection of 24 children, after the children's transition to secondary education, approximately eight months later. Yet, the impact of this transition is not the focus of this article and will be discussed elsewhere. The 24 children were selected for the follow-up study based on their and their parents' willingness to further participate, their social position (as interpreted by the researchers), aspirations and we also aimed for a mix regarding ethno-religious background and gender. In the second round, the school context was less central to the current analysis as the research had now become child rather than school centred.

In the first round, the children were generally 11-year-old, a few were 12-year-old (usually pupils with one-year grade retention), and one child, who has not been in the country for long, was 13-year-old. In Table 1, we provide an overview of the participants' migration backgrounds. Based on the information children provided about, among other things, their home and living conditions, parents' occupation and stories about, for example, unpaid bills, we made an estimation of the class they might belong to, making a distinction between 'middle-class' and 'lower-class' children to

analyse our results. The fact that we did not know beforehand what the 'objective' social background of the pupils was, forced us to thoroughly reflect and to ask 'all the right questions', and to also use child-friendly questions to gauge feelings of deprivation. We especially focussed on indicators which are proven to be relevant for children, such as their participation in leisure activities, whether they attend school trips, if they can have friends come over, and so on (see Guio et al., 2018). The researchers' 'ignorance' gave children an open opportunity to narrate and to dramatically 'present' their social identity as they wanted to (see also Kustatscher, 2017b), which led to rich empirical data.

The conversations lasted between 23 and 75 minutes in the first round and between 35 and 100 minutes in the second round. Most of the presented data are drawn from the first round, in which we questioned children's perception of their own social standing and their views on different social groups. Following previous studies on children's conceptions of social class (Kustatscher, 2017b; Mistry et al., 2015; Rauscher et al., 2017), we focused predominantly on financial resources as children define their class position primarily in terms of income and consumption possibilities (Mistry et al., 2015). As a starting point, children were asked to position themselves on a social ladder ranging from one (poor) to ten (rich) (see Goodman et al., 2000). In the first round, this 'ladder' was presented as a horizontal line ranging from poor (left) to rich (right), so that children did not have to position their families within a hierarchy. In the second round, however, the children were literally presented with a ladder ranging from poor (bottom) to rich (top). Both tools led to the same results, indicating that children's self-positioning is not necessarily distorted by the way the ladder is presented. Especially important was the meaning that children attached to their self-positioning. They were therefore asked to explain their choice, to share their views on people in poverty, rich people and people in 'the middle'. We also asked children where they would position their classmates on the ladder. In the second round, we delved deeper into these results and aimed to clarify ambiguities. Although we, for the sake of readability, use terms such as 'middle-class' in this article, sociological classifications were not used in the interviews.

Since the children could define different social groups themselves, we aimed to prevent certain existing status stereotypes from being reproduced. While this can also yield interesting findings, we have not worked with, for example, photos (e.g., of big and small houses) that need to be linked with 'poor' children, 'rich' children or children of certain ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, although the researcher showed appreciation for and interest in children's descriptions of different social classes, she deliberately did not answer in the affirmative, telling them that their answer is 'correct' or 'accurate'. To put them at ease, children were told that they do not have to mention names of classmates they rank below or above themselves on the social ladder, unless they wanted to. Overall, children seemed to experience few problems speaking about their own or others' 'lower'

position on the social ladder, as there are few negative perspectives about these social groups (see results). In addition to this, the study was also approved by the university's ethics committee.

The interviews were conducted by an Antwerp-born social upwardly minority ethnic researcher who grew up in a lower-class family herself. We believe that her sensitivity to many of the lower-class children's home situation allowed the children to freely present their own situation as 'ordinary', as the researcher was seldomly visibly 'surprised' by children's answers. Her familiarity with some forms of vulnerability allowed her to respond rather naturally to the children's answers and to gauge deeper into their perceptions. The minority ethnic children, moreover, seemed to believe in a 'shared minority background', which made them feel comfortable (see Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b).

The interviews were fully transcribed and coded inductively. After a first analysis of the attached codes, we developed a coding scheme bringing together various relevant concepts. Children's perceptions were analysed and refined thoroughly through a repeated coding process. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, after which we translated relevant quotations into English. When additional information had been necessary to clarify quotations, information was added in square brackets. We have provided the quotes with background information on the narrator, and we clearly mention the speakers' social background according to the researchers' classification (RC) and children's self-positioning (SP), ranging from one to ten. We also include the child's age at the moment of the interview, which varies depending on the research round. As in Table 1, we clearly mention the percentage of children in the schools receiving a study allowance (SA) and the percentage of mothers without a secondary education qualification (QM). All names are fictional.

Results

How can we understand children's tendency to position themselves around the centre of the social spectrum? In this section, we first look at the markers that inform children's self-positioning. Subsequently, we analyse children's perceptions of rich people, poor people and people 'in the middle' to analyse how they challenge class boundaries. Our analysis shows that although children from different backgrounds identify with the middle of the spectrum, they construct this position in different ways. Class differences also seem to occur in children's descriptions of 'the poor', although no major differences arise when commenting on 'the rich'. Finally, we examine how children construct, navigate and evaluate these perceived differences in their own school environment.

Positioning oneself on the social ladder

Although the narratives of our interviewed children reveal very different life chances, the vast majority self-identify as neither rich nor poor; more than four fifths of the children position themselves near the middle (range 5-7) and less than a fifth of the children position themselves nearer to the top (range 8-9). No child ascribes themselves to the richest (10) or lowest (<5) groups. Generally, children's self-positioning is informed by various markers: (1) money, purchasing power and consumption patterns, (2) source of money, (3) type of housing, (4) comments made by others and (5) social references (see also Mistry et al., 2015).

Money, purchasing power and consumption patterns are the most common markers children refer to when asked to explain their positioning. Most of our child-respondents refer to how much their families are able to afford and how long they would have to wait or save to be able to buy something. Children strongly emphasize material possessions (e.g., expensive smartphones, branded clothes) to describe their position in the social hierarchy. A few children also associate wealth with access to opportunities, for example by pointing out that they cannot afford to engage in leisure activities, such as sports, like their classmates do. Children likewise refer to how often they can go on vacation or eat in a nice restaurant.

Because of the focus on material possessions, children who perceive that their family spend a lot of money on consumption goods, believe that they are more affluent than others, and the other way around. The children who position themselves nearer the top, believe they are 'richer than people in the middle' because of their families' consumption patterns. Hanane, for example, lives in a single-income family of seven and positions herself near the top of the social ladder:

> Researcher: If you look at your family, which number represents your place?
>
> Hanane: Eight or nine, maybe between those two.
>
> Researcher: Eight or nine, so you're richer than most people but not the richest?
>
> Hanane: (nods)
>
> Researcher: Are you the richest girl in your classroom?
>
> Hanane: (nods)
>
> Researcher: How do you know?
>
> Hanane: My sister works, my mum works, and my brother is going to work. My [other] sister, she's almost sixteen and she'll also work. And my [oldest] sister always buys very expensive shoes if she gets money from her work. (…) She always comes home with new clothes while she already has a lot of clothes

she never wears, but she keeps buying new and new and new.
(R1, 12yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 8 or 9, SA: 68% QM: 71,5%)

As we saw, none of the children position themselves in the lower half of the social ladder. Amadou is the only child in the study who explicitly reports feelings of deprivation, although he also positions himself around the middle:

Researcher: Do you feel different from the other kids [in your classroom]?

Amadou: Yes.

Researcher: In which way do you feel differently?

Amadou: Uhm, because… Yeah, because they have more, much more stuff than I do. [They] get to choose more than I do from their parents.
(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

As Hanane shows above, children also refer to work as a source of money, although to a lesser extent. A few children seem to be aware of the relative status of their parents' occupation and know their parents might earn more or less money than others do. When placing himself on the social ladder, Alexander comments:

Alexander: My parents are doctors and they, yeah, they do earn a lot and…
yeah, that's all I can say.
(R2, 12yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 14%)

While most children solely refer to work as a source of money, Olivia also refers to her family's assets. She states that although her single mother does not earn a lot of money, she does have enough savings which secures them a stable financial position. Olivia also refers to the capital of her, according to her, affluent grandparents. Children generally also, when placing themselves on the social ladder, mention the fact that they live in a house, which is preferred over living in an apartment. Yet, they draw no distinction between families' capacity to buy or to rent a home.

Interestingly, a few children's self-positioning is also influenced by what they hear from others, whether at home or in the peer group:

Researcher: Why six?

Roos: Because we do have a large house, but my mum and dad also talk a lot about… I mean, about uhm… money and stuff, which I'm not supposed to hear, but I hear them.
(R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16,6%)

Researcher: Why seven?

Olivia: Well that's not to be mean but uhm, it's like, many children said a few times, I don't remember exactly how it happened, but one day someone said 'wooow, you're probably very rich?' I was like 'no'. That's because they were at my place, they were very shocked like 'wow'.

Researcher: How would you say your place looks like?

Olivia: It's like, for me it's just normal, it's just cosy, uhm but we maybe do have a few expensive things, like a piano and a djembe, that's a drum, an African drum. And uhm, a beautiful kitchen, like marble, marble or something like that but then it's, it's fake (laughs) but it still looks very chic and yeah just really many things, little things, I think, that show that… Iittala, that's uhm, a brand, like very expensive vases, I don't know. My mum loves it. And also, my grandpa, he works at, I don't know, I can't pronounce it, X (name of leading company) or something like that? And he really has lots of money. I mean, I don't want to say all this, but my mum said they've a lot of money, so if something would happen, they could [help] us.
(R2, 12yo, RQ: middle-class, SP: 7, SA: 20%, QM: 15%)

We also found that, when placing themselves on the social ladder, some children spontaneously make social references, positioning themselves against a significant reference group. Generally, these children mention that they place themselves in the middle because 'they're not poor' but 'also not rich'. Yet, some other children compare themselves more explicitly with other children when the researcher asks them to explain their place on the ladder:

Victor: Because you really can see that some children wear shoes which… that those soles are completely worn out, while we, we'd go to a shoemaker if our soles were worn out and we'd let them fix those soles, while others aren't able to.
(R2, 12y, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 36%, QM: 22%)

While some children compare themselves with other families or peers, some minority ethnic children also seem to refer to their relative status in their parents' countries of birth. These children spontaneously say how their families were or still are considered wealthier in those countries. These arguments are used by both foreign-born (e.g., Hala) and Belgian-born (e.g., Ibrahim) children of immigrants:

Hala: We haven't got the money to buy everything so we're not very rich (…) and it's also not like we can't buy anything so we're not poor either. I've chosen six because we're a little richer than the middle.

Researcher: I see…

Hala: But, but in Iraq, back then in Iraq, if we were in Iraq, I think I'd choose eight.

Researcher: You were richer in Iraq?

Hala: Yes (…). In Iraq, my father and my mother had much better work and we were living in a very large house and we could do whatever we wanted to do.'
(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Researcher: Do you know any rich people by person?

Ibrahim: We have a villa in Morocco.

Researcher: You have a villa in Morocco, so you'd say you're rich in Morocco? What about Belgium?

Ibrahim: In Belgium we have an ordinary house.

Researcher: Where would you place your family [on the ladder]?

Ibrahim: (circles eight)

Researcher: That's in Belgium, right?

Ibrahim: In Morocco.

Researcher: What would you choose in Belgium?
Ibrahim: (circles six)
(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 68%, QM: 71%)

Through this identity management strategy, some minority ethnic children express a double frame of reference, on which they draw to place themselves at a higher, and probably more desired, position. Although this double frame of reference is not the focus of this study, further research should explore how children use these arguments to manage their self-presentation and to protect a positive self-identity.

The grateful, the greedy and the ordinary: images of the poor, the rich and the 'in-betweens'

When we gauge the meanings children create in relation to different social class groups, it becomes very clear that descriptions of 'people in the middle' vary with their own class position. Indeed, although the vast majority of children identify with the 'middle', they have contrasting

understandings of what it entails to belong to this category. Ana, for example, refers to her own family when describing people in the middle:

> Researcher: How would you describe a family in the middle, so rich nor poor?
>
> Ana: Uhm, that's hard, I think… Uhm yeah who… Who actually can do stuff but uhm, I mean, it's like us actually, uhm, yeah sometimes, uhm… If you're in the grocery store, then… If you have money, you fill your shopping cart. If you have less money, then [only] what you need (laughs). So, every time… My dad receives his money at the end of the month so uhm, … If that money is on his debit card, then, then you fill your shopping cart entirely, but uhm… If it's still the middle of the month, then only the things that are yet needed. So, no extra soft drinks and that stuff.
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 5, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

How she describes this middle position clearly differs, however, from the description provided by middle-class children, such as that of Roos:

> Roos: I think just a mediocre house, not really too big and not really too small, and also quite pretty decorated but not that that kind of modern which costs a lot of money. And those children also [have] more toys than poor ones.
> (R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

Hence, when children from different backgrounds position themselves around the middle, they do not necessarily imagine the same pre-defined middle category. Children from lower classes, for example, do not present themselves as 'in-between' by performing a marked out middle-class 'position' or 'lifestyle', nor do they necessarily use an 'information control' strategy (Goffman, 1963) to conceal any financial hardships experienced. On the contrary, they generally define this middle category according to their own financial position and lifestyle, which suggests that children, in the context of our study, are predominantly concerned by normalizing their own position, rather than aiming to pretend to be someone they are not. As the 'rich' and the 'poor' are generally seen as extreme examples and thus as 'non-ordinary' (Mistry et al., 2015), identifying as 'middle-class' is the most available identity management strategy to present oneself as 'ordinary'. Children are still aware of socio-economic differences within their classroom, although they classify their middle-class peers as rather rich, so that they can maintain their position 'in the middle' (see further).

The different ways in which children of diverse social class backgrounds picture social groups becomes even more pronounced when discussing poverty. Many children from a lower-class background give a rather stereotypical and more 'extreme' definition of poverty. In contrast, middle-class children generally describe people in poverty in more nuanced ways. This contradicts earlier

findings that middle-class children have a less realistic picture of what poverty means (Goodman et al., 2000) and that children seem to define differences between the rich and the poor in extreme terms (Mistry et al., 2015; Sutton, 2009). Yet, our results seem consistent with studies showing that children of more highly educated parents have a more complex understanding of poverty and inequality (Flanagan et al., 2014). Except for a few respondents, middle-class interviewees, generally from highly educated parents, hardly refer to severe deprivation, such as homelessness, but tend to focus on families' weaker purchasing power:

> Researcher: A poor family, how would you describe such a family?
>
> Hanne: Ow, uhm… I'm not sure, uhm… I'm not sure how to… yeah, I'm not sure what to imagine, just that they have to be more economical with their money and stuff, and that they can't buy everything and don't get to eat nicely in a restaurant and that stuff, yeah, that they have to pay attention…
> (R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)
>
> Jordy: A poor family, for me, they live in an apartment, they don't have such a uhm large room. And they mostly have a job where you don't earn a lot of money, like garbage collector or so, or… I don't know, tram driver or so, they don't earn as much as my mum and dad. That's it actually… But they can, they have enough food and they often have to take public transport and the… mostly they have to go by tram and bus because they can't afford a car.
> (R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 9, SA: 57%; QM: 49%)

Although not intentionally, these middle-class pupils accurately describe the situation of their less affluent classmates who live in an apartment, whose parents have no car, who hardly go out to nice restaurants and so on. However, because the lower-class children in our study also aim to present themselves as 'normal' or 'middle-class', they have to describe 'the poor' in more severe terms and thus generally construct a category of people that are far more disadvantaged than they are:

> Researcher: How would you describe a poor family?
>
> Enes: Uhmm, homeless, uhm… little [tap] water. If there's water, the water is dirty. And uhm, no GSM, no internet. Yes, that kind of stuff.
> (R1, 12yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 7, SA: 78%; QM: 84%)
>
> Hala: According to me, a poor family… Wait, uhm… They don't have food; they don't have clothes and they just sit on the ground. They, they sleep on the ground, they don't have a bed and so.
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Children's perceptions of the rich, however, do not necessarily seem to vary along class lines. All children focus on the same dimensions when describing the rich, such as their supposed ability to buy whatever their hearts desire. Interestingly, and in contrast to existing literature on children's perceptions of the poor and rich (e.g., Mistry et al., 2015), some children hold rather negative views of rich people (see also Burkholder et al., 2019). When describing the rich, these children spontaneously refer to features such as being 'greedy', 'spoiled', 'pretentious' and 'anti-social'. Even though a few children mention positive aspects of rich people, such as their willingness to support vulnerable groups, these are exceptional, and children often mention that these are 'the good ones', clearly differentiating this group from 'average' rich people. These findings indicate that children draw moral boundaries against 'the rich' to challenge class hierarchies, suggesting that even though the rich belong to the top of the social ladder, they are not superior or more worthy than others (see also van Eijk, 2012). Manal for example, states that: 'sometimes there are good [rich] people who do want to help others a lot, but very many rich people only think about themselves and they keep their money to themselves' (R1, 13yo, RQ: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%), and in a similar vein Louise argues: 'sometimes they're like "I'm rich and you're not". Showing off, that's not that nice' (R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16%).

Negative features, on the other hand, are hardly attributed to people in poverty, who generally are considered to be modest, friendly and grateful. Children do associate being poor with emotional states such as being 'sad' or 'unhappy', but in doing so, they generally express feelings of empathy. Our child-respondents condemn poverty and hardly mention individual factors as causes of poverty. Poverty is predominantly seen as the result of unemployment or 'having bad jobs', and, to a lesser extent, as the result of circumstances such as war. These results contradict many findings, which reveal that children frequently describe rich people in positive and the poor in rather negative terms (Mistry et al., 2015; Rauscher et al., 2017) and that middle-class children tend to express little empathy towards the poor (Goodman et al., 2000). One of the main explaining factors, could be the influence of the broader welfare state system (see discussion).

Constructing peers above and below

To gain more in-depth insight into children's self-positioning, we also gauged how children position their own classmates on the social ladder and how they evaluate others' social standing. Children's tendency to identify with the middle of the social spectrum does not imply that they are unaware of social class differences in their classrooms. While securing the boundaries that ensure their own self-presentation as 'middle-class', most children show awareness of more or less affluent classmates.

Irrespective of their self-positioning in the middle, however, none of the middle-class children indicated in the first round that there are richer pupils in their class. This suggests that their position is seen by most of the middle-class children as the highest social position in their classroom. Unlike many lower-class children who place themselves 'in-between' a group of children 'above' and 'below', most middle-class children position themselves in the middle without identifying a particular group 'above' themselves. This could mean that these children, despite their privileged position, feel uncomfortable ranking themselves above the middle. Some of the middle-class children also mention that they 'do not really pay attention' to others' social position or that they have no idea of how other children's families are getting by. This seems to reflect a certain uneasiness or even 'taboo' among these children to talk about class differences (van Eijk, 2012). Even though less pronounced, class differences also appear when talking about classmates who have less money or are poor. Both lower- and middle-class children believe that some children have less money than they do or state that they are not sure. However, only some lower-class children report that no one has less than they do, suggesting that there are no poor children in their classroom. Children who believe they have classmates who possess less money than they do, usually mention a lack of material possessions or different consumption patterns.

The vast majority of lower-class children, however, and especially those in mixed schools, explicitly refer to pupils who are more affluent than they are. In doing so, they generally focus on the same determinants they refer to in their self-positioning (material possessions, consumption patterns, opportunities, etc.):

> Researcher: Are there children in your classroom who're richer…
>
> Sam: (interrupts) Yes! Yes! Definitely!
>
> Researcher: You're sure of that one, aren't you? Why is that?
>
> Sam: That's because they… We've an apartment but they've a large house. They've a lot of toys and then… I [have] less because I don't like to play and we've a PlayStation. And, to give an example, someone in my class also has a [PlayStation] controller but one of 100 euros instead of 50 euros. And also, a large TV, they have, and also with some other… There's someone who has a house with two floors and that's better than an apartment, I think.
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

> Researcher: Are there children with more money?
>
> Ana: Yes! (laughs)
>
> Researcher: How do you know?

> Ana: Uhm, because they... they've really a lot of hobbies; tennis, football, dance like modern, jazz, ballet, piano, many things, and I only have one dance lesson. And they also really travel a lot, some of them go skiing, others go to… I mean, Roos for example, she really travels a lot, and then I'm like (pretends to be yearning).
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 5, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

Although children believe in others' higher social class position, most claim that they are nevertheless happy with their own position. Moreover, some children express a value judgment when speaking about more affluent children. It seems that these children subtly draw boundaries by emphasizing that others' consumption patterns are not necessarily to be looked up to. Assia, for example, says about a friend whom she perceives as more affluent: 'I often see her literally buying things. Just buying and spending money but I wouldn't buy all those things myself because I wouldn't waste my money on it' (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 5, SA: 78%, QM: 84%).

Hence, some of the lower-class children use a 'comparative strategy of the self' (Sherman, 2005) based on morality to deal with their 'underprivileged' position in the social class hierarchy. The moral boundaries children draw towards the rich also seem to emerge when some children indicate that their classmates' higher social position does not necessarily imply that they are morally superior:

> Yassine: Like those chic [rich] kids, they're like 'look at me'. If they only would think about poverty, then they'd become completely different. If they'd think like 'look at how they [the poor] live, they take food from the trash', I mean, if they'd think about those things, they would potentially change.
>
> Researcher: Become a better person, you mean?
>
> Yassine: Yes.
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Some minority ethnic children spontaneously refer to their classmates of Belgian descent when asked about the most affluent pupils - not surprisingly, as in one of the participating classes (school 3) only majority ethnic children are from a middle-class family. Although most minority ethnic children do not necessarily problematize the relation between class and ethnic background, a few explicitly relate higher social standing with being 'Belgian':

> Sahar: Especially Belgians are rich in this school. I mean, their homes alone, they've very large houses and so. And non-Belgian children, they've like apartments and so (…).
> (…)

Researcher: Why are they richer?

Sahar: Maybe because they… like… Like their grandpa has died or something,
and he was maybe rich, so all the money went to them.
(R2, 12yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 43%, QM: 32%)

Sam: We're not poor but we're also not rich (…). And at the top [of the social
ladder] are Belgians, they've, if they have to make something, they've
everything. They've… Let's say we've to make a school project; they make
theirs very extensive because they've everything they want.
(…)

Researcher: Why do you think Belgians are richer?

Sam: Because they study better or something like that.
(R2, 12y, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 43%, QM: 32%)

Sahar and Sam both link wealth with a certain social position, in particular that of being of Belgian descent, although their explanations differ strongly: Sahar emphasizes certain life chances while Sam stresses personal responsibility. A few other children in mixed schools, both of minority and majority ethnic background, also claim that minority ethnic families may be poorer because some of them had to flee war and had to start all over again. Yet, the majority of our child-respondents did not refer to ethnicity or migration while explaining their views on social class differences. In addition to this, we have showed in a previous article on the same group of respondents (Kostet, Clycq, et al., 2021) how most pupils, including Sahar and Sam, do not believe that children have less chances in life because of a minority ethnic background. This does not necessarily mean that children are not aware of the intersection of class and ethnicity. Yet, as this article is part of a larger research on symbolic boundary-making among children, we did not gauge deeper, for both methodological and ethical reasons, how children perceive the class position of different ethnic groups if they did not bring it up spontaneously. On the one hand, we did not want to influence children's answers when discussing ethnic or religious diversity. On the other hand, as we discussed elsewhere (Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b), most pupils hardly draw boundaries based on ethnicity and we obviously did not want to encourage such boundary-making. Nevertheless, these scarce results do raise important questions for further investigation into children's own conceptions of the intersection of class and ethnicity and how ethnicity affects perception.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature on boundary work and social class by providing a more complex analysis of children's tendency to identify as 'middle-class'. We showed that children strategically negotiate class boundaries to present themselves as 'normal', but that they are simultaneously aware of class differences and the fact that other children are more or less well-off. Yet, this does not mean they explicitly problematize their own social position. Rather they place other groups outside the boundaries of 'ordinariness', for example by classifying their more affluent peers as 'rich'. Indeed, children generally secure their own position as 'normal' by defining 'the middle' of the social spectrum according to their own social location and constructing other social groups around it. While most children identify as middle-class, they do not describe this social category in similar ways, nor do they draw the same boundaries against groups below and above themselves. To present themselves as 'normal', some lower-class children construct a more severe image of 'the poor', and some middle-class children in socio-economically mixed schools show discomfort when talking about class hierarchy, claiming that they do not pay attention to other children's social standing (see also van Eijk, 2012).

Our research contradicts previous studies about children's evaluations of the 'poor' and the 'rich' (e.g. Mistry et al., 2015). We have shown that our child-respondents acknowledge structural factors causing inequality and tend to express sympathy towards the poor. Negative features, however, are attributed to rich people, who are generally considered to be greedy, selfish and lacking morality. We argue that both the negative perceptions of the rich and the uneasiness among some children to discuss class hierarchy, can partly be understood within the welfare state context in which these children grow up. As previous studies (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Lamont, 2000) have shown, individuals do not solely draw boundaries out of personal interest; their perceptions are also shaped by structural factors and by the public repertoires available to them within a specific welfare state regime. Whilst most research on children's perceptions of social class is conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries with a liberal welfare regime which assumes available equal opportunities and holds people responsible for their own social position, the Belgian welfare state regime is traditionally much more based on principles of equity (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Kluegel and Smith, 1986), which can possibly explain the uneasiness, also among some of our child-respondents, to talk about class hierarchy (van Eijk, 2012).

Another important finding is that minority ethnic children use their double frame of reference to strengthen their social position. A few also appear to believe that mainly children of Belgian descent are 'rich', which is not surprising as child poverty in Antwerp strongly intersects with a

minority ethnic background. Albeit this is a relevant finding, the intersection of class and ethnicity was not a dominant topic in our interviews. Furthermore, because of the larger research context this article is part of, we did not strongly elaborate on how children conceptualize the intersection of class and ethnicity themselves. We acknowledge that this is both a limitation of the study and a large gap in the broader literature. While there is a reasonable number of studies on how younger children, youth and adults experience the intersection of class and ethnicity or race, research with the age group between 11 and 13 is scarce (Ghavami and Mistry, 2019). The limited evidence, however, shows that pre-adolescent children's perceptions of social class are strongly racialized and that they are more likely than younger children to link poverty with structural factors such as racism (Ghavami and Mistry, 2019; Seider et al., 2019), which, indeed, calls for further investigation.

5

Children's conflicting repertoires on aspirations and life chances

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with Noel Clycq and Gert Verschraegen

Introduction

Many educational policies have increasingly placed the responsibility to academically succeed on pupils and their parents by calling for disadvantaged children to 'raise their aspirations' (Brown, 2011; Zipin et al., 2015). Such an approach of education may seem justified, as research shows that in many countries minority and lower-class children perform academically less well than their majority and middle-class peers (OECD, 2017). Yet, a growing body of international literature has shown that many disadvantaged pupils already have high aspirations; in some cases minority children even seem to have higher aspirations than their 'native' peers, although they perform less well; this has become known as the 'aspirations-achievement paradox' (Croll, 2008; OECD, 2018; Salikutluk, 2016; Van Praag, D'hondt, et al., 2015). The high aspirations of some minority youth indicate a strong desire to climb the socio-economic ladder by achieving a 'high status' occupation (Salikutluk, 2016). This meritocratic approach towards success, however, contrasts with studies showing that socio-demographic variables continue to have a strong impact on individual performances and success (Hadjar and Becker, 2016). Despite this continuing inequality and achievement gap between privileged and disadvantaged children, however, little is known about how children assess their own life chances and how they make sense of the relationship between structural constraints and future success.

In this research, we will tackle this empirical gap by investigating Flemish children's aspirations and assessments of life chances (see e.g., Clycq et al., 2014; Van Praag, D'hondt, et al., 2015 for research among adolescents). This paper contributes to the literature on aspirations in three ways. First, in contrast to existing literature (see e.g., Harden et al., 2012; McMahon et al., 2001), we focus not only on educational and occupational aspirations, but more explicitly on children's

aspirations to climb the social ladder (or not). By doing so, we address a gap in research into children's reasoning about and active negotiation of their socio-economic background (Rauscher et al., 2017) and contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between occupational aspirations and desired social mobility (Salikutluk, 2016).

Second, by building on cultural sociological literature, we highlight how children strategically draw on various and even conflicting 'cultural repertoires' (Lamont and Small, 2008), which are made available to them through, among other things, schooling, media, parental socialization and peer interactions. They use these repertoires to make sense of inequality and express their faith in disadvantaged children's agency to pursue their ambitions. The concept of cultural repertoires is particularly interesting as it acknowledges that children actively interact within different cultural environments, which provide some children with a wider array of repertoires than others to make sense of and to navigate inequality (Lamont and Small, 2008). We therefore focus on the differential ways in which a diverse group of children assess their own life chances and how they relate these to inequality.

Third, we focus on the educational system of Flanders, which is known as a typical early tracking system with strong inequalities between pupils of different backgrounds (Blossfeld et al., 2016) To this end, we first elaborate on this specific context which will allow us to better grasp the processes and repertoires we further discuss. We proceed by briefly surveying existing research and further outlining our conceptual framework, after which we describe the research context, data and methods. Subsequently, we describe children's socio-economic aspirations and how they plan to achieve their desired social position; we examine how children assess their own life chances, and we broaden our analysis by asking our child-respondents how they assess less affluent and minority ethnic pupils' chances of achieving academic and professional success. We end with a brief conclusion.

The Flemish education system

It is well-known that meritocracy as an ideal is deeply ingrained in many societies, and particularly in Europe and in the United States. Also in the Flemish education system, meritocracy is broadly endorsed by pupils, parents and educators (Clycq et al., 2014). Yet, at the same time, pupils' background characteristics remain a strong predictor for their performances (Danhier, 2018). In Flanders, pupils with a migration background and/or pupils who live in a socio-economically vulnerable household, have less chances to perform well on tests, compared to disadvantaged pupils in many other European countries (Bol and Van de Werfhorst, 2016). One of the main reasons for

this divide is that, already at the age of 12, children are prepared for a track, whereas many education systems in other countries only start tracking around the age of 15 or 16 (see Schleicher, 2018). The early tracking of pupils, based on their presumed 'ability', leads to very homogeneous class groups, where all are believed to have the same abilities. This is assumed to lead to an increased general belief in meritocracy (Mijs, 2016).

When they make the transition from primary education to secondary education, children are first referred to a specific 'stream'. This 'streaming' into the 'A-stream' (for children who successfully completed primary education) and the 'B-stream' (for children who did not complete it successfully), consist of a two-year preparation for a specific track. After these two years, children are tracked into (1) the general or academic track, that prepares for tertiary education, (2) the technical track, that prepares for both tertiary education and the labour market, or (3) the vocational track, that prepares explicitly for the labour market. Although the latter does not exclude access to tertiary education, pupils are much less prepared (if not completely unprepared) for higher education after this track. It is important to note, however, that the streams in which pupils end up in the first two years of secondary education do not determine their future choice, but that mobility from the B-stream to the general or technical track is much less encouraged (and feasible) than vice versa as the vocational track is considered to be academically 'easier'. However, it often happens that children start in the A-stream and aspire to a general track, but are referred to the technical or vocational track during their school career.

While the track choice is formally the free choice of pupils and their parents, research has revealed that teacher's advice is important in guiding pupils towards a track. Moreover, research has shown that teachers in Flanders are often biased by pupils' background characteristics when giving advice, and that they often refer children with a migration background and/or children who are socio-economically disadvantaged to technical or vocational education, even in cases where pupils have sufficiently high grades and motivation to enter the general track (Boone and Van Houtte, 2013; Sneyers et al., 2018). This leads to an overrepresentation of disadvantaged pupils in the technical and vocational track, which are generally perceived as less prestigious and valuable (Stevens and Vermeersh, 2010).

Given this context, which is quite illustrative for early tracking systems in other countries, we focus on the aspirations of pupils before they enter a very strict and hierarchical tracking system. Although our child-respondents have already entered a specific stream, based on whether they have successfully completed primary education or not, they have not yet been explicitly confronted with the advice of adults (be they parents or teachers) to pursue an academic or vocational trajectory based on their perceived 'abilities'. However, during these preparatory years, children are encouraged to

reflect on their abilities and future dreams by, among other things, introducing them to different scientific fields (A-stream) or manual-skilled professions (B-stream).

Aspirations and repertoires on social mobility among children

Aspirations are a major topic within educational policy, especially as 'poverty of aspirations' is seen as one of the main factors causing weak educational outcomes among disadvantaged youth (Archer et al., 2014). Yet, in recent years, an extensive body of literature has challenged this perception and has shown that aspirations among disadvantaged groups are high, and in some educational contexts even higher than those of privileged children, although they perform less well (see e.g., Croll, 2008; OECD, 2018; Salikutluk, 2016; Van Praag, D'hondt, et al., 2015). Even more, research has revealed 'doxic aspirations' among these groups, who believe that their socio-economic or ethnic background will not determine – and not even strongly influence – their future life chances. Doxic aspirations can therefore be defined as rather idealistic goals, shaped through the normalization and internalization of the ambitions and achievements of those with more opportunities in life, assuming these opportunities are available for everyone (Zipin et al., 2015). Research has shown, for instance, that disadvantaged children aspire to comparable careers to their affluent peers (Archer et al., 2014; Baillergeau et al., 2015), although the desired professions require accumulated social, cultural and economic capital many disadvantaged children hardly have access to and which are not made available to them through schooling (Zipin et al., 2015).

Importantly, however, is that aspirations are not fixed; doxic aspirations can also 'weaken' over time and transform into a 'habituated logic for aspiring'. The latter is grounded in biographic-historical conditions or what is widely known as one's 'habitus' (Zipin et al., 2015). When confronted with their disadvantaged position and/or low expectations from others, some young people 'adapt' their aspirations to these expectations and constraints and internalize the self-limiting idea that not everything is possible for 'people like them'. Hence, unlike those who exhibit doxic aspirations, these young people believe that their future is strongly influenced by their current situation, although some relapse into individual blame ('I should have worked harder') – which is one adverse effect of meritocratic thinking – rather than acknowledging structural barriers and inequality (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019; Clycq et al., 2014). Young people can also internalize both doxic and habituated aspirations at the same time; for example, when expressing aspirations for high-status careers and simultaneously referring to a back-up plan (e.g., becoming a nurse instead of a doctor) as they realise they may not achieve their initial plans because of their life circumstances. This also points to the important distinction between 'aspirations' for the future and 'expectations' of the future, as

expectations are not necessarily in line with a person's aims (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019; Khattab, 2014; Zipin et al., 2015).

Children from similar backgrounds, then, can imagine their future in different ways, despite continuing class-based patterns. Indeed, because young people develop their aspirations under various, intertwined conditions, we need to consider that habitus and dispositions can develop and be actualized very differently. Recent research, for example, has focused on the individuated ways in which children of low-educated immigrants overcome structural barriers on their path to upward social mobility, by developing strong social skills and by adapting their self-presentation to the expectations of others (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019; Crul et al., 2017). However, little attention has been paid to the ways in which children subjectively experience the relationship between opportunities and success, and how children assess their own life chances (Betz and Kayser, 2017). Children's agency to deal with inequality has hardly been acknowledged (Kim and Gewirtz, 2019). Among the exceptions are studies that indicate that higher- and lower-class children have different perceptions of life chances and inequality, yet, other studies argue that children's perceptions are more related to their position as children (e.g. limited knowledge of structural inequality) than to their membership of a specific social class (Betz and Kayser, 2017). In this paper we aim to shed light on these issues from the perspective of children navigating a Flemish educational system reproducing socio-economic and ethnic inequalities, but at the same time steered by dominant meritocratic rhetoric.

Research context, data and methodology

This article draws on two rounds of in-depth interviews with 47 children in various Antwerp schools. Antwerp is the second largest city in Belgium and the largest city of the Flemish region. This research context is particularly interesting, as the region's child poverty rates have revealed a strong ethnic gap. While 6% of Flemish children of EU-descent are at risk of poverty, the poverty-risk rate among Flemish children of non-EU-descent is as high as 36% (Kind & Gezin, 2018). Children of non-EU-descent are strongly represented in Antwerp, where 75% of the children younger than ten have a migration background, the largest group originating from Morocco. The city, hence, has a relatively high percentage of vulnerable children compared to other regions in Flanders (Stad Antwerpen, 2020). Moreover, research has also revealed an enduring ethnic gap in Flemish children's educational outcomes. Among the OECD-countries, the achievement gap between majority and minority ethnic children is almost nowhere as strong as in Flanders, which makes it structurally difficult for disadvantaged minority children to climb the social ladder (OECD, 2017).

To analyse children's socio-economic aspirations and assessments of life chances, we selected six primary schools, based on their social mix and location in a more or less deprived neighbourhood (see appendix p. 261). After an exploratory interview with the principals or teachers, we handed out accessible information letters and consent forms to all sixth-grade pupils. We made copies for both children and parents. For non-Dutch-speaking parents the letters were translated into English, French, Arabic and Turkish. We stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential. The study was also approved by the university's ethics committee.

The second round, which entailed interviews with a selection of 24 children, took place after the children's transition to secondary education, approximately eight months after the first research round. The 24 children were selected based on their willingness to further participate in the study, their social position (based on the educational level and occupation of the parents, as reported by the children), and we also considered children's ethno-religious background and gender. After their transition to secondary education, 23 of the 24 children ended up in the A-stream as they successfully have completed primary education, and one child, who has not obtained a primary school leaving certificate, ended up in the B-stream. At the beginning of the study, the children were between 11 and 13-years-old; in the second round they were a year older. The appendix on page 262 gives an overview of the pupils' ethnic backgrounds.

The interviews lasted between 23 and 75 minutes in round one and between 35 and 100 minutes in round two. The data presented in this article, are particularly drawn from the second research round, in which we gauged children's ambition to climb the social ladder (or not) and how children asses their own and others' life chances. The fact that we had already completed a research round contributed to the trust towards the researcher among the child-respondents. By now, after eight months, the children could be sure that the researcher was not passing any information to their teachers or parents, and they clearly felt more at ease.

Although we use terms such as 'social mobility', 'socio-economic ladder' or 'aspirations' in this article, these sociological terms were not used in the interviews. To avoid technical vocabulary, we gauged children's ambitions to climb the social ladder by asking them to position their family on a socio-economic ladder, which was literally presented with a drawing of a ladder ranging from one (the bottom of the ladder which stood for 'poor') to ten (the top of the ladder or 'rich'). Subsequently, we asked the children which position they would like to achieve themselves when they grow up. This focus on financial resources to grasp children's aspirations to climb the social ladder (or not) stems out of research which shows that children define their social position primarily in terms of income and consumption possibilities (Mistry et al., 2015).

To analyse how children assess life chances, we presented them with the following 'icebreakers', which they had to complete with the words 'less', 'more' or 'as much':

- *I believe that I have _____ chance as/than my classmates to achieve my dreams.*
- *I believe that I have to prove myself _____ as/than my classmates.*
- *Children from less affluent families get _____ chances to do well at school.*
- *Children with a migration background get _____ chances to do well at school.*

After we had transcribed and coded the interviews inductively with NVivo12, we developed a coding framework combining various relevant concepts. We refined this framework during the analysis, which led to a repeated coding process. As the children spoke Dutch intelligibly (and most of them fluently), all interviews were conducted in Dutch, after which we translated relevant quotations in this article literally into English. All names are fictional.

Results

To understand children's aspirations and reasoning about inequality in relation to life chances, we first describe the children's socio-economic aspirations and how they plan to achieve their desired social position. Subsequently, we examine how children assess their own life chances. Finally, we broaden our analysis by asking our child-respondents how they assess less affluent and minority ethnic pupils' chances to achieve academic and professional success. We highlight the conflicting yet creative ways in which children make sense of inequality.

Socio-economic aspirations

To analyse whether children aim for upward social mobility later in life, we first asked them how they assess their current family position on the social ladder, choosing a number ranging from one (poor) to ten (rich). Subsequently, we asked the children where they would like to stand on the ladder when they grow up. Slightly more than a third of the children aspire to climb a step or two higher than their perceived current position, almost a third of the children aspire to climb much higher or to become super rich, and almost a third aspire to remain in the same position as their parents.

The children who aim to remain in the same position on the social ladder state that they are happy with their situation as it is. Children who aim to climb the social ladder, whether only by a few steps or by becoming super rich, report that they do not want their children to be short of anything

and that having more money would allow them to donate to charity. The children who aim to become rich also mention their ambitions to travel the world. Moreover, some children in both groups, particularly lower-class children, aim to climb the social ladder to support their parents and extended family. It seems that these latter children feel, as it were, 'morally obliged' to climb the social ladder in order to support their parents:

> Yassine: I give my best [at school] to have a good life later and also for my mum a little bit, so I can pay for her later.
>
> Researcher: What things do you want to pay for?
>
> Yassine: Uhm, for example [when] she asks like, like I have to bring something for her [from the grocery store], or pay for milk for her, for [bottled] water or something like that.
>
> Researcher: You want to do all those things for your mum?
>
> Yassine: Yes, sometimes she says 'if I have money [in the future for the groceries], I'll give it to you [then]'. But if she hasn't got the money, I want to bring it for her.
> (12y, self-identifies as Tunisian)

This is especially notable among children who believe that their parents have migrated or have worked extra hard to give the children a 'better future' and who want to 'repay' them. The children express a certain loyalty towards their parents and a desire to make them proud; this confirms research that has shown that gaining social recognition of their loved ones is also an aspiration of many disadvantaged youth (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2019). Ana, for example, explains that her parents experience financial difficulties because of their low-paid work as undocumented immigrants. She is aware of her family's precarious situation and hopes to earn more money than her parents currently do:

> Ana: Because my parents, that they'd ever, that they'd be able to live when they're older. That they could experience one day that they have whatever they want. (…) Oh yeah, that they wouldn't feel like in the past, like we're short of money or something like that. I want to give that to them.
> (12y, self-identifies as Georgian)

When we discuss her family's consumption patterns, Ana continues:

> Ana: My parents, if I deserve it, then they buy it [sweater of fifty euros] anyway. Even if they don't have much money at the moment, that's really super nice.

(…) I mean… I… I try to achieve good grades and so to thank them a little bit, let's say, because they work super hard and my, my mum, my dad and mum have always said they are only in Belgium for me, so that I can have a better future because that's harder in Georgia.
(12y, R2, self-identifies as Georgian)

Jeremy, who says that it is more difficult for his mother to support two children since his parents have divorced, has 'great plans' for when he becomes rich:

Jeremy: So that I can afford myself a lot, not for myself but for my children. And then yeah… And also for my family themselves. Because, I mean, I have a lot of great plans for when I'll stand there [at the top of the ladder].

Researcher: What are those plans?

Jeremy: Like, I mean, I'd buy a car for my mum, like a Range Rover. And for my dad a Mercedes, but yeah, then I really have to… And I'd also give to my family in Africa. (…) And also, to charity, like sponsor… to sponsor charities, like Neymar does.
(12y, self-identifies as Congolese, Nigerian and Lebanese)

Our child-respondents believe that their desired social position is best achieved through high educational qualifications and a good job (see also Harden et al., 2012). Most report that they already know what they want to become. Children from different socio-economic backgrounds tend to aspire to comparable professions (see Archer et al., 2014). Both lower- and middle-class children generally express high aspirations for 'high-status' careers, such as doctor, engineer, vet or architect. Only three (lower-class) children express aspirations for manual skilled jobs, such as baker and chef. A few children additionally mention the possibility of becoming rich through their hobby:

Researcher: You want to climb to ten. (…) How are you going to make that happen?

Doha: With uhm… fashion or architecture. Architects really do earn a lot of money.

Researcher: Is that why you want to become one? For the money?

Doha: Yes, also for the money but also because I really like it. Or maybe with my hobby, that's also a possibility. (…) Boxing. (…) My aunt, for example, she has a few cups as world champion Thai boxing, so that's why. And she really did earn a lot of money with it, so that's a possibility.
(13y, self-identifies as Moroccan)

In this quote, Doha shows that she is inspired by her aunt's career, she also aims to become a self-employed architect or fashion designer because everyone in her family is self-employed (see further). Some children's aspirations, hence, seem to be motivated by their family's professions, like Alexander who aims to be a doctor like both his parents, to maintain his comfortable lifestyle. These children aim to follow in their relatives' footsteps, as these steps have proven to be both achievable and successful. Other children, especially lower-class children, report that they are motivated by their parents to aim high and to work towards a high-status career, although there is no one in these children's proximate environments in the profession. These children report that their (mostly low-educated) parents expect them to perform and to achieve.

While both lower-class and middle-class children mention comparable high-status professions when we gauge their future dreams, their narratives reveal very different life chances. Both Alexander and Adar, for example, aspire to become doctors, but these aspirations are not equally achievable for both pupils. While Alexander has a rather realistic idea of the hard work that becoming a doctor will take (i.e., he refers to internships), and is when necessary assisted by his parents while doing homework, Adar indicates that his two-years younger brother helps him when he is stuck with his homework. While Alexander has his own study room and a stable financial home situation, Adar lives with his family of six in a two-bedroom apartment and has no study room for himself.

Assessments of own life chances

How do children deal with this inequal distribution of life chances? In this section, we examine whether children are aware of their position and how they assess their own chances.

The vast majority of our child-respondents express a high level of faith in achieving their desired social position and believe in their personal agency. Some do state that it will not be easy to climb the social ladder and they will have to work very hard, yet, strongly believe that their hard work at school will pay off (see also Betz and Kayser, 2017; Franceschelli and Keating, 2018). Liam, for example, is a well-performing pupil who aims to be a star football player. However, as he realises that developing a football career is not easy, he is also determined to achieve good grades so that he can find a good job if necessary (see also Croll, 2008). In any case, Liam has faith in his ability to climb the social ladder:

> Researcher: So, you believe that you'll have more money than your parents currently do?
>
> Liam: Yes, I have faith in it.

Researcher: Where do you get that faith from?

Liam: I believe in myself. But not in such a way that I'll say I'll become better than Messi or so, but just… Because I have quite high grades and you need a diploma to go to a good company. So, I'm trying to get the best possible grades, as better as possible, as good as possible… As good as possible grades for when I want to go to a good company, then I can show my qualification and they will see 'Aha, he has good grades, we'll hire him'.
(12y, self-identifies as French, Moroccan and Belgian)

Our results show that children from all social backgrounds generally believe that anything is possible if you work hard towards your goals. This points to doxic aspirations among our lower-class pupils who fully embrace meritocratic discourses. Most children do not believe that their own social background will negatively influence their dreams and achievements. In fact, the vast majority of our child-respondents believe that they are from a 'normal' socio-economic background. They do not consider themselves 'poor' or 'lower-class', which probably explains why they do not doubt their life chances. Ana is one of the very few pupils who are aware of their vulnerable position as children of less wealthy – and in her case undocumented - parents, yet, she nevertheless expresses faith in the future. Although it is not clear whether her family will ever receive legal residence and if it will be possible for her to pursue higher education in Belgium, this hardworking pupil hopes that her efforts will pay off:

Researcher: You believe you have to prove yourself more than others do?

Ana: Because I think everyone in my classroom has Belgian documents [legal residence] and so I have to do my very best to receive Belgian documents because I've heard it's [good grades] really important for regularisation. So actually, I want to do my best more than others, also for my parents, that they can be proud of me and… That maybe life can become easier because of my good grades.

Researcher: Is it fair that you have to prove yourself more than others have to?

Ana: No, I don't think that's fair but that's just the way it is.
(12yo, self-identifies as Georgian)

This line of reasoning is also expressed by Doha, who believes that she has to prove herself more than others because of her minority ethnic background. This Belgian-born girl of Moroccan descent and daughter of fishmongers, aims to become an architect or fashion designer:

Researcher: Do you believe you're more likely than others to achieve your goals?

Doha: Yes because I, I already know that I'll work very hard for it, my dreams.

Researcher: Harder than others do?

Doha: Yes, harder than others do. I'd give everything to achieve my goals.

Researcher: Where does such a determination come from?

Doha: It's in my family, yes, it's in our family. (…) It's in the family, everyone is self-employed. Everyone.

Researcher: But you also believe that you have to prove yourself more than others do. Why is that?

Doha: Because I uhm, have another nationality. That's, that's just the way the world works.

Researcher: Do you have the feeling that others expect less…

Doha: (interrupts) Yes. It's fun to show them, you see. They expect little of you but then you can show them you can do so much, and then they'll be disappointed and that's nice to see.

Researcher: They'll be disappointed?

Doha: Yes. It's nice to see that.

Researcher: Why?

Doha: Because they don't expect it from someone like that [minority ethnic person]. (…)

Researcher: And how are you going to prove yourself? In which way?

Doha: Work really hard, really show them what I'm able to, despite the fact they say I don't.
(13y, self-identifies as Moroccan)

As Ana believes that these perceived double standards are unjust, but 'just the way it is', Doha sighs:

Researcher: How do you feel about that? That you constantly have to prove yourself.

Doha: I think that's sad, yeah because that's how the world works. (…) It only motivates me to work harder.

Researcher: Don't you ever get angry or blue?

Doha: No, I don't get angry or whatever at all. It only motivates me to work harder. (13y, self-identifies as Moroccan)

Despite their meritocratic beliefs, a few children express awareness of their privileged position. These children consider the risk of becoming poor rather small because of their parents' help. It seems that children are more likely to recognize that their financial home situation is in their favour than to their disadvantage (see also Kim and Gewirtz, 2019). Although a very few of our lower-class pupils also state that they have little chance of becoming poor because of their family's help, it is mainly the middle-class children who explicitly refer to their comfortable home situation as a 'safety net':

> Researcher: What are the odds that you'll become poor in the future?
>
> Emiel: Mmm, I don't have the worst grades so… I think I'll find a good job. I think like 5%? Not that much risk that I'll… Because I already get quite a lot of money from my parents so… (…) My parents deposit it on my bank account, so I'll get it… I mean, my mum always says you should have money for, let's say, your first car, your first house.
> (12yo, self-identifies as Belgian)

Sahar, at last, does not believe that she will become poor because: 'it's not possible in Belgium to get really, really poor, because mostly you'll get money or something from the government or something like that.'

Reasoning about inequality in relation to others' life chances

While the narratives of the interviewed children reveal very different social backgrounds, they all claim to have a 'normal' financial home situation. It is then unsurprising that they do not believe their background will have a negative impact on their future. In order to gain more insight into the links children make between inequality and life chances, we asked them how they assess the chances of children *who are less affluent* – a category with which even the less affluent children in the study do not identify. Do children believe that those who are not in, in their terms, a 'normal' social position, have fewer chances in life? Only a few children believe that a disadvantaged position can negatively influence one's future, in the sense that poor children may not be able to afford books for school, or may be less able to concentrate on school due to their problems at home. A few pupils believe that ethnic background can negatively impact children's opportunities, indicating that minority ethnic children who speak Dutch less well may have to work harder for the Dutch classes, adding however that these students can perform equally well in other classes, such as mathematics or natural sciences. Nevertheless, the vast majority of pupils believe that children generally have equal chances in life, irrespective of socio-economic and ethnic background.

Sam, for example, is the son of a taxi driver and a mother who does not do paid work, and lives with his family of six in a two-bedroom apartment. Although he believes he is in a 'normal' position, he is aware that some children in his classroom are more affluent. He describes these children as 'rich', although they are, considering the school characteristics, very likely middle-class. Sam states that the 'rich children' in his classroom are able to buy anything they need for school (e.g., craft materials for creative projects), compared to the 'normal' children, including himself. Yet, Sam does not believe that children's social background is related to educational success:

> Researcher: You say that children from less affluent families have as much chance to do well at school. But I've also heard you say that when you have to do a school project…
>
> Sam: (Interrupts) Yes, but that's not the point. It's just… At school in general, the grades, in those things they do have as much chance. Imagine you're, you don't have enough money for stuff, then… The school will set up a charity for you. They've already done that for a boy who wanted to go on vacation but didn't have the money, and they set up a charity.
> (12y, self-identifies as Belgian and 'partly' Iranian)

This reasoning is also present in the narratives of other children. Jeremy, who aspires to become a professional footballer, notes that the children in his sport-oriented school probably all have money, because the school requires some financial resources (e.g., for the expensive sport uniforms, etc.), yet also argues that the amount of money at home is not important in achieving goals:

> Researcher: Having enough money at home isn't important?
>
> Jeremy: No, not necessarily, because, I mean, Ronaldo and others, they were very poor, I'd say, in the past and now… Look where they're now.
>
> Researcher: Yet you said before that if you haven't got enough money, you'd probably not be able to come to this school?
>
> Jeremy: Yeah, that's right, but yeah… Because if you're really top, top, if you stand out, like Ronaldo, then they will give you a discount or free.
> (12yo, self-identifies as Congolese, Nigerian and Lebanese)

Some even believe that poor children have more chances in life than others. They seem to believe in a romantic ideal in which poor people can work themselves out of poverty by all means. Jeremy's classmate, Liam, who also plays high-level football, explains:

Researcher: Children with less money have as much chance to do well, you think?

Liam: Yes, because they have what we have and maybe they even have a little bit more chance because if they're poor, then they want to get out of poor… I mean, out of….

Researcher: Poverty?

Liam: Yes, out of poverty. So, they will go on that field, play football, they'd want to push everyone away, take that ball, score. They'd like to show themselves so that they can be scouted by a better team to which they can go. So maybe, they do have a little bit more chance. (…) Gabriël Jesus, a Brazilian, there's a picture of him that he, five years ago, in the streets uhm, was cleaning in the favelas and now he plays for Manchester City.
(12yo, self-identifies as French, Moroccan and Belgian)

These meritocratic stories are probably more salient among aspiring professional footballers as there are indeed examples of talented footballers climbing from the bottom to the very top of the ladder, but we find similar narratives in schools not oriented to sports:

Layla: Those with less money tend to think more about their studies to get more money later in their jobs, so they'll do their very best. And they really think a lot about their future and friends aren't really important for them, I think. They only think about grades, grades, grades and so I believe that they have really a lot of chance to become rich.
(12yo, no ethnic self-identification)

It seems that children draw on different, and even conflicting, public repertoires to make sense of inequality. They do not believe that individuals are responsible for their own poverty; they acknowledge structural factors and the role of unforeseen circumstances (e.g., war, health circumstances, etc.), yet also emphasize the individual's ability to escape poverty, especially by hard work. The ways in which children draw on these different repertoires becomes even more pronounced when we play the devil's advocate:

Researcher: You believe you're more likely to become rich than poor?

Alexander: Yes, because if we're [own family] going to be poor, I'll work even harder so I can earn more money again.

Researcher: If you risk falling into poverty, you'll just work harder?

Alexander: Yes, I think so.

Researcher: Why do you believe that?

Alexander: Because, I don't want that… If I have a family, that they… Yeah, I don't want them to be less well-off.

Researcher: Does that also mean that people who're effectively poor just don't work hard enough?

Alexander: Nooooooooo. No, they can't do anything about it, but yeah. Yeah, I don't know… Maybe they don't have a nice job, or they can't pay the taxes. I don't know if taxes are high, but I think that they're quite expensive since they have to give everyone retirement funds.
(12yo, self-identifies as Belgian)

Although Ikram studies hard so she would be able to find a well-paid job, she questions the way in which people are paid differently depending on their jobs. She wants to achieve a stable financial situation by having a good job herself, but she does not necessarily believe that income differences are always fair:

Researcher: Why do some people have more money than others?

Ikram: Because they have a better job.

Researcher: Which jobs are better paid than others?

Ikram: Uhm, lawyer, then you really earn a lot. Uhm, working for an insurance company, for a bank. And poor people, like saleswoman. Uhm yes, working at a store.

Researcher: Those people earn less money, you say. Do you think that's fair?

Ikram: No, everyone should earn… they should look at the situation. Like if you have children, if you're able to feed your children, those are people who should be paid more. (…)

Researcher: How should people in poverty be helped?

Ikram: By the government, like they should give them money. (…) Or yeah, people in general should also be nicer and donate money, like the rich people.

Researcher: Is poverty ever the fault of people in poverty themselves?

Ikram: No.

When we delve into their reasoning and ask the children whether they also know real life stories of individuals who have climbed the social ladder, we note that children predominantly draw inspiration from success stories in completely different socio-economic and political contexts. Both children's double frame of reference and popular culture feed these 'glocalization' processes (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004) in which children convey global narratives to give meaning to their own local

context. Layla tells the story of her nephew in Morocco who started to work very hard to achieve social mobility after his older sister had died of cancer. Yassine reports that 'in Tunisia, they're often poor there and yeah, then they do their very best to become better'. As we saw above, Jeremy and Liam express their faith in meritocracy through the trajectories of the once 'humble' children, Cristiano Ronaldo and Gabriël Jesus, who became among the greatest star footballers. Liam also speaks about the sports drama film *The Blind Side*, based on a true story, in which Michael Oher, a young disadvantaged boy who moves from foster family to foster family, becomes a star American football player. As Zipin and colleagues (2015) argue, popular media indeed often promote doxic logics and meritocratic beliefs.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined how Flemish children of diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds creatively and strategically draw on available cultural repertoires to navigate socio-economic inequality. We focused on the different ways in which child-respondents discuss their socio-economic aspirations, their life chances and how these are related to inequality. This focus is relevant because socio-economic and ethnic inequalities are prevalent in the Flemish education system.

Our child-respondents generally believe that their family's place is in the middle of the socio-economic ladder. Our lower-class pupils, then, display little insight into their vulnerable position. Unsurprisingly, our children aim to maintain the position their parents have acquired or to climb the social ladder, often referring to the comfortable lifestyle they want to keep. Particularly interesting is the result that vulnerable children – already at the age of 11 to 13 – want to improve their position to support their parents or to 'repay' their parents for everything they have done for them. These feelings of loyalty and care are particularly strong among our disadvantaged, minority ethnic children, some of whom believe their parents have migrated to give their children a better future. Although research shows that these children are more likely to be confronted with educational inequality (OECD, 2018; Van Praag et al., 2014), they assess their chances to achieve social mobility and high-status careers to be high – a finding that is in line with existing research on aspirations among Flemish adolescents (see Van Praag, D'hondt, et al., 2015) and which indicates doxic aspirations among these groups. This also indicates that our child-respondents have internalized – or at least strongly draw on - dominant meritocratic repertoires on success. Our child-respondents generally expect to climb the social ladder through education (see also Harden et al., 2012), some, however, refer to socio-economic mobility through sports or other extracurricular activities. While many are convinced that they will achieve if they work hard and do their best, a few argue that

obstacles may arise on their path because of their migration background. These children, however, believe they can overcome these obstacles by proving 'what they are worth' through hard work.

Our child-respondents show more complex reasoning when they discuss the relationship between life chances and inequality in general. Although most believe that success depends on one's effort and hard work, they hesitate to blame 'unsuccessful' others for their vulnerable socio-economic position. When we question children's views on factors causing poverty, for example, they argue that it is not of poor people's own doing. This shows how children creatively combine conflicting repertoires when discussing life chances and inequality. While they build on meritocratic repertoires to express their faith in upwards mobility, they do not lapse into individual blame when success is not achieved. A meritocratic discourse is not fully absent from their imaginations, however. It re-emerges as a strategy to argue that others can overcome poverty, and even more, that some poor people are more likely to succeed than others. As children grow up in different cultural environments, however, some have a wider array of repertoires to draw on to support their views. Minority ethnic children, for example, use narratives of upward mobility which have arisen in very different socio-economic and political contexts, such as their parents' country of origin.

Although children's faith in their own future and in meritocracy can be seen as a driving force to perform academically well, there are various long-term implications of such meritocratic beliefs. Research has shown that young people who, due to structural barriers, do not realise their aspirations, yet cling to meritocratic thinking, blame themselves for their 'failure' (Clycq et al., 2014). Indeed, the meritocratic ideal does not acknowledge that not everyone can climb the social ladder as easily, and that this has little to do with aptitude, hard work or determination (Littler, 2018). The disillusionment felt by young people when they realise that 'they could *not* make it, regardless of what other people say' can have far-reaching consequences, as is the case for some children of immigrants who believe that their parents have migrated in order to guarantee them 'a better future'. Research has shown, for example, that some highly educated children of immigrants want to 're-emigrate', among other things, because they feel discriminated against despite their educational level (Balci and Michielsen, 2013), which means that they probably have come to realize that life does not necessarily get easier for everyone 'because of good grades' only.

Particularly interesting about this study is that, although children already have entered the preparatory 'streams', they have not yet been referred to a specific 'track'. Since the only prerequisite for entering the 'A-stream' (which should lead to an academic track) is successful completion of primary education, the vast majority of our child-respondents have entered this direction. This should prepare them for further studies so they would be able to achieve their aspired 'high status' professions. After two years of secondary education, however, pupils will be confronted to a much

greater extent with tracking based on 'abilities' but just as much with teacher's biases (Boone and Van Houtte, 2013; Stevens and Vermeersh, 2010), which means that some of our child-respondents may end up in the technical or vocational track. This can challenge their aspirations as these tracks prepare less (or not) for their aspired careers. Hence, while our research shows the nuances children can bring to discussions of success, there is still much that requires further exploration. Future research should study how narratives evolve when children move along their trajectory and potentially experience more structural obstacles, once confronted with their own vulnerability. For the Flemish educational context, with strong inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged children, we can cautiously state that some of the children's aspirations reach far beyond what structural conditions will allow (Beckert, 2016). What will happen to these children's views once they are confronted with obstacles on their expected path to success and social mobility?

6

On the shifting (ir)relevance of national and ethnic identifications in children's lives

Published in *Identities[1]*

Introduction

> Yassine: I don't care whether I'm Belgian, I'm African or I'm Tunese
> [Tunisian]. I don't care. What I care about is just my life, my family.
> (11y, Tunisian descent, identifies as Tunisian in R1)

Yassine is one of many Antwerp pupils who navigate a society characterized by unprecedented diversity. Although born and raised in Antwerp, he belongs to a group whose assumed identifications have been analysed at length in academic and political debates because they are 'of immigrant descent'. In many Western European countries, native-born children of foreign-born parents are seen as yet to assimilate into mainstream society, as if they were 'citizen outsiders' (Beaman, 2015) who have themselves just immigrated (Behtoui, 2019; Schneider et al., 2012). They are not only expected to identify with the national identity of their country of residence, but any identification with their minority ethnic background is often also perceived as a lack of loyalty to this national identity. However, the assumption that children and young people should identify with the national identity to assimilate into the mainstream is increasingly challenged. In several locations now known as 'majority-minority cities', such as Antwerp, minority ethnic groups have become a numerical majority. If children in such contexts have to assimilate into the mainstream at all, they must do so in neighbourhoods where people of Belgian descent are largely absent (Crul, 2018; Crul et al., 2013). Yet, while a growing body of (mostly quantitative) literature has focused on how young people differently identify with national and ethnic identity depending on whether or not they are from a minority ethnic background (e.g., Agirdag, Van Houtte, et al., 2011; Clycq et al., 2020; Fleischmann and Phalet, 2018), few studies have explicitly tackled how children negotiate these categories and

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'remake the mainstream' (Crul and Schneider, 2010) while discussing identity in majority-minority cities.

This article attempts to contribute to this literature by focusing on the wide-ranging and sometimes even conflicting meanings children attach to ethnic and national identity as they negotiate mainstream and exclusionary discourses. Based on three rounds of in-depth interviews conducted over a period of 20 months with children aged 11 to 14, I discuss which identity labels children identify with, what relevance they attach to these labels, whether they define them inclusively or exclusively, and what they reveal about their sense of belonging. Since I interviewed majority ethnic children as well, a group whose identity construction has generally been less closely examined, this paper furthermore draws attention to their identifications as the first generation to lose its 'dominant' (numerical) position in majority-minority cities (Crul, 2018; Jiménez, 2017). Also, whilst it is acknowledged that children's identities are not fixed and may shift over time (Behtoui, 2019; Leonard, 2011), this is not reflected in much empirical qualitative data. In this paper, I discuss how children's identifications fluctuate and shift across the different research rounds, and how, 20 months after the first research round, more than half report that they would no longer identify in the same way.

Identity and sense of belonging among children in super-diverse contexts

Scholars have increasingly studied the extent to which minority ethnic children and youth in super-diverse cities identify with the national identity of their country of residence. These studies have shown that, compared to their majority ethnic peers, minority youth generally identify weakly with national identity while their ethnic identifications appear to be much stronger (Agirdag, Van Houtte, et al., 2011; Clycq et al., 2020; Fleischmann and Phalet, 2018; Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012). To understand these weaker national identifications, several explanations have been put forward, ranging from individual factors to structural barriers (see Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012 for an enlightening overview). Some argue, for example, that European national identities are generally associated with white and Christian traditions, to which many minorities cannot relate (Alba and Foner, 2015; Kunovich, 2009). Others show a positive correlation between the number of majority ethnic friends and national identification (Agirdag, Van Houtte, et al., 2011), and also argue that national identity may be affected by minorities' religiosity (Leszczensky et al., 2020) and perceived discrimination (Fleischmann and Phalet, 2016). If a national identity is to take shape, minority groups also need to be accepted as part of the category by the dominant group. However, while politicians

question whether minority groups are sufficiently committed to their society, many minorities across Western Europe report that they feel that they will never be accepted as part of the national group (Friberg, 2020). Overall, many of the aforementioned studies propose that this 'identity gap' needs to be addressed, as a national identity shared by both majority and minority ethnic groups would be important to foster a sense of belonging among them (Agirdag, Van Houtte, et al., 2011; Clycq et al., 2020; Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012).

However, qualitative findings suggest that it is not even clear whether a collective national or ethnic identity is always crucial for children's senses of belonging, as they seem to construct cosmopolitan identities that transcend ethnic or national boundaries (Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b; Moinian, 2009; Sedano, 2012). Especially in super-diverse cities, people are clearly able to navigate ethnic differences quite unproblematically and to develop a sense of belonging among different groups at a local level (Crul et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2012; Schönwälder et al., 2016; Wessendorf, 2013). This seems to be particularly the case for children, who experience diversity as an ordinary aspect of their everyday lives (Iqbal et al., 2017; Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b). Sedano (2012) has further shown that a strong ethnic identification does not come at the cost of belonging to a local environment or reduce one's willingness to hang out with children from other ethnic groups. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between the various fields in which ethnicity becomes relevant to children. That is, children may indicate that they identify strongly with their ethnic background, yet that ethnicity hardly plays a role when they interact with others. In this line, evidence shows that although minority groups identify less strongly with the national identity than their majority peers (Fleischmann and Phalet, 2018), these minority groups nevertheless feel very attached to their local environment (te Braak et al., 2021). Indeed, as Kasinitz et al. (2008) show, people identify in multifaceted ways. They may identify (or not) with the national identity for different reasons, at different times, different stages of life, but their identification may also depend on who asks them to identify, how they are asked to do so and compared to whom they are supposed to identify. Hence, these highly complex patterns call for more research into how children growing up in such super-diverse societies identify and how these identifications fluctuate over time.

Research context, data and methodology

This article is based on three rounds of in-depth interviews conducted over a period of 20 months with a diverse group of Antwerp children aged 11 to 14. With more than 170 different nationalities, Antwerp has recently become a majority-minority city in which the majority of citizens have a migration background. This diversity is particularly pronounced among youth, of whom

approximately 70% have at least one grandparent of non-Belgian descent (Stad Antwerpen, 2020). This context, however, differs strongly from, among others, those such as the United States, since native-born children of foreign descent in Belgium are politically and publicly still labelled as 'non-native' or in Antwerp even pejoratively as 'allochthon' (see Slootman and Duyvendak, 2015). Although, according to the governmental statistics, anyone who has at least one foreign-born (grand)parent is categorized as 'allochthon', this term is publicly generally used to refer to non-Western and Muslim migrants, their Belgian-born children and even their grandchildren. Hence, regardless of how they personally identify, these children are largely categorized by the dominant group as 'outsiders' who have to assimilate (see also Beaman, 2016; Behtoui, 2019; Friberg, 2020).

In order to reach as diverse a group as possible, the respondents were selected from the last grade of six different primary schools with a diverse pupil composition. Based upon their ethnic descent, 10 children are officially considered 'native' and the other children have at least one (grand)parent born in a foreign country. While a few of these children are from the third generation, meaning that not their parents but only (one of) their grandparents were born abroad, most children are second generation, and hence have at least one parent born abroad. A few children were born in another country themselves but migrated to Belgium at a young age.

In the first research round, in which I interviewed 47 children, the children were asked how they identify and how important they considered those identifications. They were provided with different identity labels, which had to be categorized as 'very important', 'a bit important' or 'not important'. The children could also choose not to identify or to explicitly disidentify. The national identity ('Belgian') was provided, as well as various identity labels of the largest ethnic groups (e.g., 'Moroccan' and 'Turkish'). Since I did not know the children's background beforehand, it was impossible to print all their potential ethnic identities in advance. The children were of course given the opportunity to fill in their own ethnic identifications on blank labels if missing (which they did), and these blank labels could also be used to fill in all other identities relevant to them, which could transcend ethno-national classifications (which they also did). Although, in addition to ethnic and national identity, various other identity labels were discussed (e.g., religious and gender identity), this analysis primarily focuses on the first two identity dimensions.

After these interviews, 24 children were selected to further participate in the following research rounds, based on their willingness, their individual stories and a diversity of ethnic backgrounds. In the second round, approximately eight months later, after the children's transition to secondary education, the focus was on boundary making and interethnic friendships. Although this second round was important in the overall interpretation of the results, this article is mainly based on the first and third research round. In the third round, approximately 20 months after the first, 21

of the 24 children were re-interviewed. In this last round, children were asked to reflect on their identifications in primary school, which were shown to them using sheets they had completed themselves in round one. The interviews were fully transcribed and coded inductively with the qualitative software programme NVivo and analysed after a repeated coding process. Under each quotation, I provide information on the child's ethnic descent (i.e., the country of birth of their grandparents), their self-identification (which is not necessarily in line with their ethnic descent) and age. When the age of a child differs per quote, this has to do with the different research rounds. If there is no place of birth mentioned under a quotation, the respondent was born in Belgium.

Results

In this section, I first discuss the child-respondents' initial identifications. In doing so, I examine the identifications of children of Belgian descent and minority ethnic children separately, as national and ethnic identity overlap for the former group. Second, I demonstrate how, 20 months after the first research round, children retrospectively reflect on their initial identifications and may shift their chosen identity labels.

Children's initial identifications

Downplaying the importance of ethnic and national identity labels
Several children in this study explicitly mention that their national or ethnic identity is not very important to them. Hanne, for instance, chooses the labels 'Belgian', 'European' and 'Christian' but categorizes them all under 'not important':

> Hanne: Uhm, I'm not concerned by those things actually. It's hard to explain, but like European, I really never think about it, that's something I really never think about.
>
> Researcher: And what about Belgian?
>
> Hanne: I don't think that's important either. If I had been born elsewhere, I would be fine with that too.
> (11y, Belgian descent, identifies as Belgian in R1)

Some of these children seem rather confused and even annoyed when I ask them to choose the labels they identify with. Most of them focus on other aspects which are more important to them than ethnicity. Despite the option to categorize labels as not important, some children choose not to

identify with ethnic or national identities at all. Layla, whose mother is of Belgian and father of Moroccan descent, explains that she feels neither Belgian nor Moroccan because she 'does not really care' where she comes from. However, some express feelings of ethnic group belonging despite their nonidentification. Layla repeatedly speaks of 'we' when talking about Moroccans and about 'them' when referring to Belgians, although her mother is of Belgian descent. This boundary-drawing seems to especially occur when the involved children recount conflicts in which they felt that they, as 'Moroccans' or 'Muslims', were being treated badly by 'Belgians'. This corresponds with previous work (see Sedano, 2012), arguing that ethnic differences may become especially relevant for children when they experience exclusion or conflicts. Although Layla explicitly rejects ethnic or national identity labels, she seemingly does identify as a minority as she tells how she experiences racism. She indicates that while she 'does not really care' about ethnicity, her minority ethnic background is made relevant by others.

Although some minority children downplay the importance of their ethnic or national identity, most can effortlessly tap into and elaborate on their ethnic background when asked to. Some of their Belgian descent peers, however, seem to find it more challenging to talk about ethnicity when they are not really concerned. When I, for example, aim to gain insight into Caroline's sense of ethnic belonging, she appears to find the topic quite unexciting and immediately jumps to what she prefers to talk about:

> Researcher: Would you feel sad if someone said some offensive things about Belgians?
>
> Caroline: I don't care about that. What I care about is when Jeremy said I had a pimple head.
> (11y, Belgian descent, identifies as Belgian in R1)

Arguably, majority ethnic children are generally less used to having to answer questions about their ethnic belonging, because they have been socialized into the false assumption that only minorities are 'ethnic' (Hagerman, 2018) and that their majority identity is hence 'cultureless' (see also Jiménez, 2017; Perry, 2001). In this sense, it seems that while many minority ethnic children *deliberately* downplay the importance of ethnicity or nationality, some of the majority ethnic children appear not to reflect about their own identities. On the other hand, it is striking that the majority children's ethnic background is still experienced as an 'invisible norm' in a majority-minority city.

Further, some other children seem to minimize the importance of national or ethnic identity because they cannot identify with the strict definitions they themselves attach to ethnic categories. Consider Hala, born in Iraq and who left the country with her family while she herself was only six

years old. Hala identifies as neither Iraqi nor Belgian and seems to find those labels a poor way to identify herself. While she seemingly downplays the role of these identities, further probing reveals that she does not want to identify as Iraqi because she 'hates' people from Iraq, who 'gossip a lot'. She does not aim to identify as Belgian either as she claims that 'Belgian girls ask too much attention from boys', which she considers indecent. Hence, while Hala indicates that it is not important for her to ethnically identify, she seems to use ethnic labels to strictly categorize others.

In sum, many children downplay the relevance of ethnic or national identity, but they do not necessarily all do so in favour of an overarching or cosmopolitan identity. While some children deliberately aim to transcend ethnic or national boundaries (e.g., Oskar and Layla), other children draw clear ethnic boundaries (e.g., Hala) while disidentifying from these categories.

Strong (unilateral) national and ethnic identifications

Several respondents also report that they strongly ethnically identify. Roos, for instance, lived in New York for two years and says: 'I find where I come from very important because uhm, when I went to New York, everyone asked [where I come from] and I found it important to say [I'm Belgian]. Roos, who was asked to talk about her ethnicity when she was abroad, indeed hints that she has been socialized into a context where diversity is more explicitly 'celebrated' and people attach more importance to ethnicity (Boli and Elliott, 2008). Having moved to New York, her Belgian background was no longer 'invisible'. The other children of Belgian descent, on the other hand, state that they identify strongly as Belgian simply because they were born in Belgium, and a few report that they consider their descent important because many Belgians do well in sports, which makes them proud. Except for one (see further), the Belgian descent children do not refer to cultural characteristics or habits which would make them Belgian (see also Perry, 2001). Although the ethnic descent of these children corresponds with the national identity, most of them define being Belgian inclusively by saying that one does not have to be 'native white' nor meet certain conditions to be included in the group. Most of these children indeed contest public discourses which exclude minority groups from the national imaginary. Only Jordy seems to define Belgian identity in restrictive terms. After he has described earlier in the interview how he dislikes 'how Moroccan children behave and hang out on the streets', he sets clear boundaries against this group by saying that Belgians do not hang out on the streets for no reason, that they drink beer and eat properly: 'People eat with their hands in Morocco, I don't think that's decent.'

Minority ethnic children, on the other hand, explain that they feel Moroccan, Turkish, Ghanaian and so on because their (grand)parents were born in those countries, but compared to most of their majority peers, many also refer to cultural aspects, such as their mother tongue, their home

cultures and their connection with the extended family in their (grand)parents' country of descent. Aicha is the only minority pupil who explicitly says that others do not depict her as Belgian. Although she claims that she is not bothered by this her explanation is quite contradictory:

> Aicha: Yes, I'm not seen as Belgian. I'm seen as Moroccan. (…) She [teacher] is actually the only one who thinks that we're [minority children] Belgian too. Most just think that we're Moroccan. But I've often explained that it's just my blood actually that's Moroccan and that I'm just Belgian. (…)
>
> Researcher: Would you want more people to see you as Belgian?
>
> Aicha: No, it's good as it is.
>
> Researcher: Is it an option to be both Belgian and Moroccan?
>
> Aicha: Yes, but I don't want to.
> (11y, Moroccan descent, identifies as Moroccan in R1)

Some of the minority children are also inclined to draw clear boundaries vis-à-vis 'Belgians', with whom they do not identify. Oumaima, for example, identifies as Moroccan and reports:

> Oumaima: I think that Belgians are different than uhm Moroccans. Also, their behaviour, how they talk, to give an example, those things. (…) I think that Belgians talk a little bit uhm, more neatly. And Moroccans talk a little bit… well yeah (laughs), differently.
>
> Researcher: What do you prefer?
>
> Oumaima: How Moroccans talk (…). Because if you uhm talk to a Belgian, and you talk like Moroccans do, they will look at you like 'huh?', if you talk to them like you'd talk to your Moroccan friends.
>
> Researcher: Do you adjust your speech then, when talking to them?
>
> Oumaima: Yes, a little bit. (…) [I talk] more neatly, I really watch what I say, something like that. (…)
>
> Researcher: Is that why you mentioned that you don't identify as Belgian?
>
> Oumaima: No, I don't feel Belgian. (…) I do prefer living in Belgium over living in Morocco.
> (11y, Moroccan descent, identifies as Moroccan in R1)

Oumaima in fact points to a very important aspect, also highlighted by previous research (Jaspers, 2008) in which Antwerp-based minority youth report that they speak 'neatly' to avoid stigmatization. Indeed, in many Western European countries, language and language use form a significant symbolic

boundary (Bail, 2008), which, as Oumaima hints, often impacts the sense of belonging among minorities. While she has some friends of Belgian descent, Oumaima suggests that she feels more at ease among her minority ethnic peers because they talk 'less neatly' than the former, among other reasons. Without calling it that herself, it seems that she is becoming aware of power relations and that she could be judged because of her accent and intonation. However, despite her boundary drawing and non-identification as Belgian, Oumaima explicitly states that she prefers living in Belgium to living in her country of descent. This illustrates how attachment to a country does not necessarily mean that children explicitly identify with the national identity.

Most of the child-respondents who report that they strongly ethnically identify have a mixed group of friends and draw few clear boundaries towards other ethnic groups. Olivia, for instance, identifies strongly as Swedish. Being Swedish makes her feel special and proud, but she explicitly stresses that ethnicity is irrelevant when deciding whom to hang out with. The same goes for Ilias, who hints that he is 'evidently' Moroccan, but who looks rather confused when I ask about the composition of his friendship group – he seems to find it obvious that ethnicity is not important in the playground. While I elaborate elsewhere on the relationship between children's ethnic boundary making and interethnic friendship groups, it is important to recognize here the contribution of Sedano (2012), who argues that researchers have generally paid too little attention to the various fields in which ethnicity is made relevant. Although it is generally assumed that children who identify strongly with an ethnic group are also more likely to associate with those belonging to the same group, she shows that this is not necessarily the case, and that ethnicity can be very important for children's self-identification but appear nearly irrelevant in their everyday interactions with others. The results of this study point in the same direction.

Minority children embracing 'dual' identities
Most minority children in this study identify both as Belgian and as a member of their ethnic group, which assumes a dual identity or 'a sense of national commitment and belonging without distancing oneself from one's ethnic in-group' (Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012 p. 87). Some of these children even insist on this dual identification. Before I even got to the question about dual identifications, they assertively showed that they do not want to be reduced to their ethnic background:

> Researcher: So, I see you find it a little bit important that you're Moroccan…
>
> Zineb: And Belgian, yes.
> (11y, Moroccan descent, identifies as Moroccan and Belgian in R1)

Although public and political discourses on who belongs (or not) to the national group impact young people's identifications (Barwick and Beaman, 2019), these results resonate with research showing that such discourses are also actively challenged as young people resist oversimplification and reductionism based on ethnic or national labels (Leonard, 2016; Moinian, 2009). The respondents give meaning to their dual identities in different ways. A first group of children elaborate on their ethnic background by referring to cultural aspects and claim that they are also Belgian because they were born in Belgium or because they have Belgian nationality. Many order their identifications hierarchically, suggesting that it is less important to identify with the Belgian identity. This corresponds with previous findings showing how some minority youth claim to be Belgian 'on paper' but to have their ethnic backgrounds 'in their hearts' (Van Kerckem, 2014).

Another group of children believe that their national and ethnic identities are culturally contested (O'Brien, 2017). That is to say they understand the cultural expectations that come with both identities as being in tension. Sahar, for example, says she feels both Belgian and Afghan, yet her context-dependent or situational identities are experienced as co-existing side by side rather than as intertwined, as she says that she feels 'Belgian at school' and 'Afghan once home'.

A third dual identification profile is found among children claiming to strongly identify both ethnically and nationally, but who primarily identify as Belgian as a 'recognition claim' (Lamont, 2018), more specifically to combat racism and discrimination:

> Ikram: I'm born here so I'm automatically Belgian. And yeah, if people also
> see Belgian on your identity card, then they're less likely to think 'oh, you're
> Moroccan, you're not welcome here!'
> (12y, Moroccan descent, identifies as Moroccan and Belgian in R1)

Ikram is one of the few minority children who claims that her Belgian identity is very important to her, indeed as important as her ethnic identity, yet she is one of the pupils who feel most strongly stigmatized because of their ethno-religious background. She seemingly identifies primarily as Belgian since she wants to be recognized as a fully-fledged citizen. She never talks about Belgians as her in-group ('we') and even draws various symbolic boundaries against girls of Belgian descent who, she believes, behave differently than she does.

Children reflecting retrospectively on their identifications

Approximately 20 months after the first research round, a selection of 21 children reflect on their own identifications. In this round, children's identifications and meaning making become even more

complex, and it is difficult to categorize their experiences in clear-cut patterns. It is noticeable, however, that more than half of the re-interviewed children report that they would alter their self-identifications or at least change the importance they attached to the various identity labels. As I will show, children hint that these changes in their identifications occur for several reasons. First, children seemingly come to display more awareness of the 'cultural stuff' (see Jenkins, 2008a), such as traditions and habits, which makes them show a greater attachment to their imagined ancestry. Second, the transition to a new secondary school and the new friendship groups they have made also seem to have an impact on their self-identification. Third, some children indicate that social media made other repertoires on identity available to them.

Layla, who did not identify with an ethnic or national category in round one, reports that she still does not explicitly identify as Moroccan nor Belgian, but that she does 'feel' more Moroccan than before:

> Layla: I feel more Moroccan now because my [Belgian] mother often talks Moroccan now and she also really behaves Moroccan. (…) I feel more Moroccan, but I still think it's not important. (…) She [her mother] talks a lot of Arabic, she often wears *labsat* [traditional Moroccan party attire] at weddings, what she didn't used to do. She just really behaves like a pure Moroccan, even though she's Belgian. (…) She listens only to Moroccan music (…), she dances often on Arabic songs, but really in the Arabic way…
> (13y, Belgian and Moroccan descent, dis-identifies from ethnic and national identities in R1)

As in Layla's narrative, 'cultural stuff' also seems important for Liam, who in the previous round used to identify as French, Belgian and Moroccan. He claims that his Belgian identity has declined in importance while he has started to feel more French and Moroccan. He identifies now as '40% French, 35% Moroccan and 30% Belgian'.

> Liam: I feel more at ease in France and in Morocco. If I'm in France, people smile more often, they're more open, they… If they see someone walk by, they have played with, they say 'hello, how are you?', and that's the same in Morocco. But in Belgium, they… They played with each other the day before, they see each other on the street, and they ignore you.
>
> Researcher: That's why you started to feel more French and…
>
> Liam: Yes, because I'm also like that. I say, I'm social, I say hi to everyone I know.
> (12y, Belgian and Moroccan descent, born in France, identifies as French, Moroccan and Belgian in R1)

While Liam and Layla attach a different meaning to their ethnic backgrounds compared to the first round, they do not make any major changes to the hierarchy of their identity labels. Sam, however, reports that he would fully alter his self-categorization. Whereas he used to identify more strongly as Belgian than as Iranian, he identifies now the other way around. He says that he now identifies more strongly as Iranian, not because he considers it important to be Iranian as such but, as he says: 'because that's the part that makes me allochthon'. Seemingly, being 'allochthon' became very important to him after his transition to secondary school; Sam started to hang out with minority children and reports that he does not like to hang out with 'Belgians' anymore. He now considers these children, once his best friends, 'boring' and while he once drew bright boundaries against 'Moroccans', these latter children have become his best friends. His peer group composition, hence, seemingly impacts his self-identification strongly.

Remarkably, several re-interviewed children indicate that they now attach much less or no importance to their ethnic or national identities.

> Olivia: I'd put that [Swedish identity label] at the bottom [least important] now because that's not important anymore to me. It's just, yes, I'm [Swedish], but I don't feel like people should know that.
>
> Researcher: You used to find it your most important identity?
>
> Olivia: I don't know. I really don't know. Maybe because my mother says a lot that we're Swedish, that I thought I should tell everyone I know I'm Swedish. But now it's just like… I mean it's not that important.
> (13y, Swedish, Finnish and Sierra Leonean descent, identifies as Swedish in R1)

Doha even mocks her self-categorization and the importance she once attached to those labels:

> Doha: Well yes, I'm Moroccan and yes that's my descent, that's important to me but it's not like I say, 'I'm Moroccan!' Ok, I'm just Mor… You understand? I used to be like 'Yessss, I'm Moroccan!' (…) I saw myself like, I don't know, like a troubled Moroccan or something (laughs), like very aggressive. If I see children like that now, I think 'ohh my goddd'!
> (13y, Moroccan descent, identifies as Moroccan and Belgian in R1)

Struggling to find her words, Sahar also hints that she is no longer as concerned with her ethnic or national identity:

> Sahar: Why did I even choose Belgian and Afghan as a little bit important?
>
> Researcher: I was just going to ask you. Would you identify yourself like this again?

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Sahar: Yes but, I mean I don't know. I don't understand those two, I understand [why I chose] Muslim, but those… (…) I don't care, just leave them. (…) Like why even should that matter. (…) Those descents are not that important.
(13y, Afghan descent, identifies as Afghan and Belgian in R1)

While Doha explicitly says that she used to behave like a 'troubled Moroccan', by which she, among other things, refers to her earlier rather biased and distant attitude towards those of Belgian descent, she now claims that she has fewer prejudices as she hangs out more with girls of Belgian descent. In the third research round, Doha indeed draws far fewer symbolic boundaries towards those groups. Sahar, on the other hand, who says her ethnic and national identifications have also become less important, seems to indicate the opposite. More strongly than in the first round, she draws bright boundaries against pupils of Belgian descent with whom she no longer likes to hang out. Most likely, Sahar no longer identifies so much as Afghan because, like Sam, she considers it more important to identify as 'allochthon'. During the interview, she repeatedly refers to herself and her friends as 'allochthons' and contrasts this groups with the 'Belgians'. Unlike Doha and Olivia, Sahar does not downplay the importance of her ethnic background but aims to belong to a larger category of minority ethnic children. Also, when she tries to explain why she finds her Belgian identification no longer relevant, it becomes clear that this is not so much because ethnic boundaries have become less pronounced, but rather the contrary:

Researcher: You wouldn't choose it [Belgian identity label] if you could do the exercise again?

Sahar: No, let's say I used to be *tatta-sified* [*tatta* is an insulting term used in Belgium and the Netherlands to refer to the majority group in a highly stereotypical way].

Researcher: *Tatta-sified?*

Sahar: Yes (laughs), *Belgianized*, let's say. (…) I was different, I talked differently, I used to hang out with other people, like more *Belgianized* people, but now not anymore.
(13y, Afghan descent, identifies as Afghan and Belgian in R1)

Compared to Sahar and Sam, however, most of the children who alter their identifications put forward self-chosen labels that they consider more important than ethnic or national identities. Olivia, for instance, now explains that she would put first that she is 'bisexual'. While these identities were not discussed in primary school at all, it seems that social media has introduced some children to a wider range of identities with which they can identify:

Olivia: I watched TikToks, like LGTBQ+ and that kind of stuff, TikTok compilations and I thought hmmm… I think I'm into girls, but I'm also into

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> boys, and then I was like okay I'm bi. (…) I used to know hardly anything about gays because there weren't any in my family. (…) I don't know, I don't know any lesbian women, so that's very unfortunate. So, I didn't know anything about it. I could never question like mmm, maybe I'm bi or whatever. Because I never had the chance to think about it, otherwise I could discover it earlier. (…) But now I'm on LGTBQ of TikTok or just Lesbian TikTok and that's very nice. (…) I've found myself through those [TikTok] videos.
> (13y, Swedish, Finnish and Sierra Leonean descent, identifies as Swedish in R1)

Interestingly, it is especially minority children who indicate that their initial identifications have changed. Majority children generally report that there are few to no changes and that they would identify in a similar way. This may have to do with the finding that these children did not display much attachment to their national or ethnic identity in the first place. For most children, these identities remained as 'unimportant' as in the first research round. The children who did report that they consider their ethnic/national identity important (e.g., Roos and Jordy), state that nothing has changed. Strikingly among these children, however, is that a large group indicate that their Christian identity has declined significantly in importance during the past 20 months. This contrast sharply with the minority ethnic children, who mostly identify as Muslim, and who still consider their Muslim identity very important. Although religious identities are not the focus of this study, this large and seemingly rapid shift among children who used to identify as Christian is an interesting avenue for further research (see Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the various ways in which children identify ethnically and nationally, how their identifications shift over time and how, as actors with agency, children are able to challenge both public repertoires on identity and the ethnic lens present in the current research. The relationship between children's identifications, boundary-making and feelings of belonging appears to be highly complex. Some minority ethnic children do not identify as Belgian yet indicate that they feel very attached to their environment and to their inter-ethnically mixed friendship groups (see Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012). Others, however, explicitly identify as Belgian but feel strongly stigmatized. Especially Muslim children report that they identify as Belgian to increase the likelihood that they will be perceived and accepted as full citizens of their own society. However, there is also evidence confirming previous studies which show that many distance themselves from national identities because of perceived stigmatization or a lack of sense of belonging (Fleischmann and Phalet, 2016; Leszczensky et al., 2020; Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012). Ethnic identity seems

stronger among minority ethnic children not only because of the 'cultural stuff', but also because of perceived exclusion or stigmatization.

On the other hand, the data does not contain much evidence of 'ethnic blandness' among majority ethnic children at this age. While scholars suggest that white children feel that their ethnic identity is 'bland' in majority-minority cities, where strong ethnic identities and even identity politics have become a norm (Crul, 2018), the majority ethnic children in this study generally do not seem to feel uncomfortable amid these strong identities. Although the results show that many of these children seem to experience their ethnic or national identity as 'cultureless', compared to their minority ethnic peers who refer to 'cultural stuff' (Jenkins, 2008a), most of them do not seem to be bothered by this nor do they attach much importance to ethnic or national categories. A few other children even express senses of ethnic pride and seemingly do not feel, as is suggested, 'that their ethnic identity is problematic because being "white" carries a heavy burden of slavery, discrimination and white privilege' (Crul, 2018: 2263); this, however, may have to do with their relatively young age.

While quantitative researchers aim to seek alternative collective identities to bridge the 'identity gap' between minority and majority ethnic children and youth (Agirdag et al., 2016; Clycq et al., 2020), the current study shows that although some children seemingly do not share a collective identity (e.g., do not similarly identify with an ethnic or national identity), they are nevertheless very able to cross ethnic boundaries when making friends, as they recognize each other's own worth. On the basis of these results, we can strongly question whether shared ethnic or national identities are necessary to achieve a sense of belonging. Jordy and Ikram, for instance, both identify very strongly as Belgian, but there are significant differences in their narratives, which, arguably, makes it more difficult to adequately speak of a 'collective identity' between them. While Jordy draws bright boundaries vis-à-vis 'Moroccans', Ikram is highly concerned about the perceived exclusion of Moroccans and Muslims. Rather than being concerned about an 'identity gap', the children themselves seemingly are more concerned by a 'recognition gap', defined as 'disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society' (Lamont, 2018: 421–422).

The meanings children attach to identity labels are indeed so wide-ranging that they raise important questions, often underexamined in studies of shared national identifications to foster children's belonging. When children identify with a specific label, and particularly when filling in quantitative surveys, do they do so based on an inclusive definition which states that every Belgian citizen is Belgian, motivated by an exclusive interpretation that Belgians should not eat with their hands (think of Jordy), or because they aim to avoid discrimination (like Ikram), or while they in fact identify only 30% (as Liam would argue)? Do they select a label while intrinsically combining strong

ethnic identification with an inclusive definition (similar to Roos), low ethnic identification with bright boundaries (Hala), 'high-and-high' (Oumaima) or 'low-and-low' (Hanne)? Evidently, these incomplete yet already wide-ranging motivations behind children's identifications are decisive in order to study whether or not an identity category has the potential to successfully and emotionally connect different groups.

Children display much agency and reflexivity when identifying with various labels (see also Faas et al., 2018; Moinian, 2009). These identities are not fixed but subject to change (Behtoui, 2019; Faas et al., 2018; Leonard, 2011; Malešević, 2006). Children can distance themselves from their own categorizations, think about them critically and, if they consider it necessary, revise their own opinions. This article has shown children indicating that their identifications have shifted as they have become more aware of 'cultural stuff', that their changed friendship group after the transition to secondary education has triggered an identificational shift or how social media has exposed them to repertoires on identity with which they were not familiar before. Yet, more research is needed into the circumstances which make identities more or less relevant (see also Sedano, 2012).

Finally, another important conclusion of this study is that when children took and were given space to direct the interview, it was seldomly explicitly about ethnic or national identity – although children did speak in ethnic terms when expressing their belongings or recounting conflicts (see Sedano, 2012). However, when I, as a researcher, put these labels first, I nonetheless successfully elicited conversations about these classifications, not entirely without tangible annoyance among some. When proposing my labels and questions, a few children indeed made me feel unreasonable with their astute answers (see also Moinian, 2009). Some children seemed to be very aware of and rejected the 'ethnic lens' of the research, either by emphasizing that ethnicity is not that relevant, that they primarily have dual identities, or through their 'are you serious-gaze' when I asked my questions. This illustrates how research in super-diverse cities takes too little account of the complexity and ease with which children construct their identity and interact with each other locally (Crul, 2018; Kasinitz et al., 2008).

7

How children in super-diverse schools talk about interethnic friendships

With Gert Verschraegen and Noel Clycq

Introduction

Schools in super-diverse cities – cities with a high degree of complexity of intertwining ethnic, religious and social class identities (Vertovec, 2007) – are supposedly key sites for young people to interact with a diverse group of pupils, and offer them the opportunity to make friends across ethnic lines (Iqbal et al., 2017). Yet, research on friendships among children in ethnically diverse schools and settings has produced conflicting results, and it is not clear how and to what extent pupils' ethnic backgrounds play a role when friendships are made. Devine et al. (2008) have shown that ethnicity is not always an important criterion in primary school children's friendship formation. When, for example, children share hobbies, they make friendships based on their common interests, regardless of ethnic background. Sedano (2012) has come to similar findings among a diverse group of children, where she has observed that children take various criteria into consideration when making friends. While the children's seniority in the friendship group, their age, gender, kinship and embodied styles of communication are important in deciding whom to play with, ethnicity is not highly relevant for them, although it becomes salient in times of conflict. Among the few studies conducted in Western European super-diverse cities, studies have shown that children and young people generally perceive diversity as unexceptional and that they mix relatively easily (Iqbal et al., 2017; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019). However, research has also revealed that even in diverse schools, children prefer to socialize with others with the same ethnic background and are less likely to mix with other ethnic groups (Hoare, 2019; Rhamie et al., 2012). Some authors emphasize that an ethnically diverse context indeed does not always result in the development of interethnic friendships (Vincent et al., 2016), and it has been suggested that even in super-diverse cities where children tend to perceive diversity as ordinary, ethnic boundaries between different groups are nevertheless drawn (Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b). Research also points to the impact of children's transition to secondary education and suggests that while children build friendships across ethnic lines in primary school, these friendships

are often disrupted once enrolled in secondary (Bruegel, 2006; George, 2007; Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012). This shows that while context obviously matters in boundary making processes, grasping children's meaning-making is crucial to understand how friendships are construed and experienced.

In this research, we will tackle the lingering question of how children in ethnically diverse schools say to make friends and which role they attach to pupils' ethnic backgrounds. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted in the super-diverse city of Antwerp, we aim to investigate how children aged 11 to 14 with very diverse backgrounds talk about interethnic friendships, which group boundaries they draw while doing so and which meaning they attach to ethnic differences. We have interviewed children at three different moments over a two-school year period: in the last year of primary school, the first year of secondary and finally in the second year of secondary. This allows us to examine how children's friendships evolve over time, and whether children who moved up to secondary schools with a different degree of diversity now speak differently about interethnic friendships. In the following sections, we first clarify our theoretical starting points and contributions, and go on to describe the research context, our methods and data. Next, and prior to our conclusion, we present four different patterns which emerge when pupils talk about interethnic friendships, after which we end with some brief conclusions.

Interethnic friendships and boundary making among children

To better understand the differential ways in which children aged 11 to 14 draw symbolic boundaries while talking about their interethnic friendships, we draw on insights from cultural sociology and the new sociology of childhood, as we emphasize the role of both everyday meaning-making and children's agency in social life. Our approach contrasts with many other studies in three ways. First, ample research has built on Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis' to suggest that, when certain conditions are met, an ethnic mix in schools or neighbourhoods results in positive attitudes towards different ethnic groups (e.g. Aberson and Tomolillo, 2004; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Schachner et al., 2015; Titzmann et al., 2015). This hypothesis has been challenged, as even under the same conditions research has produced conflicting results (Stark et al., 2015), with some authors suggesting that there is no correlation between ethnic mixing and positive interethnic attitudes (Bakker et al., 2007) and others even finding a negative correlation (Vervoort et al., 2011). From a cultural sociological perspective, these findings indeed prompt questions, as the main body of (quantitative) literature drawing on the relation between interethnic contact and attitudes neglects the role of culture or meaning-making. As Manevska et al. (2018) argue: 'Interethnic contact (…) is after

all not 'objectively' projected onto people, but is actively sought or avoided and interpreted through cultural lenses, in this instance, those lenses pertaining to the existence and meaning of ethnic boundaries' (p. 298). This means, on the one hand, that positive attitudes are not only a consequence but often also a condition for interethnic contact and, on the other hand, that much more attention should be paid to the meaning that people give to their interethnic relations (rather than whether they have interethnic relations or not). Research, for instance has paid attention to how adults (e.g., teachers and parents) aim to steer children's friendships according to their own perceptions of diversity. However, while children's friendship networks are partly influenced by the adults in their life, their own agency and autonomy to form perceptions and friendships must also be acknowledged (see e.g., Iqbal et al. 2017; Sedano 2012; Spyrou 2002). This emphasis resonates with recent research in the New Sociology of Childhood, arguing that children not only take part in social life but also make 'things happen'; they are not only 'socialized' but contribute to wider processes of social and cultural transformation through active meaning-making and social interaction with others (James, 2013; Pache Huber and Spyrou, 2012).

Second, by analysing the ways in which children draw symbolic boundaries between ethnic groups, our approach differs from the large body of literature which concentrates on children's interethnic prejudice (e.g., de Bruijn et al., 2020; Tropp and Prenovost, 2008). This focus on processes of symbolic boundary making rather than on prejudices (such as attitudes towards ethnic groups), enables us to describe the 'work' that is done to construct symbolic boundaries. Children can make 'negative' statements about certain groups out of prejudice or internalized stereotypes, yet bright symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis other groups can also derive from other sociological and/or psychological needs. Children can actively draw specific group boundaries and distinguish between a positively valued 'us' and a negatively valued 'them' in order to, for instance, revalue a stigmatized 'in-group' label or to develop a personal sense of security, dignity and honour (Lamont, 1992). In this sense, we conceptualise children's boundary work as an intrinsic part of the development of both personal and collective identities.

When talking about their social lives, children often draw boundaries between different peer groups (e.g., children they play with versus children they never play with; children with the same ethnic background versus children with another background) (Spyrou, 2002). To grasp how these boundaries are differentially set when our child-respondents talk about interethnic friendships, 'symbolic boundaries' can be defined as:

> conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people,
> practices, and even time and space. (…) Examining them allows us to capture
> the dynamic dimensions of social relations (…). Symbolic boundaries also

> separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168).

Symbolic boundary making, hence, is the active construction of these alleged conceptual distinctions. To discuss the 'sharpness' of the boundaries that children draw vis-à-vis others, we further build on Alba's (2005) distinction between 'blurred' and 'bright' boundaries. 'Blurred' boundaries are ambiguous boundaries that do not clearly divide people into different groups, while 'bright' boundaries are unambiguous boundaries that make it clear which side a person is supposed to belong to. The meaning attached to symbolic boundaries and their sharpness, however, can shift and/or change according to time, context and situation, making them more or less relevant in group formation processes (Wimmer, 2013).

Third, building on a boundary approach also allows us to de-essentialize ethnic groups as it does not take ethnic group formation for granted. While it is indeed often problematically assumed that children primarily form groups along ethnic lines (Sedano, 2012), a small but growing body of literature has revealed the different ways in which children 'shift' and give a different meaning to so-called ethnic boundaries, to make their groups more or less inclusive (Cangià, 2015, 2017; Spyrou, 2002). Yet, little is known about children's boundary making in super-diverse cities, although it is suggested that the presence of many minority groups results in ethnic diversity being seen as normal (Iqbal et al., 2017; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019; Wessendorf, 2014). Thus, by studying how a diverse group of pupils draw group boundaries (irrespective of their backgrounds) and what meaning(s) 'ethnic markers' receive in these processes (or not), our study contributes a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of children's perceptions of interethnic relations. More particularly, when analysing our data, we will argue that children's narratives can be situated on a continuum of two axes. One axis relates to the sharpness of boundaries children draw ('bright' or 'blurred') and the second to whether or not they claim to have interethnic friendships (or solely mono-ethnic friendships). Intersecting the two axes allows us to provide a new typology of children's interethnic friendships, how they are related to group boundaries and how children's friendships can evolve over time.

Research context, data and methodology

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with children in various Antwerp schools. Antwerp is a particularly interesting setting to study interethnic friendships because of its super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007) character. With 179 nationalities, Antwerp has become a majority-minority city (Crul, 2016),

as the share of minority ethnic citizens (51.1%) has become larger than the share of the 'established' majority ethnic group (48.9%). This super-diversity is especially pronounced among children, as more than 70% of residents aged below 20 have a migration background (Stad Antwerpen, 2020). Yet, there is still a significant degree of segregation in Antwerp schools, with some schools made up of mainly majority ethnic children and others with a concentration of minority children. This is often due to neighbourhood segregation, yet even schools within the same neighbourhood sometimes differ strongly in their pupil population (Mahieu, 2012).

To reach a diverse group of respondents, we selected six primary schools, based on their ethnic and socio-economic mix and their location in more or less disadvantaged neighbourhoods (see appendix on page 261). After an introductory interview with the principals or teachers, information letters and consent forms were handed out to all pupils. They received copies for both themselves and their parents. Besides providing basic information, the letters stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential.

The data were collected by interviewing the children at three moments in a two-school year period: once in the sixth grade of primary school (11 and 12-year-olds), once in the first year of secondary school (12 and 13-year-olds) and once in their second year (13 and 14-year-olds). After the first author had interviewed 47 sixth-grade children, 24 children were selected to further participate in the study, based on their willingness, their socio-economic and ethnic background, their individual story and the secondary school they attended. The pupils had moved up to about 14 different secondary schools. While some went up to schools with a similar degree of ethnic mix to their primary school, others moved to a school with a greater concentration of pupils from their own ethnic background. Twenty-one of the 24 children participated in the third and last research round.

In the first research round, where the interviews lasted between 23 and 75 minutes, we especially gauged children's perceptions and experiences of diversity. The second interviews lasted between 35 and 100 minutes, and in this round we focused more explicitly on whether children's friendship groups had changed after the transition to secondary education and whether they perceive differences between their friends from different ethnic groups. In both rounds, the first author asked the children to sum up their friends and to say something about their 'top five' friends in particular. In the last round, where the interviews lasted between 30 and 82 minutes, she elaborated further on the first results and asked children whether there were any changes in their friendship groups.

The interviews were conducted by a female Belgian-born researcher of Moroccan descent, who has always lived in Antwerp and has first-hand experience of the city's super-diversity and different ethnic groups. As she realized that the topic of diversity could raise certain tensions or encourage socially desirable answers, she assured the children that there were no wrong answers and

she used the children's terminology during the conversation – although some terms are considered problematical from a sociological perspective. If children spoke of 'allochthons' (see further), for example, the researcher also used this term so that the children did not feel corrected. Stigmatizing vocabulary was not taken up, but was hardly used anyway by the children.

All interviews were conducted in Dutch - there were no language barriers or difficulties as all children spoke Dutch at least intelligibly. The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed with the qualitative software program NVivo. First, the interviews were coded inductively, after which a coding framework was developed bringing together the different perceptions of diversity and interethnic friendships. While analysing this material thoroughly, the data were refined through a repeated coding process. Under each quote, we provide information on the child's age, self-identification, research round and the school's ethnic mix. We divided the schools into ethnically mixed schools (T1), ethnically mixed schools with a high concentration of minority children but a number of Belgian-descent pupils per class (T2) and schools with a high or almost total concentration of minority pupils (T3). Age differences between quotes from the same respondent are due to the different rounds.

Results

When analysing our data, four different patterns emerged in children's understanding, each of them situated on a continuum of the two dimensions or axes. One axis relates to the sharpness of boundaries children draw ('bright' or 'blurred') and the second to whether or not they claim to have interethnic friendships. This results in four different quadrants in which pupils' narratives can be situated. Each of these quadrants expresses their experiences with or relation to ethnic diversity. In a first quadrant, in which friendships display 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf, 2013), children say that they have a diverse group of friends, while blurring ethnic boundaries. In a second quadrant, in which friendships seemingly reflect the limited possibilities for interethnic contact due to segregation, children claim they have homogeneous friendship groups although they also express blurred boundaries. In a third quadrant, children draw bright boundaries but nevertheless report that they engage in interethnic friendships, which indicates that they 'cross boundaries' (Zolberg and Woon, 1999), as when engaging with children from 'other' groups. In a fourth and last quadrant, children draw bright boundaries as well, but report that they only have friends from the same ethnic background, suggesting that their friendships display group confirmation processes. However, this typology should not be understood as fixed. As we will show, children's perceptions of interethnic friendships and boundaries are highly dynamic: they may be placed in different quadrants during

different research rounds, since some children's boundary-making seems to weaken over time and some friendship groups become repeatedly more or less diverse.

Table 8: Typology of children's interethnic friendships and boundary making

Children's understanding of their friendship group composition	Children's understanding of group boundaries	
	Bright group boundaries	**Blurred group boundaries**
Monoethnic friendships	Friendships displaying group confirmation	Friendships displaying ethnic segregation
Interethnic friendships	Friendships displaying boundary crossing	Friendships displaying commonplace diversity

Friendships displaying commonplace diversity: blurred boundaries, mixed group of friends

A first group of children in this study experience ethnic diversity as a common aspect of their everyday lives (see chapter three for a detailed discussion). When asked what typifies different ethnic groups, they generally demarcate these based upon 'cultural markers', such as 'some Muslims wear a headscarf', but these markers do not seem to affect their evaluations of one another much. These children report that they do not consider these differences while structuring their friendship groups, and that they hardly discuss ethnicity or religion:

> Researcher: Do you ever have the feeling that there are differences between the pupils with roots in another country or…
>
> Olivia**:** (interrupts) They're actually all the same, it's like… Maybe our culture is a little bit different, but we're all people, friends and we all have fun together, so.
>
> Researcher: And do you ever discuss different cultures?
>
> Olivia: No, I'm not that deep yet. We just want to have fun.
> (11y, self-identifies as Swedish, R1, T1)

Yet, noticeably, some majority ethnic children who claim to have a mixed friendship group mention all children from the same ethnic background as their top five friends, which corresponds with earlier research showing that best friends are more likely to be from the same ethnic group, and that this is especially so among 'white' majority pupils (Kao and Joyner, 2004; see also Demanet et al., 2020). Most of these children say that this is a 'coincidence' rather than a deliberate choice. Emiel, for

example, hardly draws bright boundaries, yet mention that he feels more comfortable with his friends of Belgian descent because they share the same interests:

> Researcher: How important is it that you share the same culture?
>
> Emiel**:** I have friends who come from Moroccan origin, I used to have from Turkish also, so it doesn't really matter to me.
>
> Researcher: But I believe that your friends at the moment are mainly of Belgian descent?
>
> Emiel: Yes, they are. (…) It's just, I sat with those children in pre-school already and we only had more Moroccans, I mean people from Moroccan descent and Turkish descent, since primary school, so I know my [Belgian descent] friends longer than them. And there are no people of Moroccan descent at skiing.
> (12y, self-identifies as Belgian, R2, T1)

One possibility is that these children in fact do not tend to hang out with friends of the same ethnic background, but rather with friends of the same social class, as they generally have more expensive or at least typically middle-class hobbies compared to most of their minority ethnic classmates. In our research setting, ethnicity intersects to a large extent with social class, so in many classrooms almost all majority ethnic children are from a middle-class background while most minority children are not (Kind & Gezin, 2018), possibly causing class differences to strengthen ethnic lines. When we ask Emiel what he likes about his friends, he answers:

> Emiel**:** If I meet someone and I say my hobby is skiing, they always say like 'huh, but can't you only ski abroad?' And they (his top five friends) understand what I do because the first three do the same so for them it's like the most common thing in the world. And they [other two friends] are really good friends so they have already seen me ski. (…)
>
> Researcher: Can you describe what you expect from a good friend?
>
> Emiel: Uhum, someone I can talk to (…). Because that friend (…), he also skates and that's also nice because you can talk about that. So that's actually what I like, if someone does the same kind of sports.
> (12y, self-identifies as Belgian, R2, T1)

Arguably, the extent to which children's friendship networks are mediated by social class needs to be more thoroughly examined, as very different findings have emerged from the literature (see Iqbal et al. 2017, who show that children are more likely to mix across ethnic lines than across social class lines).

Our data also indicate that patterns may change over time. Oskar, also stated in the first round that his minority classmates do not seem to share his interests. After his transition to secondary education, he does not repeat this, and reports that he gets along well with some of them; in the third research round, he even reports that he has one minority ethnic best friend. Interestingly, his class became less diverse regarding interests and academic trajectory after the transition to secondary education. While in Flemish primary schools all pupils are in the same class, whether they are interested in academic or vocational subjects, they then, when they enter secondary education, are clustered according to their assessed abilities and interests.[1] Oskar has chosen to study Latin in secondary school, a field of study generally most appreciated for its abstraction and difficulty. While in a Flemish context, this study subject is known to have a rather homogeneous white pupil population, Oskar's class – at least at this moment – is quite ethnically diverse, perhaps also because the children have not yet been tracked. He therefore may, more than in primary education, have come into contact with a diverse group of pupils who share his interests. However, research also indicates that being enrolled in the same study field is not a sufficient condition to develop interethnic friendships, as minority ethnic pupils may also be confronted with stereotype threat within their own track, among other things (Van Praag, Boone, et al., 2015). Yet, overall, our findings are very much in line with studies that show that children hardly perceive bright ethnic boundaries when they intrinsically share the same interests (e.g., Knifsend and Juvonen, 2013; Sedano, 2012).

Importantly, not all the children in the study seem to hang out with children from supposedly the same social background. Alexander, for example, is from an affluent family (both his parents are doctors) yet reports that he spends time with pupils from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, while in some cases ethnic boundaries are blurred and class boundaries might be brighter, in other cases, neither ethnicity nor class seem to be central mechanisms in children's group formation, calling for further investigation into the social conditions which impact children's friendships.

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[1] In Flanders, when Flemish children make the transition from primary to secondary education, they are first referred to a specific 'stream'. This streaming into the 'A-stream' - for children who successfully completed primary education - and the 'B-stream' - for children who did not complete it successfully -, consists of a two-year preparation for a specific track. After these two years, children are channelled into (1) the general or academic track (*ASO)*, which prepares them for tertiary education, (2) the technical track (*TSO)*, which prepares them for both tertiary education and the labour market, (3) the artistic track (*KSO*), or (4) the vocational track (*BSO)*, which prepares pupils explicitly for direct entry onto the labour market. Research has shown that Flemish teachers are often biased by pupils' background characteristics when giving advice, and that they often refer children with a migration background and/or children who are socio-economically disadvantaged to technical or vocational education, even in cases where they have sufficiently high grades and motivation to enter the general track (Boone et al., 2018; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013; Sneyers et al., 2018). This leads to an overrepresentation of minority ethnic and other disadvantaged pupils in the technical and vocational tracks, which are generally perceived as less prestigious and valuable (Stevens and Vermeersh, 2010; Van Praag et al., 2014).

Friendships displaying ethnic segregation: blurred boundaries, homogeneous groups of minority friends

A few of the minority ethnic children claim to have a homogeneous group of 'minority' friends because they hardly meet people of 'native' Belgian descent. Indeed, some of the children are from a relatively if not entirely 'segregated' neighbourhood and school (see also above). While they interact daily with minority peers originating from all over the world, they also navigate an environment where majority ethnic children are largely absent. Unsurprisingly, these children have a diverse group of minority ethnic friends, but no friends from the majority ethnic group. When we use the term 'homogeneous', we are hence referring to groups of friends that consist solely of different minority ethnic children, rather than to a friendship group consisting solely of children from the same ethnic background. Enes, for example, has never had classmates of Belgian descent and reports:

> Researcher: Do you have any friends of Belgian descent outside of school?
>
> Enes: No, I don't actually. But if I had a good friend from Belgium, I would also just hang out with him. (…) It's not like I don't… Uhm, I mean, in Belgium almost everyone is originating from… originating from another country. I almost never… I almost never meet a Belgian-Belgian.
> (11y, self-identifies as Dutch-Turkish, R1, T3)

Some of these pupils report that they start hanging out with pupils of diverse ethnic backgrounds once they actually meet them. Ayman lives in a neighbourhood with a large share of residents of Moroccan descent and attends a primary school with, in his class, exclusively children of Moroccan background. During the first interview, he does not really draw boundaries between different ethnic groups, yet he mentions that he only has Moroccan friends. After the transition to secondary education, however, he meets people from different backgrounds and reports that he has a diverse group of friends.

Layla, on the other hand, is the daughter of a mother of Belgian descent and a Belgian-born father of Moroccan descent. She attended a mixed primary school but has moved up to a secondary school with a much higher share of children with a migration background. While she had majority ethnic friends in primary school, she reports in the second interview that she only hangs out with girls of Moroccan descent:

> Researcher: Is it important to you that your friends share the same culture?
>
> Layla: That doesn't matter to me.

> Researcher: You told me that you only have friends of Moroccan descent?
>
> Layla**:** Yes, but they're… There are also brown people with whom I'm friends (…). There are people from other countries [than Morocco] but they're Muslim too, they often come to talk to me. Girls who aren't Muslim have never come to talk to me, so…
>
> Researcher: If they had come to talk to you, you'd have become friends?
>
> Layla**:** Yes, I also had a, had Belgian friends at primary school, they were very good to me, so.
> (12y, self-identifies as Muslim, R2, T3)

Yet, Layla's friendship group has changed again by the third interview round. Now she reportedly again spends time with a mixed group of pupils, including Belgian-descent and non-Muslim children. Interestingly, Layla's arguments have hardly changed over time and once again she seems especially inclined to become friends with children who first come and talk to her:

> Layla: [My friends are from] Morocco, Spain, from here in Belgium, uhm a few from the Netherlands, a few from France.
>
> Researcher: Compared to last year, you don't hang out primarily with Muslim children?
>
> Layla: No, they're not all Muslim but that doesn't matter to me, whether they're Muslim or not. (…) The Belgians now, everyone is just… They just come talk to everyone and they're really nice to you and they just want to be your friend.
> (13y, self-identifies as Muslim, R3, T3)

Hence, the fact that some of the child-respondents report a homogeneous minority ethnic peer group does not necessarily or exclusively say anything about intragroup preferences, as some children – because of residential and educational segregation (see Mahieu, 2012) – hardly come into contact with children of Belgian descent. As most of the minority child-respondents, moreover, are from socio-economically vulnerable families, especially those in schools and neighbourhoods with a high share of minority groups, they generally do not take part in the kind of extracurricular activities (such as scouts, drawing academies etc.) where they would have a chance to meet peers other than those they share their schools and neighbourhoods with.

Friendships displaying boundary crossing: bright boundaries, mixed group of friends

Other child-respondents draw bright boundaries, using ethnonyms. In this study, boundaries are particularly drawn between majority and minority ethnic children, generally referred to as, respectively, 'Belgians' and 'allochthons', or between 'believers' (used exclusively for Muslims) and 'non-believers' (generally used as a synonym for majority ethnic pupils, whether or not they are religious). The term 'allochthons', commonly used in Belgium and the Netherlands although recently attacked publicly as controversial, stems from a nativist understanding in which a distinction is made between the 'original' habitants of a country, the 'autochthons', and the habitants who are not from 'the land' and thus are 'allochthonous'. The term 'allochthons' is generally used, also by the child-respondents, to refer to (non-Western) migrants, their Belgian-born children and even their grandchildren (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2015). We assume that the omnipresence of this nativist distinction leads minority children to focus on the boundaries between 'natives' and 'non-natives', but to say little about their interethnic relations with other minority groups. The boundaries children draw are primarily moral, meaning that they are drawn on the basis of assumed moral qualities and moral character (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

One might expect that children who draw bright boundaries are less inclined to become friends with each other. Interestingly, however, while this is true for a very few children (see further), most children report that they have a mixed friendship group, or have made one since the transition to secondary education. During the first research round, Hala (11y, Iraqi descent, T2) emphasized that non-Muslim girls had different moral values and hence she did not want to be friends with them. Yet, when I interviewed her again in the second research round, she explained that the non-Muslim pupils Tess (Dutch descent) and Eva (Belgian descent) are two of her best friends. At this point, Hala also gives another reason why she originally did not want to hang out with non-Muslim pupils. While first emphasizing their 'immodest' behaviour, she says in the second round that non-Muslim girls in primary school did not want to hang out with her. Hala moved to Belgium aged seven and is still working on her Dutch. In the second round, she explained how she is bullied on Instagram by other minority classmates because of her language. This experience may affect how she draws boundaries between different pupils, as she feels supported by her new non-Muslim friends who accept her for who she is. In the third research round, where Hala reports that she has become even closer friends with Tess, she no longer draws any kind of moral boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim children. In other words, this third type of friendship involves the gradual erosion and, eventually, crossing of group boundaries.

A similar pattern is found in the narrative of Yassine, who is shorter than average due to health problems. Yassine stated in primary school that he did not like to hang out with non-Muslim pupils because 'they are greedy and stingy', but after entering secondary education, he nevertheless became the only Muslim boy in his friendship group. Further on in the interview it becomes clear that Yassine became friends with those boys because they do not bully him. They even stand up for him when he is bullied because of his height. Yet, in the second round, Yassine still draws the same bright moral boundaries between Muslim and Belgian-descent or non-Muslim pupils. In the third round, however, when he has become even closer with his new friends, he reflects on his boundary making, recalling that he initially did not want to hang out with non-Muslim pupils:

> Yassine: I thought that they were all racist because then there were some
> children who are like that so… I went, I mean, I asked Olivier 'what is your
> religion' and he said that [he isn't Muslim] and I said do you want, can I be
> your friend, and he said ok.
> (13y, self-identifies as Tunisian, R3, T2)

Yassine further explains that he was wrong to say in primary school that non-Muslim pupils are greedy, and that he is happy that he has changed his perception: 'Because if I still thought that way, then it's like, then I think that's bad, then I'm saying wrong things which aren't true'.

In the second research round, Sam too draws strong boundaries between 'Belgians' and 'allochthons'. He tells us that he likes the minority girls in his class more than the majority ethnic ones because:

> Sam**:** They dare to do a lot.
>
> Researcher: What do they dare to do?
>
> Sam: Being naughty in class, they secretly take their telephone or… and they
> dare to contradict [the teacher], they also dare to do that, I think.(…) [They're]
> just not like a Belgian.
>
> Researcher: And how would you describe a Belgian pupil?
>
> Sam: Those, those who study all day (…) And if the teacher is mad at us and no
> longer teaches us, she [Belgian-descent pupil] starts to cry (laughs).
> (12y, identifies as 'partly Iranian', R2, T2)

Sam reports that he has a few friends of Belgian descent. He explains, however, that they behave like his minority friends, by which he particularly means that they also dare to misbehave. Yet, he still categorizes his friend group as 'allochthonous', particularly because his Belgian-descent friends 'behave like them':

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> Sam**:** But there are also Belgians, so real Belgians, who hang out with us but that doesn't matter, that's normal. They act normal (…). They act like we do
> (12y, identifies as 'partly Iranian', R2, T2)

These results suggest that, even when they use ethnonyms, many children do not necessarily structure their friendship groups based on whether or not children are from a minority background. Rather, they seem to make friendships on the basis of how children's behaviour is perceived - as 'typically' allochthonous or 'typically' Belgian. Generally, behaviour is perceived as 'typically' allochthonous when children dare to be naughty and rebellious, and 'typically' Belgian when children tend to behave in class and are perceived to be stingy. Some children, hence, seem to 'expand' (Wimmer, 2013) ethnic boundaries by including Belgian-descent children in their group if they 'act like they do.' Apparently, this strategy of boundary expansion goes hand in hand with a strategy of boundary 'contraction' (Wimmer, 2013), as these minority children also place minority pupils who do not 'behave like them' outside the boundaries of 'allochthon-ness'.

> Sam**:** It's also that Belgians are selfish, and the allochthons stick up for each other. It's just like, they ['Belgians'] falsely accuse you and they just act strange. And yes, just selfish in general.
>
> Researcher: And the allochthons?
>
> Sam: No, they help each other, they stick up for each other.
>
> Researcher: They don't let you down, they don't falsely accuse you?
>
> Sam: The allochthons don't betray you at all! (…) Only grumpy allochthons do that.
> (12y, identifies as 'partly Iranian', R2, T2)

Sam divides the group of 'allochthons' in two, and calls minority pupils who do not act as he expects the 'grumpy allochthons', meaning they are not 'typical'. Although they use ethnonyms in a rather problematic way, these children apparently make friends based on shared group conventions (e.g., not betraying each other to the teacher) and behaviours (e.g., being rebellious). However, this leads to ethnically mixed peer groups (including children of Belgian descent) nevertheless being described as 'allochthonous' because the shared group norms and behaviour are described as 'typical' for that group (see also Sedano, 2012). This shows that moral boundaries, while bright, do not necessarily coincide with friendship group formation.

Friendships displaying group confirmation: bright boundaries, homogeneous group of friends

A few children who draw bright boundaries report a homogeneous group of friends. In contrast to children who draw blurred boundaries (quadrant two), these children generally say that they deliberately choose to hang out with children from the same ethno-religious background. However, they are in a small minority and directly or indirectly report negative experiences with the group against which they draw boundaries. Jordy has attended mixed primary and secondary schools with a minority of Belgian-descent children, yet mentions having only friends who are, like himself, of Belgian descent. He explicitly says that he is less inclined to become friends especially with 'Moroccan' children. According to him, 'Moroccan' children tend to misbehave, to pollute the neighbourhood and he also does not like the way they make linguistic mistakes when they speak:

> Jordy: I hate it a bit that they don't speak Dutch normally, they use their articles wrong. (…) Now my brother has Moroccan friends, he speaks differently from before. (…) He speaks a little Moroccan and now he also uses the wrong articles. And he also uses Moroccan words.
> (11y, self-identifies as Belgian, R1, T2)

When I ask Jordy to define how a 'normal' person should behave, he stresses, among other things, that they should drink beer, eat properly and not with their hands, and that they should dress neatly for a party. It seems that, in contrast to the vast majority of the other children, Jordy draws bright moral boundaries based on 'cultural markers'; he also considers 'Moroccans' less normal because they are not allowed to drink beer according to Islam (the religion most Moroccans adhere to) and traditionally eat with their hands instead of a knife and fork. Jordy, however, has moved up to a secondary school (T1) with a smaller share of children of Moroccan background, and although he still draws bright boundaries against this ethnic group, he reports that he has become slightly less negative because 'here there are less Moroccans, last year [in primary school] it just was a little bit very annoying.' In the third research round Jordy even reports that he hangs out with some pupils of Moroccan descent in his school, yet, although to a lesser extent, clear boundaries are still present in his narratives.

Ikram, too, reports that she prefers to hang out with children who are Muslim like she is. In the first round, she draws moral boundaries by claiming that non-Muslim girls behave differently from Muslim girls, dancing in public or talking about boys and relationships. However, in both research rounds one and two, she seems to be more concerned that they may not understand her way of living:

Ikram**:** If they [friends] are Muslim, then it's easier for you. Then we can talk about everything.

Researcher: What kind of topics wouldn't you discuss with someone who's not Muslim?

Ikram: Yes, about uhm, school is out, I immediately have to pray *Duhur* and *Asr* [noon and afternoon prayer], I really wouldn't say that to them. And just, that we can't wear a headscarf here at school, with them [points to the list with her Muslim friends' names], we always whine about that, but with Belgian girls we don't. (…) They won't know why we do all that, they won't understand it either.
(12y, self-identifies as Moroccan, R2, T3)

Ikram, however, has not engaged with Belgian-descent pupils since she entered primary school aged six. As she lives in a neighbourhood with many minority ethnic inhabitants and goes to a school with a very large percentage of children with a migration background, she says that she hardly meets same-aged children of Belgian descent. The only people of Belgian descent she interacts with are her teachers, with whom she does not feel completely at ease. In both primary and the first year of secondary school, Ikram tells the researcher that she does not believe that teachers fully respect Muslims and the way they practice their religion. Because she reports rather negative experiences of the interaction with her teachers, she may expect to have the same kind of interaction with majority ethnic and/or non-Muslim pupils of her own age. We also note this when we ask her in what circumstances she would be able to socialize with non-Muslim children:

Researcher: What should be different, so you'd hang out with non-Muslims?

Ikram**:** Just having respect for each other. (…)

Researcher: What do you want them to respect?

Ikram: That I'm Muslim, I wear a headscarf, I pray, I eat halal. She must respect that and then I will respect her.

Researcher: If you meet a non-Muslim girl who respects all those things, you would be friends with her?

Ikram: Yes.
(12y, self-identifies as Moroccan, R2, T3)

Although her best friends are Muslim, Ikram reports in the last research round that meanwhile she has also made some non-Muslim friends. She states that she no longer supports her statement that it is easier to hang out with Muslim friends, and adds that non-Muslim friends can understand a religious way of living too. Interestingly, Ikram has also become more nuanced about the teachers

she first considered rather racist. She says she was wrong to suggest that teachers do not respect her religiosity, and that there are many teachers who are open to Islam. Hence, Ikram says she has changed her perceptions of non-Muslim teachers and pupils, and the clear boundaries she first drew seem to have become blurred. We discuss these shifts further in the final part of our paper.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on in-depth interviews conducted over a period of two school years to discuss which symbolic boundaries children set while talking about whether or not their friendship group is ethnically diverse. Interestingly, both children who make a clear distinction between ethnic groups and children who do not, report that they have a mixed group of friends. On the other hand, in both groups there are also children who indicate that they only hang out with those of their own ethnic or religious background. To describe these patterns, we created a typology based on both the categorical distinctions children draw between ethnic groups and how they understand their own interethnic friendship group formation.

In line with previous research (Knifsend and Juvonen, 2013; Sedano, 2012), children say that they make friends based on shared hobbies and activities or because they have known each other for a long time. The results suggest that children initially want to feel safe and secure in their friendship group and want to be able to discuss their interests. For most, ethnicity has very little to do with this. However, even in cases where ethnicity is not a salient boundary marker, children might form monoethnic friendships. In these cases, social class differences and segregation processes seemingly impact children's group formation. Previous research has also shown that in socio-economically disadvantaged schools, which are often ethnically diverse, pupils have fewer friendships and lower attachment to friends in general. This implies that socio-economic disadvantage more strongly affects friendship group formation than ethnicity (Demanet et al., 2012).

Furthermore, and also confirming previous research (Devine et al., 2008; Sedano, 2012), some other children seem to draw clear moral boundaries between different ethnic groups; this is especially the case when they experience certain tensions, like Jordy who reports that 'Moroccans' pollute the neighbourhood (see also Wessendorf, 2014). It further becomes clear that some Muslim children also draw moral boundaries, for example by claiming that they do not want to hang out with non-Muslims because they are 'stingy' or 'indecent'. This moral boundary making may be a response to stigmatization and feelings of being 'attacked' in one's own worth (Lamont et al., 2016). Research has shown that Muslim youth feel unappreciated because of their religion, often from childhood onwards (Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b). Supposedly, some of the child-respondents aim to

situate themselves as 'morally superior' to their non-Muslim peers, to revaluate their own social group (Wimmer, 2013), although they hang out with them, or, like Ikram, report that they only socialize with children of their own religious group so they will be respected and understood. Interestingly, however, some children who once drew bright boundaries (e.g., Hala, Yassine and Ikram) do so much less after they have become friends with non-Muslim peers.

Although in this age group the various minority groups form a large majority, some of the child-respondents broadly distinguish between 'allochthons' and 'Belgians' and do not really draw symbolic boundaries between different minority groups. Noticeably, these children attach a rather problematic meaning to being 'allochthon'. Some minority child-respondents state that allochthons are characterized by, among other things, naughtiness and some even suggest that it is typically 'Belgian' to study hard for school, meaning that a 'typical allochthon' should not study all day. Apparently, some of the minority interviewees obtain a sense of worth from disobedience, and since studying hard is seen as a 'typically Belgian trait', it is not a 'cool' thing for them to do. Further, other children need to follow these behavioural scripts to be included and seen as one of them (see also Warikoo, 2007). This leads to the interesting finding that even children of Belgian descent can be included in the so-called 'allochthonous' friend group (a phenomenon called boundary expansion) if they behave 'typically allochthonously', and minority children can be excluded if they do not (boundary contraction) (see Wimmer, 2013).

As the relationship between children's attitudes and interethnic friendship is complex, the quadrants provide a useful analytical framework to grasp the variations and discrepancy between children's attitudes and friendships, as reported. Yet, our two-year study, in which we have interviewed the children three times, has also demonstrated that children's boundary work and friendships are not fixed but often show fluctuating patterns. As some children's boundary making seems to weaken over time and some friendship groups become repeatedly more or less diverse, they can be placed in different quadrants during different research rounds. Both symbolic boundaries and friendship groups are fluid, and after the transition to secondary education, some of the pupils' described networks and boundary-making processes changed. Overall, our results also highlight children's agency and reflexivity in negotiating ethnic differences. We were struck by our child respondents' nuance and thoughtfulness when speaking about ethnic differences, and how they adjust their previous opinions about ethnic groups when they feel it is necessary. Importantly, however, we did not conduct ethnographic observations, so this article has only looked at how children *talk about* interethnic friendships and provides little insight into whether or not their claims are consistent with their practice. This approach is nevertheless interesting, as symbolic boundaries are often expressed at the discursive level and oral boundary making could also be seen as a behavioural 'act'. However,

since symbolic boundaries also have a behavioural component with an impact beyond oral statements (Lamont, 1992), further research should explore how these flexible quadrants are enacted in children's everyday life.

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How children and adults challenge each other's performances of everyday cosmopolitanism

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with Gert Verschraegen and Noel Clycq

Introduction

There is ample research into the ways in which 'differences are negotiated on the smallest of scales' (Wilson, 2011: 635) and how people construct cosmopolitanism – or openness towards others – from 'below' (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002; Pichler, 2008). The translation of cultural openness into everyday practices has been analysed at length, especially in urban cities where cosmopolitanism is expected to flourish (Müller, 2011). An interesting and more recent thread in this literature is the focus on young people and how they navigate contexts with a lot of ethnic diversity (Keating, 2015). Research in different locations indicates that children and young people often practice cosmopolitanism differently from adults, and that they are more likely to experience diversity as a commonplace or ordinary aspect of their daily lives (Harris, 2009; Iqbal et al., 2017; Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019; Wessendorf, 2013). Children are generally more rooted in their local environments and have more opportunities to build friendships across differences, yet they do not necessary seem to be intentionally 'cosmopolitan'. Compared to adults, they hardly emphasize their ability to interact across differences, as this is not particularly exceptional or noteworthy for them (Harris, 2009; Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019). Overall, there is a growing consensus that children display a great deal of agency when navigating super-diverse environments and that they do not simply adopt 'what they hear from adults' (Visser, 2020; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019; Weller and Bruegel, 2009; Wilson, 2013). Less research is available, however, on how children's cosmopolitan orientations interact with those of their own parents and teachers, nor do previous studies strongly tackle the ways in which these different orientations can be seen as a 'performance' rather than as inherent beliefs (see e.g. Müller, 2011; Plage et al., 2017; Woodward and Skrbis, 2012 for exceptions). Cosmopolitanism is indeed

often deliberately performed within specific encounters rather than appearing to be an attitude or a form of identity (Plage et al., 2017).

In this paper, based on in-depth interviews with children aged 11 to 14 and some of their parents and teachers in the super-diverse city of Antwerp, we show how children and adults narrate their evaluations of ethnic diversity and mixed friendship groups in different ways, and how they question and challenge each other's understandings of racism. In doing so, this study unpacks the ways in which cosmopolitanism is enacted among the different generations. More specifically, we describe how adults and children challenge each other's performances, which results in major discussions about diversity and racism at home and in the classroom. Focusing on both children and adults also allows us to foreground children's agency and their ability to articulate their own views on diversity and stand up for their own opinion. To better understand the differential orientations of adults and children towards ethnic and cultural difference, we draw upon different theoretical concepts. Firstly, we draw on the literature on everyday cosmopolitanism, arguing that it constitutes a multifaceted 'cultural repertoire' (Kendall et al., 2009; Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986) on which children as well as adults can draw to navigate the diverse social environments in which they find themselves. Secondly, to make sense of how parents, teachers and children talk differently about cultural diversity, we examine the various 'speech norms' that are activated in discussions about diversity and racism. We elaborate on these theoretical approaches in the first section of the paper. Subsequently, we present our methods and data. Thereafter, we will discuss in detail how adults and children contest each other's performances of cosmopolitanism, after which we end with some brief conclusions.

Repertoires of everyday cosmopolitanism among children and adults

In the past decades, research has demonstrated how those living in super-diverse neighbourhoods increasingly succeed in interacting across differences in 'unpanicked' ways (Neal et al., 2013). The notion of conviviality is used to capture how diversity has become an ordinary aspect in many urban citizen's everyday lives as they negotiate ethnic differences quite unproblematically (Gilroy, 2004; Wessendorf, 2013). Others, however, have evidenced that people engage rather superficially with diversity. Blokland and van Eijk (2010), for example, show how 'diversity-seekers' claim to have settled in a neighbourhood for the ethnic diversity, yet hardly interact across ethnic differences in their local environment. Valentine (2008), in turn, illustrates how openness towards diversity is often more a form of civility and 'urban etiquette', rather than the articulation of a profound respect for

and engagement with the 'other' (see also Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Plage et al., 2017). Scholars further point out that conviviality should not be romanticised as convivial behaviour can coincide with structural inequality and everyday racism (Noble, 2011, 2013).

From a complementary perspective, these dynamics in super-diverse cities are also studied through the lens of 'everyday cosmopolitanism', defined as the repertoires and strategies used by ordinary people to bridge boundaries between different groups (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002; Pichler, 2008). This literature is conceptually close to recent research on conviviality (see e.g., Noble, 2013; Radice, 2016) and distinguishes between cosmopolitan attitudes, practices and competences (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). While cosmopolitan attitudes refer to a recognition of the other and an open and tolerant world view, they do not necessarily or always translate into everyday practices or the ability to interact across ethnic and cultural boundaries in skilful ways. Cosmopolitan practices indeed require more than cultural openness; they entail 'coordinated sets of learned cultural competencies which must be applied in particular social situations, akin to a cultural repertoire or mode of behaviour' (Kendall et al., 2009: 104–105). Rather than as inherent beliefs, values or ideas, we perceive cosmopolitanism as a cultural repertoire or 'toolkit' (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986) which can be selectively called upon in particular social contexts to express or enact one's position towards others (Kendall et al., 2009; Woodward and Skrbis, 2012).

Following earlier work (e.g., Kendall et al., 2009; Müller, 2011; Woodward and Skrbis, 2012), we will therefore primarily pay attention to how ideals of cultural openness are expressed or 'performed', focusing on the differences between children and adults. We build on a growing body of literature in super-diverse cities suggesting that there are generational differences in urban citizens' cosmopolitan practices. As children are more likely to encounter different ethnic groups in their everyday lives (e.g., at school or in public places), they generally perceive diversity as an ordinary aspect of their lives, compared to adults, who more often construct symbolic boundaries when talking about ethnic groups (Harris, 2009; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019). Adults also appear to perceive children's interactions more strongly through an 'ethnic lens'; this is reflected, for example, in teachers and parents reporting that some children only hang out with 'those of the same ethnic background', while children themselves see this differently (Crozier and Davies, 2008; Sedano, 2012). In their Australian study, however, Noble and Watkins (2014) have showed that generally there is little difference between the views of pupils, teachers and parents, but they also showed how pupils are more focused on social justice and that they were less likely to draw on cultural explanations when talking about certain phenomena. Children and adults also seem to view racism differently and differ in opinion about the legitimacy of using racial labels when talking about diversity. There is some evidence, for instance, that while children report that some teachers treat

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them differently due to their racial or ethnic background, teachers themselves believe it is unlikely that those who are racist would teach in a school with a majority of racial minorities (Vaught and Castagno, 2008). Teachers seemingly ignore children's comments on racism or silence them, and report that they find it more important to talk about cultural differences than about racism. Similarly, many white parents do not talk much about racism unless it is brought up by the children themselves or the media, and they, too, prefer to focus on cultural differences rather than racial exclusion when discussing diversity (Priest et al., 2016).

To grasp the varied ways in which children and adults perform cultural openness, we will pay close analytical attention to how our respondents normatively challenge the way in which others speak about ethnic and racial difference, and how they justify their own register of speaking about such differences. This focus is rather common in research on 'everyday racism' (Essed, 1991), which makes frequent use of interviewing as 'a way of generating in-depth talk' about ethnic or racial diversity and racism (Romm, 2010: 215) to gauge which presuppositions and rules are applied in it. As Nina Eliasoph aptly puts it: 'part of a society's way of understanding race – or any issue – is people's shared understanding of how and where it is appropriate to speak about it. Interviewees' attitudes toward communication itself is part of what should count as interviewees' "attitudes"' (Eliasoph, 1999: 482).

Our approach to the way our respondents normatively speak about diversity is partly inspired by the pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2011; 2006). They have advanced an understanding of norms as enacted practices which take shape in various sorts of everyday disputes and controversies about the rules and valuations that should underpin our common life. Boltanski and Thévenot argue that norm contestation is rather common in our rapidly changing and diversifying societies as ordinary actors are often uncertain or disagree about which norms and judgments should prevail in certain situations. As indicated by recent controversies about 'political correctness' and 'wokeness' in both the anglophone world (Pollock, 2004; Titley, 2020) and continental Europe (Bonnet, 2014), such disputes also arise concerning the implicit norms that govern how people speak about racial and ethnic difference. Actors continually implement critique and invoke justice demands concerning how people address ethnic groups and speak about racial difference. According to Boltanski, they do so on the basis of their innate 'critical capacities' and 'ordinary sense of justice' (Boltanski, 2011: 27–29).

To capture the normative grammar that is implicit when people speak about ethnicity and race, we use the concept of 'speech norms', which are the (implicit) norms activated in discussions about cultural openness, diversity and racism. Speech norms concerning diversity and race are about what supposedly can be said (and what cannot be said) about (racial and ethnic) diversity, but

especially also in which context and to whom something can be said (or not) (e.g., Bonnet, 2014; Pollock, 2004). This alludes to Goffman's work (1981), arguing that everyday talk can be seen as staged performance, a form of acting before an audience, which often occurs in highly 'scripted' ways; what is deemed relevant to some audiences is not deemed relevant to others; what can be said to some people (and how it should be said to them) cannot necessarily be said to others. Research, for instance, has shown how white people are more cautious when talking about race in public, as this 'frontstage is multiracial' and think they can afford to 'speak their mind' in the backstage when talking to an 'all white audience' (Nelson, 2021: 3). In this article, we will analyse how speech norms on diversity are enacted within the frontstage interaction between the respondents and the researcher (cf. Romm, 2010: 215–267). Building on the work of Bonnet and Caillaut (2015), we see speech norms which are enacted in interview situations as expressions of assumed social desirability, suggesting that respondents are inclined 'to distort their answers to be perceived favourably' (Bonnet and Caillault, 2015: 1187).

Research context, data and methodology

The data presented in this paper are part of a larger study in which we examine children's boundary making and repertoires on ethnic and social diversity. While we have discussed children's repertoires on ethnic differences in more detail elsewhere (see Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b), this paper mainly focusses on how children's enactments differ from those of their own parents and teachers. The study is conducted in Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium), a rich site for studying cosmopolitan attitudes and practices because of its super-diverse character. In recent years, Antwerp has become a 'majority-minority city' (Crul, 2018), in which the more than 170 minority groups form the majority of the population (Stad Antwerpen, 2020).

To recruit as diverse a group as possible, the children were initially selected within the sixth grade (11-12y) of six primary schools, chosen because of their location in more or less diverse neighbourhoods and the degree of ethnic and social mix among pupils. The 21 interviews with the children took place in three rounds over a period of two school years: (1) the sixth grade of primary school, (2) the first grade of secondary school, and (3) the second grade of secondary. During the second research round, parents and teachers were asked whether they too were willing to participate in the study: 12 parents and 13 first-grade teachers agreed to do so. There was one couple among the parents, so parents of 11 children were interviewed. The teachers teach one or several of the children. There are, hence, several pupils of which only a parent or a teacher have been interviewed. While there is a great deal of diversity within the group of children, this diversity is less pronounced among

the parents interviewed. Of the 10 mothers and two fathers who agreed to participate, seven are of Belgian descent, three are of European descent and two have a Moroccan migration background. Of the teachers, 10 are of Belgian descent, two have a non-Belgian, European background and one teacher is of Northern African descent. The low diversity among teachers is, however, less remarkable, as only a very small minority of teachers have a migration background in Flanders.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all parties. Everyone was interviewed individually. Although the narratives are at times similar (see results), the researcher did not share any information about what was said in a previous interview with a parent, teacher or child. All those involved have been informed that each other's interviews are private and that they cannot access this information. The interviews with the children, however, did influence the interviews with the parents and the teachers, as they determined the topics to be further explored. Concretely, all actors were asked to explain their perceptions on diversity, to tell something about their social network and encounters with different ethnic groups, how they view topics such as racism and discrimination, and so on. Teachers were asked to elaborate both on their personal perceptions and the school policy or ideology, but this paper draws only on the first. It is important to consider, however, that the ways in which they performed cosmopolitanism is related to their professional position (see results). The audio-recordings were transcribed and coded inductively with the qualitative software programme NVivo. The interviews with the children were coded and analysed first. The codes that arose inductively from the first research round with the children were applied to those of the adults, as well as the subsequent interviews with the children themselves. Thereafter, codes which arose inductively from the interviews with adults were applied deductively to those with children. This repeated coding process allowed us to analyse similar and conflicting patterns in children's and adults' repertoires on diversity and racism.

As we discussed above, talking about diversity entails many speech norms and people generally express themselves carefully. The interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper, a female researcher with a minority ethnic background. This most likely had an effect on the respondents' answers. It may be that some of the respondents were utterly positive about diversity, perhaps more positive than they would be otherwise, because the researcher was seen as 'diverse' herself. Rather than perceiving social desirability as a methodological obstacle to our research, we employ it to examine what the interviewees believe they are supposed to answer when being interviewed on diversity and racism.

Results

In this section, we discuss how children and adults share or challenge each other's repertoires on diversity and racism, and construct a typology of how cosmopolitanism is enacted among children, parents and teachers. We discuss how parents enact 'cultural cosmopolitanism', that is an openness towards those with other cultural backgrounds, while their children draw less on these repertoires on diversity but display cosmopolitanism in their everyday practices, which we will call 'social cosmopolitanism'. We further describe how the teachers, through their formal role as educators, are especially concerned with performing social engagement and non-racism, although their performances of what we will call 'moral cosmopolitanism' are contested by their pupils, who show an awareness of current debates on ethnic and racial diversity. Strikingly, both parents and teachers dismiss children's anti-racist performances as a form of pubertal behaviour, and children's opinions are repeatedly described as rather simplistic, poorly reasoned and blind. It is important to mention that we do not consider these different performances of cosmopolitanism as demarcated categories into which the various respondents fit completely. Our typology is not all-encompassing and exists alongside others (see e.g., Kendall et al., 2009 for a useful typology). This is hence not an exhaustive list of cosmopolitan performances. While we do not claim that the performances of parents, teachers and pupils can be completely reduced to one of the three types – on the contrary, respondents may express different forms of cosmopolitanism – we mainly describe here how the parents and teachers, compared to their children or pupils, tend towards a specific form of cosmopolitanism in an interview setting and what contradictions arise while they do so.

Culturally and socially cosmopolitan: parents and children

After an interview with Victor (pupil), the researcher lingers in the kitchen in his home to exchange pleasantries with his parents and to ask if they are willing to participate in the study themselves. While describing the research objectives, Pieter (Victor's father) curiously interjects: 'I assume you're not of Belgian descent, can I ask where you are from?' The researcher, who is somewhat taken aback by his question, answers that her parents are of Moroccan descent and deflects the conversation back to the ongoing project. A few weeks later, when she interviews Pieter himself, he illustrates his cultural openness in the following way:

> Pieter: I also know, I have a few Moroccan friends and it's very important that
> the whole family eats together. (…) I've attended [a meal] (…) there's a large
> plate, and that part is for you and then yeah… It's… *You* [Moroccans,
> addresses the researcher directly] are very tactile, you know, you smell and feel

a lot, while *we* [Belgians] eat with a knife and fork. It's different, there's no
right, there's no wrong, but there are cultural differences.
(Victor's father, Belgian descent, primary school teacher)

Contradictorily, while Pieter repeatedly stressed that he does not like to think in 'lines or boxes', he places the researcher in a clear-cut category because he now knows that she is of Moroccan descent. Although he means very well, this makes the researcher feel quite uncomfortable, as she would not describe herself as very tactile nor as someone who smells and feels a lot at the dinner table. In this sense, Pieter's performances allude to what Hage (1997) calls 'cosmo-multiculturalism'. As an act of distinction, he aims to show both his interests for and his knowledge of the 'exotic other', but in doing so, the researcher is reduced to a passive subject. To be able to perform his cultural openness, the researcher indeed had to be 'otherized'. This rather awkward group ascription was not unique during the interviews with the parents and gave a first impression of how they perform their cultural openness in a specific social setting. Their comments illustrate how they are not only concerned with their performances, but that they are also highly aware of whom they think they are performing for. The researcher's (assumed) ethnic background most likely made certain speech norms to which the respondents intend to adhere even more present. They seemingly assume that, in the context of this research, diversity has to be seen as an unconditional 'enrichment' – not only because the study is about diversity but also because the researcher is seen as 'diverse' herself.

While they stress their openness, some parents clearly attach a different meaning to diversity than do their children. Ilse (Oskar's mother) reports that she is very open to ethnic differences and that she supports ethnic mixing. As they live in a white neighbourhood, she and her husband decided to enrol their children in a school in an adjacent district. She even promotes the school on its website, where she states that they have deliberately chosen this urban school for its diversity. Ilse further reports that she truly loves how Oskar is repeatedly invited to the birthday parties of minority classmates and how he once participated in a school project with children of various ethnic backgrounds, which allowed her to interact with those children and their parents as well. While she draws strongly on culturally cosmopolitan repertoires on diversity, and even what is called 'banal' cosmopolitanism (see Kendall et al., 2009), her son speaks much less in celebratory terms:

Researcher: Do you believe that the class' diversity is positive or negative? (…)

Oskar: I'm a bit neutral in that case, because I don't think it matters [in] what
you do or who you are, so… I mean, it matters if you do stuff according to your
religion, but I don't think it matters a lot. (…) I don't think it's [ethnic
diversity] necessarily nice, I also don't think it's necessarily bad because
yeah… You're all just human.
(Ilse's son, 11y, Belgian descent, R1)

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Oskar's perception does not differ from his mother's in terms of respect and mutual acceptance. For him, however, diversity is a quite ordinary phenomenon one should not be particularly enthusiastic about – by which he is in no way saying that diversity is bad. He rather alludes to a certain 'normality' present among children who experience diversity as a commonplace aspect of their everyday lives, as we elaborately discuss elsewhere (Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b; see also Wessendorf, 2013). While it may seem that Oskar draws on a repertoire of colour-blindness when he says that 'you're all just human', he does not engage in such rhetoric and further in the interview he mentions ethnic differences when he speaks of racism, which he considers especially prominent against Muslims. Although some of our child-respondents clearly adopt colour-blind approaches (see Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b), Oskar mainly aims to emphasize that he does not understand what 'all the fuss' is about when it comes down to celebratory approaches of diversity. He does not say that he 'does not see differences' (or colour), but rather hints that there is no point in exoticizing, essentializing or celebrating those, as his mother does when she refers to how she enjoys seeing people of different ethnic backgrounds mixing with each other. Although not explicitly, Oskar in fact uses 'you're all just human' to distance himself from the cosmo-multiculturalism that lurks in many of the adults' performances, which reduces minorities to passive subjects, to 'cultures to be enjoyed' rather than humans. As also Pieter shows, many parents indeed rather draw on these celebratory repertoires for their own enjoyment, and to say something positive about *themselves* rather than about minority groups or diversity:

> Pieter: I'm also someone who thinks that… I don't know if you're familiar with the commercials of Benetton? United Colors of Benneton? That's my belief, or that was my goal. I wanted my, my friendship group to look like a coloured box of Caran D'Ache. That's a kind, that's a kind of coloured pencils, you know. Yes, I'm, I'm really a philanthropist. I'm someone who has become interested in other cultures from early on.
> (Victor's parent, Belgian descent, primary school teacher)

Compared to their parents, our child-respondents are generally (yet not all) less inclined to strongly perform cultural cosmopolitan attitudes (e.g., their openness towards the ethnic other), as their narratives rather reflect 'social' cosmopolitanism. With 'social cosmopolitanism', we allude to what Woodward and Skrbis (2012: 130) describe as an 'accidental' dimension of cosmopolitanism: 'a form of subjectivity and set of cultural practices and attitudes individuals come to develop passively, perhaps even accidentally via immersion within a globalizing social and cultural field or exposure to cultural difference'. In the context of our research, however, 'accidentally' developing cosmopolitanism does not mean that the children do not express reflexivity or consciousness when

navigating diversity. Hence, while cultural cosmopolitanism is about discursively valuing cultural differences, we use social cosmopolitanism to refer to easily encountering and navigating (social, ethno-cultural, racial) differences in everyday life.

The parents, however, mainly operate in homogeneous networks (friendship groups, workplace, etc.), and those who report encounters with people from another ethnic background allude to connections via the children rather than intimate friendships. Helene, for instance, states that she finds it important to mix with others and that she therefore deliberately says hello to the Muslim mothers of her children's classmates and invites those children to her own children's birthday parties. When Pieter is asked how diverse his network is, he answers 'We also have friends… My daughter her best friend is uhm, her dad is from Haiti and her mum from Belgium'. This tends towards what Kendall et al. (2009: 115) describe as a sampling style of cosmopolitanism, which 'implies engagement and contact, but only as a form of temporary, fleeting connection'. The commonplace diversity evidenced by Wessendorf (2013) among London adults, may be less present among our adult-respondents as the largest minority ethnic groups in Flanders are socio-economically more strongly disadvantaged. While Wessendorf refers to the emergence of commonplace diversity among doctors and employees in a local hospital (see e.g., Wessendorf, 2014: 43), our highly educated respondents mainly encounter diversity in their neighbourhoods and their children's schools. Intimate friendships, however, were made at university or in the workplace, sites which were indeed predominantly ethnically white. Most of the children, on the other hand, interact daily and often intensely at school with peers with backgrounds from all over the world; cosmopolitanism is therefore more strongly reflected in their everyday practices than in a consciously enacted repertoire of cultural openness (see also e.g., Harris, 2009; Iqbal et al., 2017; Visser and Tersteeg, 2019).

Some of the parents perform their cultural cosmopolitanism to such an extent that they feel they have to justify the composition of their children's friendship group. Although there is little evidence that Victor (Pieter's son) has a homogeneous friendship group, as one of his three best friends is of Moroccan descent, Pieter seems to become uncomfortable when asked about his son's friends. Strikingly contradicting his own assertion that he wanted his own friendship group to be like a box of coloured pencils, the father now argues:

> Researcher: Would you say that Victor has a mixed friendship group?
>
> Pieter: Uhm he has… One of his best friends at school uhm is Ilyas and yes, he's Muslim. Uhm, uhm, he, he also plays basketball and basketball is a sport which is very multicultural too. (…) Yes, it's not like we, like we seek it. We, we look at the personality and not the background. I think it's always… I, I, I don't like to think in boxes, in colours, I don't care, I really don't care. Uhm, it has to be about the person who's interesting and not about which col… which

skin colour or which… (…). I mean, it's not like we look for it like 'and now you have to make an African friend because it otherwise wouldn't be in proportion!' I mean, that… that wouldn't be ok either, you know.
(Victor's parent, Primary school teacher, Belgian descent)

Victor himself, on the other hand, speaks in quite a relaxed way about his friendship group. According to him, his three friends are simply his friends because he has known them since preschool. Emiel (Alexia's son), who in contrast to Victor does have a significantly homogenous group of friends, reports that he especially hangs out with these boys as they share his interests and that he does not know many minority ethnic children who are interested in skiing and snowboarding, like his friends. However, when we gauge Emiel's mother's perception of his friendship group, Alexia argues that she read in the newspaper that according to research people tend to hang out with those of the same ethnic descent and that it hence may be 'merely human' that Emiel hangs out with majority ethnic friends. This illustrates that, where children speak quite happily about their friendship group, their parents seemingly feel that they have to justify a perceived lack of diversity, probably assuming that the researcher expects this diversity, at least to a certain degree.

Children and parents' understandings also differ in the ways in which they talk to each other about diversity. In their family context, it appears that some parents look more strongly through an ethnic lens. They do not necessarily do so out of 'ill will', but rather from a great interest in ethnic diversity. Kristien, for instance, reports that her daughter Niyah (whose father is of Nigerian descent) is not concerned with ethnic differences, which corresponds with Niyah's narrative, yet she points to these differences anyway:

Kristien: I asked her, and I was kinda surprised, at the beginning of the school year, yes, the first day probably, I asked whether there were a lot of coloured children in her classroom or a lot of whites. And then she said 'no I think only I and another pupil are, are darker.' And I thought wow that's strange, and uh… A month later, I looked at their class picture and that's not true at all, but she doesn't notice. Like, I mean, like your (addresses the researcher) skin colour is the same as mine to her. It's all the same to her, so only really dark, dark, is different to her. So, then I thought 'oh Niyah, look, half of your class, there's almost no one white, white and you say that you're nearly the only one'? And she was like 'well yes, you see it for yourself no? I'm darker, and, and Diana is darker, and the rest aren't.' And I thought wellll (laughs)….
(Niyah's mother, Belgian descent, logistic employee)

On the other hand, parents and children largely see eye to eye regarding racism and discrimination. Both show awareness of ethnic and racial exclusion and report that they talk about these inequalities at home, hence they do not really adopt a 'colour-blind approach'. Furthermore, repertoires of group

disadvantages (see Kostet, Verschraegen, et al., 2021b) seem to be especially shared. While Malika (Layla's mother) strongly emphasises, during the interview, her many experiences with religious-based racism, Layla's stories are permeated with fear of such racism, largely based on these family stories. Although she has experienced racism herself too, she draws most strongly on her parents' stories.

However, some of the other parents with a migration background report that they disagree with their children regarding racism and that they consider that their children's opinions are too strong. Vera (Olivia's mother) and Sahira (Doha's mother), for instance, report that their daughters react too fiercely when something racist happens in their presence and they both believe that their strong opinions are related to puberty, the impact of social media and the Black Lives Matter movement. These discussions are especially intense in Vera's household – she is of Northern European descent herself and separated long ago from Olivia's father, who is of Western African descent. When we interview Vera, she explains that her daughter has become very concerned with racism over the past months, that she has started identifying herself as 'Black', and that her daughter becomes furious – in her opinion too furious – when someone uses the 'N-word'. Vera argues that she tries not to respond to her daughter's self-identification as Black as she aims to 'raise her as human, not as white nor black, but just in a universal way'. However, Olivia is highly critical of her mother's 'universalist' approach to her own racial identity. She explains that once when she did not clean her room, her mother uttered: 'You're really an African' and that she 'was like okay (…) isn't that racist?' This interestingly illuminates how some people assume that they are acting on the backstage when bringing up race as they talk to their own family members but how this setting can transform into frontstage when a disagreement occurs (see Nelson, 2021). Olivia says that she explicitly condemned her mother's racist statement and that they got into a heated discussion:

> Olivia: I was like wauw, yeah. 'Very sweet… Like Africans never clean their rooms (sarcastic)?' I said, 'sorry, that's just who I am, it has nothing to do with Africa'. I was very mad… (…) I said, 'mum no, you can't say such things, that's not funny.' (…) And then one time she said like 'when I was little, a girl told me that she's not allowed to hang out with me because I'm a foreigner' and I was like 'but that's not the same! Just stop!'

While the parents stress their cultural openness, in Oliva and some other children's narratives (see also further), speech norms regarding racial awareness and social justice seem more present and pertinent. Olivia emphasises that her mother should not equate their experiences of racism because her mother is Northern European and therefore white. According to her, her mother will not suffer because of her skin colour: 'If people know she's from [Northern European background] they're like

"oh cool", she'll never experience like blacks that they're like "oh are you going to steal something?"'

Performing Non-racism in Front of a Racism-Aware Audience: Teachers and Children

Evidently, the teachers have a different relationship with our child-respondents from their parents. As a result, teachers' performances of cosmopolitanism also differ to a certain extent, as they are more concerned with their professional role. While the parents heavily stress their cultural cosmopolitanism, teachers more strongly emphasize a 'moral cosmopolitanism', expressing a sense of responsibility for their pupils with a minority and/or disadvantaged background (see also Vandevoordt, 2017), and foregrounding their efforts to educate these children to become active citizens in this society. One way in which teachers express their commitment to social responsibility and cultural openness is by highlighting their 'choice' to teach in a super-diverse school:

> Amélie: You can't work at our school if you don't take societal responsibility
> in the first place. (…) I know that all my colleagues are socially engaged in
> some way, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to teach at this school.
> (Enes' teacher, Belgian descent)

The fact that these teachers are employed in super-diverse schools is even used to perform non-racism (Bonnet, 2014). Several teachers in various schools repeatedly report that they, or some of their colleagues, have been accused of racism by their pupils, yet respond as follows:

> Hanne: What racist would want to teach in a programme where 90% are
> allochthon [contested term for those with a migration background]? That would
> be like hurting yourself every day again and again. So, I try to make them
> [pupils who accuse teachers of being racist] rationalize but I don't manage to
> do so.
> (Emiel's and Ana's teacher, Belgian descent)

Although some of these teachers acknowledge that a tiny minority of the teachers in their schools may be racist, they all believe such teachers will sooner or later transfer to other (white) schools. In this way, our respondents display and safeguard an image of their schools as 'free from racism' (see also Vaught and Castagno, 2008). Matthias, who works in a relatively white school, and Mehdi, the only teacher with a minoritized ethnic background in our study, are the only ones to report that that some of their colleagues undoubtedly have racist attitudes.

The way in which most teachers downplay racism among their colleagues contrasts sharply with the experiences of pupils, who report several situations in which they felt treated in a racist way, whether explicitly or implicitly. As Hanne already hints, the children often discuss these incidents with their teachers, although the latter generally try to make their pupils 'rationalize', that is, they try to make the children 'understand' that most of the time there is no racism involved. Teachers, including Matthias and Mehdi, report that minority children often misuse the word racism as an excuse when they are held accountable for their misbehaviour. Hanne believes that this overly strong focus on racism is also part of children's identity development and puberty, which will wither over time. Having said that she does not manage to make them 'rationalize', she strikingly continues:

> Hanne: Sometimes it's frustrating, you know, that you think like come on, just stop with all your 'us-versus-them-stories', because they create those themselves. (…) Because often they refer to older teachers and I think that they indeed may come across [as racist], but I'm convinced they're not. I don't want to… I don't want to believe that they are.
> (Emiel's and Ana's teacher, Belgian descent)

Some majority ethnic children challenge their teachers' understandings of current debates regarding racism and diversity too. These pupils do not blindly adopt their teachers' views, but actively question their opinions. Roos (Jonas' pupil), for instance, explains:

> Researcher: Do you ever disagree with your teachers' opinions?
>
> Roos: Uhm yes. Our teacher who, at the beginning of the year, he said that he's for All Lives Matter and almost all [pupils in the classroom] stood up for (…) Black Lives Matter and Muslim Lives Matter. So, that's what we stood up for. And also, he, he also tries to change our opinion in class, he always tries to uhm… yes, to contradict us. (…)
> (13y, Jonas' pupil, Belgian descent, R3)

Jonas himself, on the other hand, who describes his pupil population as a 'left liberal public', argues that majority ethnic children have also become very quick to use the word racism, while they 'hardly know what they are talking about'. He explains that when he had told his pupils that he supports the headscarf ban in education, the pupils said to him that they found his opinion slightly racist; this led him to explain the context of the headscarf ban, so that his pupils would form a more nuanced opinion. He explicitly says that he fails in making them change their opinions and that 'they carried on thinking in black and white.' While many teachers, hence, aim to 'nuance' children's perceptions, several children seemingly are very aware of the problematic nature of 'nuancing' racism and seem to strongly draw on repertoires of social justice. They are strongly concerned with current events that

they follow closely, as Roos shows when she says that Black and Muslim lives matter because of the events 'in China with those internment camps and in America with George Floyd.' These children seem to find it important to be aware of injustices, which is reflected not only in what they say about racism but also in the way they talk about gender issues, to give one example.

However, similarly to some of the parents (e.g., Sahira and Vera), other teachers (Jonas but also Hanne) do not take their children's anti-racist (and activist) attitudes very seriously and dismiss them as a pubertal life phase. Jonas hints that these children blindly form opinions, and Nele (Niyah's teacher), whose pupils are, according to her, quasi unanimously against the Muhammad cartoons, downplays her pupils' opinions and openness towards each other's religion as a form of 'blind respect':

> Nele: I notice, compared to 15 years ago, a very big difference, in the sense of uhm… I now have the feeling that, regardless of home situation or culture, that the children enter the classroom and that they all agree that you can't joke about everything, that one shouldn't joke about certain things, and that's something I worry about because I think uhm… If you don't have a religion, that shouldn't be so sensitive to you. (…)
>
> Researcher: And how tolerant are the children towards each other religions as such? Do they also express respect for each other's religion?
>
> Nele: Yes, but to be honest it's blind respect, like I said.
> (Niyah's teacher, Belgian descent)

Conclusion

How and to what extent do children's performances of cosmopolitanism differ from and interact with those of their parents and teachers, the most important adult 'agents of socialization' in children's lives? By adopting a relational approach and investigating the speech norms which emerged during the interviews, we have shown that children and their parents and teachers perform their cosmopolitan attitudes differently, and illustrated how they challenge each other's performances.

This article offers various contributions to the literature. First and foremost, this study unpacks the ways in which cosmopolitanism is enacted differently among the different generations. While previous research has argued that young people in super-diverse cities find their ability to engage with ethnic differences rather unexceptional (Visser and Tersteeg, 2019), our findings provide more details about how adults and children perform their everyday cosmopolitanism. Whereas children come across as 'socially cosmopolitan', encountering differences in everyday life, it seems that parents and teachers are more likely to perform, respectively, cultural and moral

cosmopolitanism. In contrast to most of the adults, children seemingly do not aim to be seen as 'culturally open' nor do they intentionally engage with different ethnic groups out of cultural openness.

Our findings, secondly, suggest that the main reasons for these different performances of cosmopolitanism across generations are related to the structure of networks and context. While the vast majority of parents operate in ethnically homogeneous networks (friendship groups, workplace, etc.), most of the children interact daily and often intensely with diverse peers at school. This explains their social cosmopolitanism, which is perceived as a fact of life, so to say, which is rooted in their everyday social interactions. Parents and teachers seem to have had fewer opportunities to build everyday intimate relations across differences, although especially the teachers navigate super-diverse environments, for instance by working in Antwerp schools. Therefore, they put a premium on displaying cultural or moral 'cosmopolitanism' when discussing interethnic relations and diversity, mainly in relation to their children's peers (and their parents) or when being interviewed by a minority ethnic researcher. As we have argued, the differences between the parents' and teachers' performances of cosmopolitanism can be explained mainly by taking into account role differences and context. While teachers foreground their professional role by expressing a sense of moral responsibility to educate and emancipate their pupils with a minority and/or disadvantaged background, parents have a more diffuse relation with their children and are expected to accept their diverse group of friends.

Thirdly, our results shed light on children's agency in challenging their parents' and teachers' repertoires on diversity and racism and show how they stand up for their own opinion. Adults tend to dismiss children's perspectives as 'blind', 'naive' or 'irrational', yet children display awareness of societal tensions around diversity and sometimes contradict adults' views. In this sense, our analysis shows the profoundly situated nature of 'speech norms' concerning race and diversity and how they are contested across generations. Both adults and children seem to closely watch their words when talking about ethnic diversity and racism, anticipating on each other's reactions and drawing on different repertoires and implicit norms while doing so. Parents and teachers initially emphasize their cultural openness and knowledge of the 'other', often in celebratory terms, suggesting that they are primarily concerned with being recognized as cosmopolitan citizens. In line with previous research, these adults focus mainly on 'positive' or 'hopeful' messages, meaning that they tend to put little emphasis on topics such as racism. On the other hand, their children and pupils draw more strongly on their sense of social justice and current debates on power relations. In contrast to their parents and teachers, they are seemingly more concerned with being recognized as 'socially aware' young citizens in an unequal society. Consequently, the children and adults disagree about

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which norms and judgments should prevail in their discussions about diversity: children's 'anti-racism' or adults 'happy talk'. As some adults tend towards what Hage (1997) calls 'cosmo-multiculturalism', their children are more careful about reducing minority ethnic groups' cultural backgrounds to 'cultures to be enjoyed'. While there is some literature on how adults prepare children for a globalized world (e.g., Weenink, 2008; Keating, 2015), our results hence suggest that future research should pay more attention to processes of 'reverse socialization', in which parents and teachers may acquire skills and knowledge through their children (Ekstrom et al., 1987). Our child-respondents, who seemingly develop their cosmopolitan orientations - as Woodward and Skrbis (2012: 130) would say – 'passively, perhaps even accidentally', show a more reflective attitude when discussing themes such as diversity and racism. Supposedly, this makes them sometimes correct their own parents and teachers, showing them how to navigate a super-diverse context, when they feel the adults lack a profound awareness of ethnic or racial tensions.

Also, our focus on the discursive enactment or performance of cosmopolitanism points to some more general conclusions which are relevant to ongoing research on racism and diversity. By clarifying the speech norms that are activated in discussions about cultural openness, diversity and racism, we have shown how public repertoires about diversity affect people's everyday speech and how they engage in identity work to be seen as 'morally on the right side (Boli and Elliott, 2008). While speech norms are often present when discussing issues such as diversity (see also Bonnet, 2014; Bonnet and Caillault, 2015), we have argued that they become more pronounced when people are interviewed by a minority ethnic researcher, who is seen as 'diverse' herself. Our analysis of these interactions clearly shows that speech norms matter: while the adult-respondents want to be recognized for their openness, they employ well-intended but stereotypical representations of the researcher to perform their cosmopolitanism. In line with earlier literature (e.g., Romm, 2010), we argue that researchers inquiring into racism and diversity have to be mindful of the potential impact of their inquiries and/or their background on how cultural openness, racism or anti-racism is performed. Rather than seeing this social desirability as an obstacle to our research, we approached these responses as important data to analyse and to gain a better grasp of the mechanisms at play.

Crafting ordinary lives:
Concluding reflections

In this dissertation, I have discussed children's boundary making in the context of super-diversity, with a focus on the negotiation of ethnic and social class boundaries. More particularly, I have examined which repertoires children draw on when they discuss their perceptions of ethnic and social class diversity, how children self-identify with ethnic and national categories, which symbolic boundaries they set to demarcate ethnic and social class groups and how their perceptions of ethnic diversity and racism interact with those of their parents and teachers. Further, I have analysed which aspirations children hold for their futures, how they assess their life chances and on which repertoires they draw to explain the relationship between inequality and opportunities. While doing so, I have also reflected on the presence of symbolic boundaries in research with children, from my position as a minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background, and how these boundaries cause power dynamics to shift. The implications and theoretical contributions of my results are discussed in the concluding section of each of the chapters; in this section, therefore, I will mainly reflect on how the results highlight children's agency and will raise questions about how to conduct research on ethnic diversity in a majority-minority city. This conclusion will also highlight the limitations of the study, suggest some directions for further research and, finally, I will also reflect on the interaction between children's narratives of hope and my own experiences.

The child-respondents express a great deal of agency as they negotiate the unequal environment in which they find themselves. They do not passively draw on existing public repertoires to make sense of this environment, but they actively choose, combine and reconstruct the repertoires that support both their own perceptions and their self-concept. We have seen, for instance, how children choose flexibly between different publicly shared narratives when talking about diversity, in order to give meaning to different aspects of it. Some of them combine repertoires of 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf, 2013) – which they draw upon when they talk about how they personally encounter diversity in their daily lives – with repertoires of 'group disadvantages' (Lamont et al., 2016) to display an awareness of racism and anti-Islam sentiments (chapter three). In this sense, the children present themselves as socially aware cosmopolitan individuals (chapter eight), who easily encounter ethnic differences but are aware that their experiences are not shared by

everyone and that minority groups may be discriminated against. The selectivity and reflexivity with which the child-respondents choose between cultural repertoires is also illustrated in how they make sense of the relationship between social inequality and life chances (chapter five). While rejecting individual responsibility as an explanation for poverty and deprivation, they simultaneously cite meritocratic repertoires of individual social mobility to argue that anyone can become successful in life, regardless of social background. The child-participants seemingly acknowledge structural inequality but are more hesitant to explicitly claim that these inequalities determine their own or others' lives. They hence construct their arguments and narratives in such a way that they infuse sense into their own social situation and dovetail neatly with one or more available yet conflicting repertoires.

The child-respondents also negotiate social class boundaries with consideration as they make sense of class hierarchies. While previous research had already revealed that children of all social backgrounds tend to identify as middle-class (Mistry et al., 2015; Rauscher et al., 2017; Sutton, 2009), this dissertation has added to the literature by examining more specifically how children challenge symbolic boundaries to enable this self-definition (chapter four). Interestingly, the child-participants do not necessarily adopt an 'information-control strategy' (Goffman, 1963), nor do they perform a marked 'middle-class lifestyle' when asked to assess their own social position. They, however, actively construct in their narratives a middle-class category that corresponds to their own living conditions, which they aim to present as 'normal'. The children indeed shift boundaries and foreground their own definitions in such a way to present their own lives as 'ordinary'. This 'ordinariness' is not only created by boundary shifting, but also by carefully selecting and combining very specific cultural repertoires and identity labels that will allow them to manage their own self-presentation to fit their own needs. They use multiple resources and strategies to craft their own ordinary lives.

This is also displayed in the children's negotiation of ethnic and national categories (chapter six). Contrary to what is often assumed, the child-respondents do not all seem to identify primarily with ethnic or national categories out of profound communitarian group solidarity or attachment, but seemingly construct an identity that also has a certain 'ordinariness' to it. For some pupils, like Ikram, this means claiming a Belgian identity so she will not be perceived as a 'foreigner', for others, like Oumaima, it means disidentifying from it because one's own way of speaking and behaving does not seem 'normal' for children of that ethnic group. However, although many children, regardless of their background, downplay the relevance of ethnic and national identity labels, this seems to require more identity work from the children with a migration background – who are more strongly confronted with external categorizations (e.g., individuals reducing them to their ethnic background)

– than from majority ethnic children, who generally display few concerns about these identifications. While downplaying ethnic differences is a deliberate strategy for some, it seems rather obvious for others.

The inventiveness with which the young respondents navigate their ethnically diverse environment has also been highlighted in chapter seven, in which their boundary making is discussed in relation to how they talk about their friendship groups. In line with previous research, these results show that the pupils want to feel safe and secure among their friends, but that ethnicity often has little to do with this, although they may frame their friendships in ethnic terms (Iqbal et al., 2017; Sedano, 2012). Whether or not children say they get along with each other seems to be related in the first place to their interests and hobbies, but to a large extent also to how others relate to the school and teachers – and whether or not there is an oppositional school culture (see also Van Houtte et al., 2019; Willis, 1978). Although the school context was not central to my analysis, and no firm statements could be made given the small and qualitative nature of the study, there are several indications that sharper boundaries are drawn in schools where ethnic differences strongly overlap with differences in social class background (chapter three). This raises the question of how ethnic and social class boundaries relate and to what extent class differences are 'ethnicized'. Corresponding with previous qualitative research (Iqbal et al., 2017; Papapolydorou, 2014), the results of this study also suggest that children are more likely to make friends across ethnic than across social class lines (see also Demanet et al., 2012). This is not to say that all drawn ethnic boundaries can be traced back to social class differences – for that is certainly not the case – but social class does seem to be one of the most important criteria determining the strength with which boundaries are drawn between different groups. Just like among adults, 'cultural matching' based on social class symbols, such as lifestyle and life chances, and hence social class homogeneity, also seems to be present among children of this age group (Papapolydorou, 2014; Verbrugge, 1977). However, compared to research on interethnic friendships, research on interclass friendships among children is scarce. Especially in super-diverse cities, contemporary research tends to focus on ethnic boundaries, while the intersection with social class dynamics remains relatively underexamined.

When talking about ethnic differences, the child-respondents do not uncritically adopt adults' views, as is often assumed, but actively challenge their own parents' and teachers' perceptions of diversity and racism when they consider this necessary (chapter eight). In several respects, the children seem to deal with ethnic differences in a less problematic and essentialist way than the adults. These results prompt us to suggest that the children and their elders engage in 'reverse socialization' (Ekstrom et al., 1987) as they tell each other how they should deal with ethnic differences and racism. Perhaps these children may also be the first generation to actually experience

the emergence of 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf, 2014). In the ethnically stratified context of Flanders (as compared to the London context in which Wessendorf conducted her research), our middle-class adult-respondents, especially, come across ethnic differences mainly outside their usual sphere of work or interests. Their children, on the other hand, seem to be much more exposed to the 'diversity within the diversity'. As hinted at above, especially in schools where children have a similar socio-economic background (e.g., school two) – and where minority ethnic children are among the best performing pupils in class and engage in various extracurricular activities – children draw almost no sharp boundaries between different groups. Generally, children also have more repertoires at their disposal to discuss ethnic diversity than the adults, who tend to adopt a patronizing or moralistic attitude, perhaps because they associate the 'cultural other' to a large extent with the 'disadvantaged other', as also briefly touched upon in chapter two.

Although the child-respondents express a more reflexive attitude, they are not 'innocent' and reproduce categorical inequalities as well. We have seen in chapters three and seven how a few children describe others in highly stigmatizing terms, calling children of Moroccan background 'indecent', for example, and children of Belgian descent 'tatta's'. These children draw sharp boundaries when they evaluate social groups. Although they do not explicitly say so, some of the minority ethnic children in particular experience these evaluation processes at play and realise that they might not only be seen as 'different' but also as 'maladjusted', as in the case of Oumaima who indicates that she pays attention to her accent when talking to children of Belgian descent. The importance of children's evaluation processes has also become clear in the second chapter, in which I have discussed how their boundary making had an impact on how I positioned myself as a minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background. Despite them 'being children', some of the child-respondents were able to set the standards that I had to meet during the interviews, for the accent to use or what form of cultural capital is considered valuable. Indeed, they were able to (unintentionally) reproduce what is considered superior and what is considered inferior, despite the fact that they are usually granted little social power.

Across the three research rounds, we also note shifts in the child-participants' repertoires, their self-identifications and boundary work processes. By the end of the study, the pupils express a wider range of repertoires; and, in some cases, repertoires of commonplace diversity or cosmopolitanism (chapter three) begin to lean more strongly towards repertoires of social justice (chapter eight). Where the children, for instance, recognized group exclusion in round one, mainly based on what they see in their own environment, in round three they express a stronger awareness of broader forms of social exclusion and seemingly develop a vision of how to position themselves in current debates on racism. We have seen, for instance, how some of them take power relations

into account, by stating that someone with a Scandinavian migration background will not experience the same stigma as someone with a black skin colour, or that it is 'Black/Muslim Lives Matter' and not 'All Lives Matter'. Most likely, these changes in their activated repertoires occur for several reasons. First, as we have seen in the introductory chapter, children's reasoning about ethnicity and racism becomes more complex as they grow older, and around approximately the child-respondents' current age, children gain more insight into how racism is entangled with power dynamics (McKown, 2004). Second, it is important to also consider the events that were topical during my research period. In the period between the first two and the last research rounds, George Floyd was murdered, which led to heated social debates and protests. The Black Lives Matter movement (but also broader social debates about social justice, wokeness, cancel culture, etc.) became international headline news again. Third, after their transition to secondary school, all of my child-respondents were on social media, and particularly on Instagram and TikTok. As research has shown, social media has an impact on young adolescents' identity formation and fosters reflection on others' worldviews and opinions (Allen et al., 2014; Carney, 2016). As we have also seen in chapter six, social media has introduced the children to a wider range of repertoires and identities with which they can identify, as in the case of Olivia, who has started to identify most strongly as 'bisexual' and who refers to the importance of 'LGTBQ' or 'Lesbian TikTok'.

There is also a shift in many children's ethnic self-identifications. While some identify in the last round more strongly than before with their minority ethnic background, other children mock their previous identifications and question the relevance of ethnic and national identity labels in general. Some children who identify with the same labels as before also indicate that the meaning they attach to those labels has changed significantly. These divergent results are not easy to interpret and call for more investigation into the conditions under which (and which forms of) ethnic identities become more or less important in urban young people's lives.

While centring on their agency, this dissertation does not claim, however, that the child-respondents exercise this agency *against* the constraints of social structure. The children are no 'masters of their own lives'. Such a presumption would be problematic as it implies an 'independent' child who is able to free him or herself from his/her social and cultural contexts (Abebe, 2019). Rather, the notion of agency as used in this dissertation should be understood as a continuum, since children may have more or less agency in some areas of their lives and not in others, and their agency is also dependent on their specific situation and other people they interact with (Robson et al., 2007). Their agency must therefore be understood as 'interdependent' or as a 'relational dynamic' (Spyrou et al., 2019). Although a thorough analysis of social boundaries or the impact of social structures is not the focus of this study, the empirical data do raise some tentative hypotheses about how broader

conditions affect children's repertoires and boundary work, all of which require further analysis. We have seen above, for instance, how different patterns seem to emerge across different school contexts. The results also show that children's negotiation of social class and ethnic categories is impacted by their social position, as it partly structures the ways in which they can convincingly present themselves as 'ordinary'. Middle-class children, for example, describe poverty in a more nuanced way since their own life situation is sufficiently different from this group. However, lower-class children, in their narratives on people in poverty, construct living conditions that are so extreme that they differ from their own situation. We have also seen how (lower-class) children with a migration background explicitly refer to their 'more affluent' situation in their country of descent, to position themselves higher on the social ladder.

It has become clear that the children do not have an equally wide range of repertoires at their disposal to make sense of their environment. There are also some examples of children who seem to be strongly socialized into repertoires of group disadvantage, for instance, that are passed down within the family (chapter three). These children speak of their future as if it were determined by racism, because these are the experiences of their family members. As we have seen, repertoires are not merely 'ideas', but also function as a toolkit (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986). Children also draw upon cultural repertoires to actively make sense of their experiences and to determine how they will act in their daily lives (Corsaro, 2005). Those socialized into a wider range of repertoires can more actively choose between different strategies of action (see also Kasinitz et al., 2008; Lamont et al., 2016) We note, for instance, that while some children see their lives as quasi-determined by racism, others indicate that they will not let racism and discrimination determine their future and thereby draw upon meritocratic repertoires of social mobility (chapter five). Arguably, whether or not children see their future as predetermined will influence how they navigate their environment and will impact their sense of belonging.

The results of this dissertation also underline the call for more research into how ordinary people, and particularly children, aim to bridge recognition gaps in society (see Lamont, 2018). Although I explicitly gauged the feelings of deprivation among children, my child-respondents said very little about how they deal with material inequality. The children, however, seemed most concerned with gaining recognition, dignity and worth throughout their narratives, like Doha who insisted that she is not going to let her future be determined by people who underestimate her because of her ethnic background; Ikram who identified as Belgian as a claim for recognition; or like Olivia, who suggested that she does not allow her behaviour to be racialized. The argument that people are not only concerned with redistributive justice but also with claiming recognition is not new (see

Fraser, 1996), yet empirical research on how people aim to reduce recognition gaps remains scarce (see Lamont et al., 2016), especially among children.

Conducting research on ethnic diversity in a majority-minority city

In recent years, many scholars have extensively examined the ways in which minority ethnic youngsters identify with their 'host' country, whether they become friends with the majority ethnic group, and hence the extent to which they are 'integrated' or not (e.g., Alvarez Valdivia et al., 2015; Leszczensky et al., 2016; Schulz and Leszczensky, 2016). Others, however, have increasingly called for a rejection of these notions of integration and assimilation as a 'one-way-street' and also for consideration of how 'native', 'white' people integrate or assimilate in a diversified society where minority ethnic citizens increasingly form a numerical majority (Alba and Foner, 2015; Crul, 2018; Crul et al., 2013; Jiménez, 2017; Kasinitz et al., 2008; Schinkel, 2018). Contemporary studies in super-diverse societies should indeed start from the premise that minority ethnic groups are already an integral part of the society they are examining. My research belongs to this latter research strand in several ways. The study, for instance, did not start from an assumption that diversity is solely related to the presence of minority ethnic groups, has studied how also children of 'native' Belgian descent identify with ethnic and national identities (rather than assuming they are not 'ethnic'), and whether or not they interact with an ethnically diverse group of children, among other things. In fact, rather than ethnic groups, this research has taken 'children in super-diverse schools' as units of analysis (see Wimmer, 2013), acknowledging that all their experiences matter if we aim to understand dynamics in a super-diverse society.

Nevertheless, I have sometimes experienced my own research too as quite puzzling and not free from problematic assumptions. As I have described in the first chapter, it felt like a relief to interview children since, unlike their parents and teachers, they hardly seemed preoccupied with my ethnic background, which I do not like to be reduced to. In the meanwhile, however, I was the one who was asking them questions about their ethnic identifications and the relevance of ethnic boundaries in their lives. After a while, I had a hard time justifying this to myself. How could I be sure that I was not exhausting the children in the same way that other people's ethnic lens has exhausted me? While the use of symbolic boundary making, which inherently rejects overly strong ethnic lenses, as a conceptual framework was a good way to counter essentialization in research, I still felt bound at moments by the clear-cut categories used to talk about ethnic diversity. This became particularly clear when the children astutely replied to my categories:

Researcher: Is there a lot of diversity in your class?

Hamza: No.

Researcher: No?

Hamza: Because everyone is the same size, almost everyone is the same age.

Researcher: And concerning children's descent?

Hamza: Yes, very much… We have many differences. Morocco, Turkey,
Spain, Italy, many.

Researcher: Are there children of Belgian descent?

Hamza: Yes, many. Like me.

While I was in fact trying to ask whether there were any 'native' majority ethnic children in Hamza's class, he rightly pointed out to me that there were many children of Belgian descent in class, including himself, as the native-born son of foreign-born parents (see also Moinian, 2009). Even when I asked whether there were children in his class whose *parents* are of Belgian descent, Hamza replied that he did not know where children's parents were born. He did not seem to associate 'being of Belgian descent' with being 'white' but rather with being born in Belgium; he indeed unintentionally pointed out that my question is outdated in a super-diverse society in which already a fourth generation of children 'with a migration background' are coming of age. Hamza indeed elicited the important question of how many generations of children with a migration background must be born in a country before their 'migration background' will no longer be relevant as a category of analysis.

It was not easy to develop an academic view on this matter, and after three and a half years of research, I can hardly offer an answer to the question of what kind of categories should be used when discussing ethnic diversity in a super-diverse environment. In my research, the distinction between majority and minority ethnic children was at times very relevant, because even the fourth generation of Belgian children with a migration background are confronted with specific inequalities, as discussed in the introduction and the methodological chapter. The fact that they, or even their parents, were born in Belgium does not generally give them the same structural life chances as children who are officially considered 'native'. When analysing the empirical material, it further had to be acknowledged that having or not having a migration background (also true for having a working-class or middle-class background) has an impact on the repertoires that children have at their disposal or the way in which they identify themselves or not, among other things. Yet, there is still an important question as to which categories are most appropriate for talking about ethnic

diversity, as the current categories all seem to be inadequate, underlining the need for a new vocabulary.

Besides these few experiences, however, the concept of symbolic boundaries has been very fruitful. It has made it possible to study children's perceptions and repertoires in more detail without imposing a strong ethnic lens on the data. The questions were mainly about the boundaries children draw themselves, the identities they may or may not put forward, and most importantly, social groups were not taken for granted. This approach has allowed me to examine intra-group dynamics that go beyond simplistic perceptions of ethnic groups bound by communitarian solidarity, for example, by showing how children subject those of their 'ethnic in-group' to the same evaluative criteria with which they judge the 'out-group'. The results, finally, have demonstrated that this research was in fact more a study of how the child-respondents draw a complex set of boundaries in order to position themselves as 'ordinary', rather than an examination of ethnic boundary making as such. Indeed, one of the most important conclusions of this study is that when my child-respondents took control over the interview, it was seldomly explicitly to discuss ethnic boundaries or identifications, as the illustrative vignettes at the beginning of this dissertation have also shown. Therefore, I believe that I can do the child-respondents' narratives the most justice by ending this section with a quote from Olivia, who –

although we had just extensively reflected on how her national and ethnic categorisations have changed – spontaneously rerouted my question by referring to possible further changes in her subcultural identity:

> Researcher: My two-year research has come to an end…
>
> Olivia: I actually think it's a good end. If I imagine what, all the things that happened, what I've written. It's cool to see how I've changed.
>
> Researcher: If I were to interview you again in two years from now, do you think you'd have changed again [showing her the sheet with her (mainly ethnic and national) identity labels]?
>
> Olivia: I think I found myself. I'd maybe become more like a geek. Especially if I can study arts, then I'd, I'd be myself even more.

Limitations and directions for further research

Drawing on some limitations of the study, I would like to raise several suggestions for further research. My first suggestion concerns the relationship between social class and ethnicity. As mentioned in the fourth chapter, this dissertation does not explicitly address how children experience

this intersection. Since the questions on social position were part of the broader study on the (ir)relevance of ethnic boundaries, I did not bring up this relationship myself as I did not want to influence the respondents' further answers. In other words, if the pupils themselves did not bring up the intersection of class and ethnicity, I did not either. However, as seen in the fourth chapter, there are indications that some child-respondents associate a strong social position with a majority ethnic position and hint that majority groups tend to be more affluent. On the other hand, we have seen in chapter five how most children seemingly do not believe that having a minority ethnic position affects one's life chances in their environment. Yet, especially in a Western European context, research on children's perceptions of how social class inequality is related to one's ethnic background is scarce. A limited number of studies conducted in the US show that pre-adolescent children's perceptions of social class are strongly racialized and that they are more likely than younger children to link poverty with factors such as racism (Ghavami and Mistry, 2019; Seider et al., 2019). This calls for further investigation. How do pre-adolescents assess the relationship between having an ethnic minority background and a lower/higher position on the social ladder? How do they explain the ethnic gap in poverty rates? On which repertoires do they draw when narrating their perceptions and how do these differ according to their own social position and ethnic background?

A second suggestion relates to the cultural repertoires children draw upon. This research has proposed that some minority ethnic children tend to draw upon a dual frame of reference to make sense of their social position. Chapter four has discussed how both Belgian-born and foreign-born children refer to their social standing in their (or their parents') countries of descent to claim a higher position on the social ladder. In turn, chapter five has illustrated how some of these children call upon examples of socially mobile individuals in their countries of descent to argue that poor people have a relatively high chance to climb the social ladder. These findings suggest that children use their dual frame of reference, meaning both their experience in the country they live in and their country of descent, to make sense of their everyday lives, to develop a positive identity and perhaps also to construct hopeful narratives. The ways in which children navigate between these (acquired or imagined) frames, however, was not a central topic of this dissertation. Yet, this may be of great importance in understanding minority ethnic children's identity negotiation. In what ways do minority ethnic children build on a dual frame of reference to develop a positive sense of identity? How do they develop this frame – through personal experience, through family stories, through assumptions? In which ways is this frame used to develop positive narratives and in which ways does it also have a downside?

A third suggestion concerns the way children negotiate social class boundaries. In chapters six and seven, I have discussed how children's identifications and boundary work processes shifted

across the three different research rounds. These results indeed confirm that neither identifications nor boundary work processes are fixed, and even major changes can occur. After starting in secondary school and making new friends, for example, some pupils drew less sharp boundaries against other ethnic groups. Yet, while strongly suggesting that encountering a new reference group has an impact on children's perceptions, this dissertation did not consider how children's assessment of their own position on the social ladder changes (or not) after their transition, and how they consequently may (or may not) shift social class boundaries in a different way. As Roos' illustrative vignette at the beginning of this dissertation shows, however, there are some indications that children actually position themselves differently over time. Further research should analyse more closely how children's understandings of their social position and social class boundaries differ depending on whether children come into contact with a more or less advantaged reference group. This would address the still pertinent gap in research on how children negotiate social class boundaries.

My fourth suggestion concerns the relevance of religious boundaries. The strength of this research was that it allowed children to foreground their own definitions of ethnic boundaries, which highlighted that ethnicity is not a structuring principle for most children when deciding with whom they will hang out (or not). One of the most important limitations, however, is that the research has not sufficiently addressed children's religious identification and the extent to which religious boundaries as such play a role in their friendship group formation, self-identifications and sense of belonging. The relevance of religious identity and religious boundaries becomes very strong in several chapters. In chapter three, for instance, we have seen how children draw on repertoires of group disadvantages and believe that especially Muslims are treated badly in their environment. Furthermore, this chapter has described how some minority children feel strongly stigmatized or excluded because of their religious background and how their fears of becoming victims of anti-Islam sentiments affect how they imagine their future in Belgium. In chapters six and seven, we have experienced how some children distinguish between 'Belgians' and 'believers' (by which they mean Muslims), how some draw moral boundaries between religious groups, and how some friendships are seemingly formed based on a recognition of religious experience. Hence, religious boundaries were not completely absent from this research, but a more specific focus on them may yield more refined results. Especially interesting, for instance, as briefly mentioned in the sixth chapter, is that minority ethnic children (of which most self-identify as Muslim) strongly identify with their religious background as their 'most important identity' (see also the appendix on page 265), while many of the majority ethnic children who identified as Christian in primary school report in the last research round that they no longer consider their Christian background as important or that they no longer identify as Christian at all. While previous research has tackled how primary school children

construct non-religious identities (Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019), further studies should examine how these non-religious identities that emerge among some children once they enter secondary school interact with the strong religious identifications of other children. While the child-respondents in this study are relatively young, other studies show, for instance, that adolescents may feel excluded at school if they do not drink alcohol for religious reasons (Jacobson, 1997; Van Praag, Boone, et al., 2015). Our child-respondents, however, seem to be very sensitive to the exclusion of Muslims and display an emerging awareness of power relations in society; this may develop into them questioning how one person's own 'norms' can lead to the exclusion of others. It is indeed therefore important to conduct further research into how young people in super-diverse cities relate to religion and to what extent religious boundaries too may become blurred. Do children and adolescents in super-diverse cities transcend religious boundaries as easily as they transcend ethnic boundaries?

Fifth, many of the limitations discussed above stem from my general research objective, which is to analyse how children in a super-diverse city negotiate ethnic and social class boundaries. As the subtitle of this dissertation suggests, this analysis, which focuses on the 'how' question of children's boundary making, indeed is rather descriptive than explanatory – although I have also cautiously raised potential explanations for certain phenomena throughout the different chapters. Yet, further research is needed to establish convincing causal mechanisms explaining not only 'how' but also 'when' and 'why' certain boundaries become more bright or blurred in 'which' children's lives. Although my results show, for instance, that ethnic boundaries are strongly downplayed by some groups of children while sharply drawn by other groups, my dissertation does not provide much empirical evidence to explain these variations. This has also to do with the fact that I did not make full use of my longitudinal data. As described in the introduction, several of the chapters are based on only one (e.g., chapter three) or two (e.g., chapter four and five) research rounds, which did not always allow me to explain structuring mechanisms in detail or to highlight, for instance, how children's repertoires on diversity, positioning on the social ladder or aspirations shift (or not) over a two-school year period. This does not mean that these data are not available. Rather, research into symbolic boundary making among children in super-diverse cities is so scarce that, even without the longitudinal aspect, there was much to analyse – more than would be feasible to put together in a coherent dissertation. Although, in this sense, this dissertation has been completed, the broader analysis is far from done.

Sixth, another limitation that is directly related to my methodology, is that my study does not enable the making of statements about how symbolic boundaries actually manifest themselves in practice. While I have looked extensively at how children discursively draw ethnic and social class boundaries, this research provides little insight into how children interact across these boundaries in

their daily lives. As discussed in chapter seven, the approach taken is nevertheless interesting, since oral boundary making can also be seen as a behavioural act. However, since symbolic boundary making also has a behavioural component with an impact beyond verbal statements, further research should investigate the extent to which these boundaries manifest themselves in the classroom, in the playground, and beyond.

Concluding reflections on the interaction between children's hopeful narratives and my own gloominess

While writing this conclusion, I tried to contact my child-respondents again to see how they are doing and where they currently stand in their educational trajectory, so that I could add an appendix to my dissertation. However, for some inexplicable reason, I no longer have access to the private social media account I had created to reach them during the study. Although I could have contacted the children, or adolescents in the meantime, through a different channel, such as their parents, I decided that it might be better to leave things as they are – at least for now. After all, the stories presented are those that mattered to them at the time of the interviews and hence should remain at the heart of the analysis. They are the narratives that the child-respondents aimed to put forward; displaying the ordinary lives that they performed at a particular time, in a demarcated context and in front of a specific researcher. Why would I want to juxtapose these stories with their current trajectory in a brief appendix that does not even allow for thorough analysis and is, in that sense, anecdotal rather than explanatory? I realized that as I tried to contact them again, I did so not without expectations but mainly from a rather deterministic point of view. Seemingly, while my results display children's agency, I myself was drawing on particular repertoires of continuing inequality. I was confronted with my own wish to know whether some of them – now that the adolescents are presumably in the third grade of secondary school – have been confronted more strongly with the inequality in the Flemish educational context and its early tracking system. Do the children still attend the A-stream? Do they still have the same (doxic) aspirations? Are they still optimistic and hopeful about their life chances? These are all questions that were running through my head, forcing me to reflect on why I apparently aimed to check whether they might have started losing hope, without considering that their aspirations might have even increased.

My own childhood experiences have indeed left me with a personality so sad and gloomy that if a talented novelist were to gain insight into my interior world, she would be able to write a sequel to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground.* Symbolic boundaries that made me feel out of place were omnipresent during my childhood. In fact, I was such a maverick in my environment that

my six-years-older brother – who was impishly going through puberty – made me believe that not only was I adopted – as many siblings tease each other – but that I had also been found on the street in a box of *Derby,* the then low-quality budget brand from a large supermarket. Overdramatic as I was, I took his words to heart for far too long. I also grew up at a time in which the far right was gaining electoral victories and, especially after the 9/11 attacks, anti-Islam sentiments seemed on the rise. Daily blatant and latent racism, teachers humiliating Muslim children, and even occasional physical punishments in education were my childhood experiences. Yet, it is not necessarily these experiences that I believe to be at the root of my gloominess, as I could not even imagine a world without them. Encountering a hostile world was merely an everyday reality for everyone in my family or friendship group. Being treated in racist ways was normal. That was life and life was not meant to be easy. I remember the very day, however, that my dejection came to life; the day that I realized that I was looked down upon, that I was confronted with my own degradation. This was the starting point of many miserable teenage years I would spend thinking: *I am an inferior child. I am scum.*

The day came not long after I made the transition to secondary school and found myself for the first time in class with 'native' majority ethnic children. My neighbourhood was rapidly gentrifying, but there were no white children yet in my primary school class. Attending a secondary school alongside these children, after twelve years of being surrounded with minority ethnic children only, was an alienating experience. I discovered a great deal back then, and one of my greatest discoveries was that it did not take more than having white children in class for the teachers to stop physically punishing us. Treatments that I had previously considered normal took on a problematic edge because they seemingly only happened to 'us.' During these first months in secondary school, besides the fact that I did not like the subject I was studying, I also began to feel more and more out of place for reasons I could not yet really pinpoint. There was something odd in the gaze of my majority ethnic classmates when they asked me questions about my life that I could not fully understand. There was something vicious about the teachers' questions about our doings at home. *So, how many children are you again?* (Six. And two children have passed away). *Oh, that's a lot.* (That's not *that* many, I guess.) *Do you have to help a lot cleaning and cooking at home?* (Uhm no, why are you asking?) *You probably ate a lot of sugar when celebrating the end of Ramadan?* (I am chubby, I clearly eat too much sugar at any time.) *Did you steal the microscope lens during the last science lesson?* (I was not even at school that day and why the hell would I want to have a lens?)

And then, as a revelation, the day came that I would understand it all.

It was the day my younger sister, who was the first in the family with middle-class and majority ethnic classmates in our local gentrifying primary school, brought one of these classmates

home. It would be the first time that a white child would come and play at our house. My mother, who is firmly convinced that every guest must be received warmly, wanted to spoil the child. While she was making French fries for them (oh the irony), I was walking around nervously. Something just did not feel right, but again I did not fully understand my own uneasiness. I only sensed that the restlessness had to do with the girl being white and us not being white. *Maybe you should make something else, mother? Are you sure her parents want her to eat here? When are her parents coming? What exactly did they tell you?* Mother gestured for me to leave. There had not been much communication between the two parents as they do not share a language. We only knew that the child was coming home with us and that she would be picked up later that day. While we were sitting at the table, little Elizabeth enjoying her fries, the bell rang. I can still see her mother standing at the living room door: *Let's go darling, we're going to eat at home… uhm… something healthier of course,* she said. While her words as such may seem quite normal, even meant as a joke, she looked at the table with a gaze so condescending that it made me want to die. The disapproval in her eyes was piercing. She clearly did not like the idea of Elizabeth at our unhealthy dining table. This event was so upsetting that if I did not know better, I would henceforth serve every child-guest a dish of organic raw vegetables next to avocado slices and a hummus dip.

I would never get over the thought of my mother's hospitality being reciprocated with disdain. It was from that day on that I understood that everything we said or did was judged differently because of our ethnic (and later I would understand also social class) background. Fries and hotdogs at a children's party are only legitimate if you are white and middle-class. It was, as it were, a revelation not very subtly delivered through Elizabeth's mother's eyes. I understood that when the teachers said that I have many siblings, they were not making a neutral statement. That when they asked if I had to help with the housework, they did so mainly on the assumption that this was the case and that it would be wrong. That when they asked me if I had stolen a lens, they had expected a confession or a lie but not a sincere explanation. For we were scum and everything we did or said was inferior. There was not much left for me to do but to become disobedient and to distance myself from everything and everyone. The world expected a scumbag, the world got a scumbag. I was an outcast manufactured by society, and I would excel in it.

Many years later, I am one of those aspiring doctoral students who did not plan to go to university, but nevertheless enrolled because of circumstances that I do not fully grasp myself – and thus for the sake of convenience one could call my enrolment an accident:[1] merely a factory error during the production of my life's trajectory or a courier who mistook the destination address during

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[1] The use of this term is inspired by Peter Berger's book '*Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist.*' The arguments in this conclusion, however, have nothing to do with Berger's work.

delivery. Due to my childhood experiences, I became highly sensitive to evaluation processes in people's narratives. I believe that this is why I have also been greatly inspired by Michèle Lamont's work, which has had a great impact on my sociological thinking. I was very eager to study how evaluation processes arise when people talk about other social groups and how others' judgements affect their own experiences. I recognize my own life stories in those of some of the child-respondents, who displayed awareness of being looked at through judgemental glasses, for example, because of their accent and language use (cf. chapter six) or Muslim background (cf. chapter three). Yet, these narratives were less present in the research than I had expected, and repertoires of shared group disadvantages also seemed to weaken over time instead of becoming more salient, as in my own teenage years. Several children developed more positive narratives after their transition to secondary education. Ikram, who stated the in first research round that she believes that in the future she will no longer be welcome as a Muslim in this society, argued in the second and last research round that now she believes that Muslims will be accepted and that she will be able to build a beautiful life in Belgium.

Perhaps there is little point in questioning and haunting these children's developing narratives of hope with the sociological premise that, structurally speaking, ethnic boundaries do matter, no matter how unimportant they may be to them (chapter three, six, seven and eight) or that the socio-economic position of some children is not so 'normal' and does significantly limit chances in life (chapters four and five). There is even less point in haunting their optimistic repertoires with my gloomy ones – for although we share some experiences, we also differ strongly in others. While I was conducting this research, so little seemed to have changed over the past 20 years, yet so much at the same time. The repertoires that the child-respondents have at their disposal are much more complex and diverse than the repertoires that were available to me during my youth. While I was coming of age, repertoires of social justice, anti-racism, cosmopolitanism, commonplace diversity, gender inclusivity, and multiple identifications, among other things, barely made it into teenage ears. Elizabeth's mother's condemnatory gaze would undoubtedly have been less confronting, had I then had access to the more complex narratives displayed by the child-respondents. I would have known that I was not inferior. There was also no social media to bring positive stories countering the news about the Flemish far right and rising islamophobia, while some children like Ikram hint that they have developed narratives of hope as they have become familiar with anti-racist majority ethnic people on social media. Or perhaps the child-respondents simply embody the art of putting things into perspective, of positivity and willpower, much more than I ever did.

Children's hopeful and optimistic narratives almost work like kryptonite in this sense: I start questioning why I am still walking around dark and gloomily, waiting for social structures to attack

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people's lives. Why should I not – instead of haunting them with my suspicions – allow their positive narratives to haunt my dejection, for my background probably has given me as many advantages as it has made things difficult for me? Why not be inspired by the children's 'dual frame of reference' and use my childhood experiences in such a way as to create the most desirable social position for myself? While in chapter two I started this analysis by discussing the barriers that I have experienced as a minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background, I will therefore now end this dissertation, complete my educational trajectory indeed, with a list not of the struggles but of the perks of becoming an accidental sociologist.

The perks of becoming an accidental sociologist

A perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that I can quickly get over failures, if a paper is rejected or a proposal not granted. How long should I grieve for not getting recognition for what, at least in my case, often still requires work? In my secondary education, I often did not even get recognition for what I was very good at.

A perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that I have very little fear of cruel reviews. What can the reviewers say that I have not heard before? That I am not good enough? That my work is worthless? That I really should stop doing what I am doing?

A perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that in academia, my lack of a sense of entitlement can indeed miraculously play to my advantage, because in this competitive context you are hardly entitled to anything.

A perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that whenever I felt that my professors were setting the bar too high, at times when I just wanted to be mediocre, I knew how to handle the pressure because in their high expectations they only reminded me somewhat amusingly of an average migrant parent.

A perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that I have continued to work calmly during the pandemic as it has brought little change to my life. For deaths and health issues have always been present in my environment, not to mention the caring responsibilities that many children of migrants have always had. Just being able to work without personal concerns is a feeling I have never known. Another perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that I do not mind not being able to network at international conferences because of the pandemic. Now I can blame my lack of social capital on that, instead of playing the Bourdieu-card again.

But perhaps the greatest perk of becoming an accidental sociologist is that aptitude for self-mockery; I derive pleasure from the observation that the academic world can be so tough that I – as educated scum – ironically enough have ended up quite at home there.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Topic list round 1

Introduction

- Age, residence
- Hobbies or other extracurricular activities
- Are there any leisure activities that you would like to do, but cannot do or are not allowed to do?
- Which music genre do you prefer? TV-shows?
- How does your family look like?
- Do you live in a house or an apartment?
- Who do you share your bedroom with/do you have your own bedroom?
- How satisfied are you with the privacy you get at home?
- Where do you do your homework? Who helps you with it?
- Home languages, migration background & religious/philosophical background
- Are your parents still together?
- Are both of your parents working? Do you know what they do?
- Which plans do you have for the summer holiday?

Poor and rich

- How does a poor family look like, according to you?
- Do you personally know any poor people?
- How does a rich family look like, according to you?
- Do you personally know any rich people?
- How does a family 'in the middle' between poor and rich look like?
- Where would you place your own family? Can you explain why?
- ⇨ Use social ladder (based on Guio et al., 2018)
- Are you satisfied with that position? Would you want to have more/less money?
- Do you think that your parents are satisfied with this position?
- Do you ever talk about money at home?
- Can you give any examples of stuff you really would like to have but cannot have (for the moment)?
- Are you ever worried about the amount of money you have in the family?
- I am going to recite a few statements, and you can indicate whether they apply to you (2001):
    - I get pocket money each week.

- o I can do whatever I want with my pocket money.
- o I have savings (I save money myself or my parents save for me).
- o I have branded shoes (like Nike, Vans, Adidas).
- o We have a television at home with channels such as Ketnet, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, … or streaming services such as Netflix.
- o We have a garden OR a park in the neighbourhood
- o I have transport when I need it (parents' car, ticket for public transport, bike, …)
- o I have the kind of clothes I want to have.
- o We go on holiday for at least once a year.
- o My family and I also do outdoor activities
- o I have a cell phone or tablet.
- o I have a game console, such as a PlayStation or Nintendo.
- o We celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays and/or I get presents on these days.
- o I sometimes invite my friends at my place.
- Do you have classmates with more/less money?
- Do you talk about your family's situation with your classmates or friends?
- How easy is it to talk about this situation with others?
- How rich/poor are the people in your neighbourhood, according to you?
- Why do some people have more money than others, you think?
- Do you think that those differences are fair?
- Should poor people be supported, and if so, how?

Education

- How much do you enjoy going to school?
- Do you participate in all the schools' activities?
- Do you consider yourself a good pupil?
- How important is it to you to achieve good grades?
- How much would you enjoy being top of class?
- How important is it to you that the teacher likes you?
- Have you already decided which study area you are going to do next year?
- How did you choose that area? (If not chosen by themselves: which area would you choose if you could decide all by yourself?)
- Have you already decided which school you will attend?
- What do your parents/teachers think about your chosen area?
- How do you feel about the thought of going to secondary school in a few months' time?

Identity and diversity

- Do you believe that there is a lot of diversity in your class?
- What differences do you notice among your classmates?
- How do you feel about this diversity?
- Antwerp is becoming more diverse too, how do you feel about that?
- ⇨ Appendix 'identity': can you choose the labels with which you identify? You can choose to categorize them as 'not important', 'a little bit important' or 'very important'. You can also choose not to identify at all, of course. You can write some other categories you identify with on the blank labels, if you like.

- Do you ever talk about other cultures or religions in class?
- Has the teacher ever said something about other cultures/religions that hurt someone in class?
- How important is it to you that the teachers show a great interest in your culture or religion?

Peers

- Who are your best friends? Are those classmates?
- What do you like most about these friends?
- Do you have friends who have another culture or religion than you do?
- What differences are there between you, if any?
- Do you talk about cultural differences in your friendship group? What do you talk about?

Aspirations and the future

- What do you want to become when you grow up?
- Do your parents support your future plans? How do they support you? And the teachers?
- What are your biggest dreams?
- How easy or difficult do you think it will be to achieve all those dreams?

Appendix II: MacArthur scale of Subjective Social Status
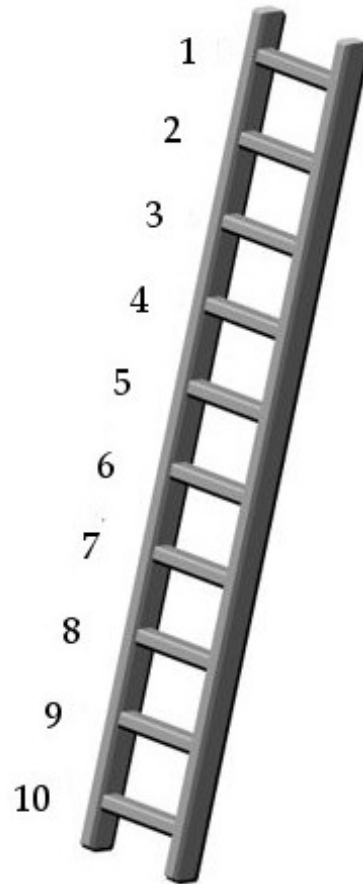
Assume that the ladder is a way of picturing your school: at the top of the ladder are the people in your school with the most money. At the bottom are the people with the least money. Where would you place yourself on this ladder?

Based on Goodman et al. (2001).

Appendix III: Identifications

	11-year	12-year
Boy	Girl	Belgian
Flemish	Antwerp citizen	Moroccan
Turk	European	
World citizen	Christian	Muslim
Jewish	Non-believer	Atheist

Appendix IV: Topic list round 2

Introduction

- Description new school and class
- General experiences new school
- General experiences study area and lessons
- Easy making new friends?
- Experience teachers
- Experience curriculum, tests and grades

Group formation and relationships

- How do the pupils at this school get along with each other?
- Which peer groups can be distinguished on the playground? How do you feel about these groups?
- Which groups do you like most? Which the least?
- Do the teachers encourage the pupils to hang out with each other? How?
- Are there any pupils who are bullied in this school? Why? Have you ever been bullied?
- If 1 was the most popular pupil and 10 the least popular, where on the scale would you place yourself?
    - Why do you think so?
    - How do you feel about being at that position?
    - Where would you like to stand if you could choose your own position?
    - Which pupils would you place at 1 and which ones at 10? Why?
    - Are you concerned with your position at school? In which ways?
    - Do you believe that others respect you for who you are?
    - Are you actively concerned with being respected at school? In which way?
    - Do you ever compare yourself to others? How?
    - Which pupils are hardly respected, according do you? What makes that they are not really respected? How do you feel about that?
- Can you write down your top 5 best friends (and compare with last year)?
- What makes them your best friends?
- Do your parents allow you to hang out with anyone? Who would they like you to hang out with? Who would they rather you did not hang out with?
- What do you expect from your best friends? (Behaviour, values, appearances, …)
    - How important is it to you that they have the same interests as you do?
    - Have money?
    - That they behave in similar ways?
    - Have the same kind of family?
    - The same religion?
    - The same culture?
- Among which kind of people do you feel very uncomfortable or insecure?
- Have you ever felt inferior?
  What kind of people do you consider inferior?
- What people would you never want to be friends with?

- Are there any pupils you would not want to invite home because you would feel uncomfortable?

Social position and life chances

- Position on the social ladder again, compare with R1:
    - Last year you chose place X?
    - Are there more pupils who have more/less money than you do, compared to last year?
- Where would you like to stand yourself when you grow up?
- Do you believe you will achieve that?
- What are the odds that you will become poor/rich? Why?
- Do you think that you live in a rich, a 'normal' or a poor neighbourhood?
- Which pupils are more likely to succeed in life? Which are least likely?
- I am going to recite a few statements, which you can fill in with the words 'less', 'more' or 'as much'
    - I believe I have _____ chance as/than my classmates to achieve my dreams.
    - I believe I have _____ chance as/than my classmates to achieve good grades.
    - I believe that the teachers expect _____ of me compared to my classmates.
    - Pupils of less affluent families have _____ chance to do well at school.
    - Pupils with a migration background have _____ chance to do well at school.

Identity and belonging

- Cf. identifications last schoolyear, now other method:

I am…	I am NOT…
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

- Can you sum up three things that are 'typical' …….. about you?

- Last schoolyear you said that there is a lot/little diversity in your school. How is it this year?
- Do you feel like people of different backgrounds get along in our society?
- What do we need do get along even better, according to you?

Aspirations and life chances

- Gauge whether aspirations are still the same. Ask to write down top 5 dreams.
- How important do you think the following things are to achieve success in life?

	Not important	**A little bit imp.**	**Important**	**Very important**
Good grades				
Enough money at home				
Parents with a good diploma				
Good/enriching hobbies				
Reading a lot of books				
Being smart				
Working hard				
Having supportive parents				
Luck				
Feeling well at school				

Appendix V: Topic list round 3

Introduction

- Experiences last months of first grade (COVID-19, tests and grades, study advice)
- Gauge whether pupils have changed their study area
- Experiences new class, new teachers
- Outlook for next year (study area, school, …)

Looking back previous rounds

- Identities
- Friendship group
- Peer groups at school
- Position on the social ladder
- Aspirations and dreams for the future
- Faith in achieving one's dreams

In-depth questions previous rounds

- Established-outsider-boundaries:
    - Does it bother you when ………… act differently than you do?
    - What bothers you most about ……………?
    - When do you consider someone a bad ………………?
    - Which groups do you like? Which groups do you dislike?
    - How do you feel about children who do not speak Dutch very well?
- Social class and inequality
    - Are there pupils whose parents have better jobs than yours do?
    - Have you ever wished that you would live differently at home? What would you want to see differently?
    - Have you ever wished that your parents had another job?
    - How come there are minority groups living in some neighbourhoods more than in another?
    - Why is it that there are more minority groups living in poverty?
    - Why is it that most of the teachers are of Belgian descent?
    - Do you know any jobs that minority groups generally tend to do? Why is that?

Appendix VI: Topic list parents

Introduction

- Introducing themselves (+ if applicable partner and other children)
- Occupation and level of education (and partner)
- Can you tell something about the context in which you grew up? (and partner)
- Can you tell something about your social network?

General questions about parenting

- How would you describe [child] (personality, interests, …)?
- How would you describe your relationship with [child]?
- What is your main objective as a parent? What do you hope to achieve in your upbringing?
- What are the most important values you aim to foster in your child(ren)? Do you feel like you succeed in doing so?
- Which characteristic of [child] do you appreciate most?
- When would you be disappointed in your upbringing?
- How do you like [child] to spend his/her free time? Why do you consider this way of spending free time important?
- Do you know all [child]'s friends personally? And their parents?
- Are you ever worried about [child]'s friends? With what kind of people would you not like [child] to hang out?
- What kind of friends would you like [child] to have?

Identity, diversity and friendship groups

- What role does ethnic identity have in your family? Religious identity?
- Does [child] have a mixed friendship group regarding ethnic or religious background?
- How important do you think this is? Do you encourage [child] to make friends across ethnic or religious lines?
- You are raising [child] in a super-diverse society which is probably very different to the society you were raised in; how do you feel about that?
- How would you like [child] to encounter diversity?
- Do you talk about diversity at home?
- Has [child] ever been confronted with diversity in a negative way? How did you handle the situation?
- Does [child] deal differently with diversity than you do as a parent? How do you notice?
- Do you ever talk about social inequality? Poverty? Racism or discrimination?
- Do you think that children should have insight into these inequalities?

- How do you prepare [child] for this inequality?

Education, aspirations and the future

- [child] attended last schoolyear X and is now enrolled in X, have you consciously chosen for these schools? In which way?
- What characteristics were most important to you when choosing a school?
- How did you decide to enroll [child] in [name study area]? Did everyone agree with this decision?
- What do you hope [child] will achieve?
- Do you ever talk about [child]'s future dreams? Can you tell me something about [child]'s dreams? Do you support those?
- How much faith do you have that [child] will achieve his/her dreams?
- What will make it easier for [child] to achieve those? What will make it more difficult?
- Do you believe that [child] has all what he/she needs to succeed in life?
- Do you believe that you have the necessary tools to support [child] in achieving his/her dreams?
  - ⇨ Same list to gauge relationship between inequality and life chances as topic list 2 children.

Appendix VII: Topic list teachers

Introduction

- Introducing themselves (subjects, years of experience, how long involved in this school, level of education, …)
- How did you end up in this school? (Deliberately chosen based on pedagogical ideology, …?)
- How would you describe the atmosphere in the teacher corps?
- How would you describe your relationship with the pupils?
- What are your main objectives as a teacher? What makes you satisfied?
- When are you most proud of your pupils? When most disappointed?

Identity and diversity

- How would you describe the atmosphere among the pupils?
- Is there much group formation? On basis of what characteristics?
- Which tensions are noticeable among the pupils?
- How would you describe the school's diversity (social background, ethnicity, religious background, …)?
- How do you feel about this diversity?
- How would you describe a school with an 'ideal' pupil composition?
- What are the benefits of such a pupil composition? Are there any challenges?
- Would you describe this school as rather advantaged or disadvantaged? Why?
- How do children across social class lines get along with each other?
- How do pupils across ethnic lines get along with each other?
- Are the pupils tolerant of each other? How does the school aim to foster mutual tolerance?
- To what extent should the school be concerned with cultural differences in class?
- Do you believe that the pupils feel like their cultural and religious background is respected at school? How do you notice?
- How diverse is the teacher corps? How important is a diverse teacher corps to you?
- How do you implement the topic of diversity in class?
- Does the school have a certain policy on diversity? Do you agree with that policy?
- Do the teachers share a similar view on diversity?
- Can you recall a situation in which you did not agree with a colleague's perspective on diversity?
- Do you feel like you have the necessary tools to teach in a super-diverse setting? Have you ever experienced difficulties? How supported do you feel?

Social inequality and life chances

- Do you believe that all the pupils have equal chances to succeed in life?
- What are the odds, according to you, that the pupils will be confronted with discrimination?
- Do you believe that discrimination is a thing?
- How do you prepare the pupils for discrimination?
  ⇨ List with life chances as in topic list 2 children.

Appendix VIII: Overview selected schools

	Foreign home language	Study allowance	Mother no secondary qual.	Deprivation index score of school neighbourhood	% of inhabitants with a migration background in neighbourhood
School 1	23%	20%	15%	5.1	43%
School 2	8%	16%	14%	0.7	25%
School 3	49%	57%	49%	5.2	48%
School 4	27%	30%	17%	4	46%
School 5	78%	78%	85%	4.3	59%
School 6	66%	68%	72%	8.2	72%

Appendix IX: Overview child-respondents

Name	Gender	Age in R1	Country of descent	Religious background	P. school	Social class	Round 2	SY1	SY2
Adar	Boy	11	Kurdistan	Muslim	3	Lower/working	X	A	A: science
Aicha	Girl	11	Morocco	Muslim	2	Lower/working			
Alexander	Boy	11	Belgium & the Netherlands	Christian	4	Middle	X	A: Latin	/
Amadou	Boy	11	Guinea	Muslim	4	Lower/working			
Amber	Girl	11	Belgium & Brazil	Christian	2	Middle			
Ana	Girl	12	Georgia	Christian	4	Lower/working	X	A: Latin	A: Latin
Arthur	Boy	11	Belgium	Non-believer	1	Middle			
Assia	Girl	12	Morocco	Muslim	5	Lower/working			
Aylin	Girl	12	Turkey	Muslim	5	Lower/Working			
Ayman	Boy	12	Morocco	Muslim	6	Lower/working	X	B	/
Caroline	Girl	11	Belgium	Christian	1	Middle			
Doha	Girl	12	Morocco	Muslim	1	Lower/working	X	A: arts	A: humanities
Efua	Girl	12	Ghana	Christian	1	Lower/working			
Emiel	Boy	11	Belgium	Non-believer	1	Middle	X	A: STEM	A: STEM
Enes	Boy	12	Turkey	Muslim	5	Lower/working	X	A	A: modern science-languages
Hala	Girl	12	Iraq	Muslim	3	Lower/working	X	A	A: Latin
Hamza	Boy	12	Morocco & Algeria	Muslim	5	Lower/working			
Hanane	Girl	12	Morocco	Muslim	6	Lower/working			
Hanne	Girl	11	Belgium	Christian	4	Middle			
Ibrahim	Boy	11	Morocco	Muslim	6	Lower/working			

Ikram	Girl	12	Morocco	Muslim	6	Lower/working	X	A: modern science	A: modern science
Ilias	Boy	11	Morocco	Muslim	1	Lower/working			
James	Boy	11	Belgium & Ireland	Non-believer	3	Middle			
Jeremy	Boy	11	Congo, Nigeria & Lebanon	Non-believer	1	Lower/working	X	A: sports	A: sports
Jill	Girl	11	Belgium	Christian	2	Middle			
Jordy	Boy	11	Belgium	Non-believer	3	Middle	X	A: sports	A: modern science-languages
Julie	Girl	11	Belgium	Christian	2	Middle	X	A	/
Layla	Girl	11	Morocco & Belgium	Muslim	4	Lower/working	X	A (then B)	A
Liam	Boy	12	Morocco & Belgium	Non-believer	2	Middle	X	A: sports	A: sports
Louise	Girl	11	Belgium, Portugal & the Netherlands	Non-believer	1	Middle	X	A	A: modern science-languages
Majda	Girl	12	Morocco	Muslim	6	Lower/working			
Manal	Girl	13	Afghanistan	Muslim	3	Lower/working			
Niyah	Girl	11	Belgium & Nigeria	Christian	2	Lower/working	X	A	A: humanities
Noah	Boy	11	Belgium & Morocco	Muslim	2	Middle			
Olivia	Girl	11	Sweden, Finland & Sierra Leone	Non-believer	1	Middle	X	A	A
Oskar	Boy	11	Belgium	Non-believer	3	Middle	X	A: Latin	A: Latin
Oumaima	Girl	11	Morocco	Muslim	4	Lower/working			
Redouane	Boy	11	Morocco	Muslim	3	Lower/working			
Roos	Girl	11	Belgium	Christian	4	Middle	X	A: Latin	A: Latin-Greek
Sahar	Girl	11	Afghanistan	Muslim	3	Lower/working	X	A	A: economy
Sam	Boy	11	Iran	Non-believer	3	Lower/working	X	A	A: sports
Selin	Girl	11	Turkey	Muslim	1	Lower/working			

Tomasz	Boy	12	Poland	Christian	1	Lower/working	X	A	A: humanities
Victor	Boy	11	Belgium	Christian	1	Middle	X	A: Latin	A: Latin
Warre	Boy	12	Belgium	Christian	1	Middle			
Yassine	Boy	11	Tunisia	Muslim	3	Lower/working	X	A: science	A: sports
Zineb	Girl	12	Morocco	Muslim	3	Lower/working			

NOTE: SY1 is the chosen study of area in the first grade of secondary school. In most of the schools, children are streamed in the A- or B-track but do not have to choose a specific area yet. In other schools, pupils can already choose to delve into a specific area. SY2 is the chosen study of area in the third research round. Except for Layla, who doubled her first grade, all the children have moved up to the second year of secondary. The information is missing for Ayman, Alexander and Julie because they dropped out of the study after the second round.

Appendix X: Children's identifications

Name	Belgian identity	Minority Ethnic group identity	Flemish	European	Religious
Adar	Not important	Very important (Kurdish)	Non-identification	Very important	Very important (Muslim)
Aicha	Non-identification	Very important (Moroccan)	Non-identification	Not important	Very important (Muslim)
Alexander	A bit important	Non-identification	A bit important	Not important	A bit important (Christian)
Amber	A bit important	Non-identification	Very important	Very important	A bit important (Christian)
Arthur	Very important	N/A	Non-identification	Non-identification	Not important (Atheist)
Assia	Non-identification	A bit important (Moroccan)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Aylin	Non-identification	A bit important (Turkish)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Caroline	A bit important	N/A	A bit important	A bit important	A bit important (Christian)
Doha	Very important	Very important	Non-identification	Non-identification	Non-identification
Efua	Non-identification	Very important (Ghanese)	Non-identification	Non-identification	A bit important (Christian)
Emiel	A bit important	N/A	A bit important	A bit important	A bit important (non-religious)
Enes	Not important	Very important (Turkish)	Not important	Not important	Very important (Muslim)
Hala	Non-identification	Non-identification	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Hamza	A bit important	Very important (Moroccan & Algerian)	Not important	A bit important	Very important (Muslim)
Hanne	Not important	N/A	Not important	Not important	Not important (Christian)
Ikram	Very important	Very important (Moroccan)	A bit important	A bit important	Very important (Muslim)
Ilias	Non-identification	Very important (Moroccan)	Non-identification	A bit important	Very important (Muslim)
James	Very important	Non-identification	A bit important	Not important	A bit important (non-religious)

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Jeremy	Very important	Very important (Congolese, Nigerian & Lebanese)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Non-identification
Jill	Very important	N/A	Very important	A bit important	A bit important (Christian)
Jordy	Very important	N/A	Very important	A bit important	A bit important (non-religious)
Julie	Very important	N/A	Very important	A bit important	Very important (Christian)
Layla	Non-identification	Non-identification (Moroccan father)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Liam	Very important	Very important (Moroccan father)	Very important	A bit important	Not important (non-religious)
Louise	A bit important	Non-identification	A bit important	A bit important	Not important (non-religious)
Manal	Not important	A bit important (Afghan)	Non-identification	A bit important	Very important (Muslim)
Noah	Non-identification	A bit important (Moroccan mother)	Not important	Not important	Very important (Muslim)
Olivia	Non-identification	Very important (Swedish)	Non-identification	Not important	Very important (Atheist)
Oskar	Not important	N/A	A bit important	A bit important	Not important (non-religious)
Oumaima	Non-identification	Very important (Moroccan)	Non-identification	A bit important	Very important (Muslim)
Redouane	A bit important	Very important (Moroccan)	A bit important	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Roos	Very important	N/A	A bit important	Non-identification	A bit important (Christian)
Sahar	A bit important	A bit important (Afghan)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Sam	A bit important	Not important ('partly-Iranian')	Non-identification	Very important	Very important (non-religious)
Selin	Non-identification	A bit important (Turkish)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Tomasz	A bit important	Very important (Polish)	Non-identification	Very important	Very important (Christian)
Victor	A bit important	N/A	A bit important	Non-identification	A bit important (Christian)
Warre	A bit important	N/A	Non-identification	Non-identification	A bit important (Christian)

Yassine	Not important	Very important (Tunisian)	Non-identification	Non-identification	Very important (Muslim)
Zineb	A bit important	A bit important (Moroccan)	Non-identification	A bit important	Very important (Muslim)

Appendix XI: Schools' characteristics before and after the transition to secondary

Adar, Hala, Oskar, Sahar, Sam & Yassine

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	49%	57%	49%
Secondary school	31%	43%	25%

Alexander

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	17%	30%	27%
Secondary school	16%	33%	19%

Ana

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	17%	30%	27%
Secondary school	22%	37%	24%

Ayman

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	72%	68%	66%
Secondary school	79%	79%	54%

Emiel

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	15%	20%	23%
Secondary school	22%	37%	24%

Doha

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	15%	20%	23%
Secondary school I	12%	25%	9,7%
Secondary school II	24%	35%	33%

Enes

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	85%	78%	78%
Secondary school	71%	71%	68%

Ikram

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	72%	68%	66%
Secondary school	67%	79%	59%

Louise

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	15%	20%	23%
Secondary school	16%	33%	19%

Jordy

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	49%	57%	49%
Secondary school	30%	35%	13%

Julie

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	15%	20%	23%
Secondary school	15%	25%	10%

Layla

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	17%	30%	27%
Secondary school	60%	67%	43%

Niyah

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	15%	20%	23%
Secondary school	28%	44%	23%

Olivia, Tomasz and Victor

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	15%	20%	23%
Secondary school	22%	36%	25%

Roos

	% mothers without secondary qual.	% receiving study allowances	% non-Dutch home language
Primary school	17%	30%	27%
Secondary school	12%	19%	9,8%

There is no information available on the secondary school of Liam and Jeremy.

Appendix XII: Overview parents

Name	Gender	Pupil	Number of children	Descent	Education level	Profession
Alexia	F	Emiel	2	Belgian	Tertiary	Medical representative
Eva	F	Victor	2	Belgian	Tertiary	Secondary school teacher
Helene	F	Alexander	2	Dutch	Tertiary	Oncologist
Ilse	F	Oskar	2	Belgian	Tertiary	Primary school teacher
Kristien	F	Niyah	1	Belgian	Secondary	Logistic employee
Malika	F	Layla	6	Belgian	Secondary	Childcare worker
Maria	F	Louise	2	Belgian-Portuguese	Secondary	Administrative employee
Pieter	M	Victor	2	Belgian	Tertiary	Primary school teacher
Sahira	F	Doha	3	Moroccan	Lower secondary	Fish monger
Saïd	M	Liam	2	Moroccan	Secondary	Entrepeneur
Veerle	F	Roos	2	Belgian	Tertiary	Project manager
Vera	F	Olivia	1	Swedish-Finnish	Tertiary	Office manager

Appendix XIII: Overview teachers

Name	Pupils	Years of experience	Subject	SES school	Descent
Amèlie	Enes	7	Dutch	Disadvantaged	Belgian
Cherish	Jordy	6	Dutch, citizenship, coaching & differentiation	Mixed	Belgian
Elisabeth	Ikram	2	Natural sciences	Disadvantaged	Belgian-Spanish
Guido	Ikram	22	Natural sciences	Disadvantaged	Belgian-Italian
Hanne	Ana & Emiel	9	French & English	Mixed	Belgian
Jonas	Roos		Ethics	Advantaged	Belgian
Kathleen	Doha	13	Dutch, English & History	Mixed	Belgian
Matthias	Doha		Ethics	Mixed	Belgian
Mehdi	Adar, Hala, Oskar, Sam, Sahar & Yassine	15	History, Ethics & Geography	Mixed	Belgian-Maghrebi
Nele	Niyah	15	Catholicism	Mixed	Belgian
Nina	Enes	13	French	Disadvantaged	Belgian
Ruben	Niyah	16	Geography, natural science, STEM	Mixed	Belgian
Zoë	Tomasz, Olivia & Victor	11	English, Latin	Mixed	Belgian

Appendix XIV: Author contribution

Chapter four: Repertoires on diversity among primary school children

Imane Kostet: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Gert Verschraegen: Feedback outline, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Noel Clycq: Feedback outline, critical revision of the manuscript.

Chapter five: How children negotiate and make sense of social class boundaries

Imane Kostet: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Gert Verschraegen: Feedback outline, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Noel Clycq: Feedback outline, critical revision of the manuscript.

Chapter six: Children's conflicting repertoires on aspirations and life chances

Imane Kostet: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Noel Clycq: Feedback outline, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Gert Verschraegen: Feedback outline, critical revision of the manuscript.

Chapter eight: How children in super-diverse schools talk about interethnic friendships

Imane Kostet: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Gert Verschraegen: Feedback outline, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Noel Clycq: Feedback outline, critical revision of the manuscript.

Chapter nine: How children and adults challenge each other's performances of everyday cosmopolitanism

Imane Kostet: Preparing research, data collection, data analysis, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Gert Verschraegen: Feedback outline, critical feedback analysis, contribution theoretical framework, critical revision of the manuscript.

Noel Clycq: Feedback outline, critical revision of the manuscript.

Appendix XV: Dutch abstract

Antwerpse kinderen groeien op in een samenleving die diverser is dan ooit. Deze diversiteit is vooral aanwezig in de basisscholen, waar maar liefst driekwart van de leerlingen een migratieachtergrond heeft. Tegelijkertijd kent de stad een grote etnische kloof in zowel de armoedecijfers als de bredere verdeling van levenskansen. Kinderen met een (niet-westerse) migratieachtergrond hebben een veel groter kans om geboren te worden in een gezin dat leeft onder de armoedegrens, en ook de prestatiekloof in het onderwijs tussen kinderen met en zonder migratieachtergrond is groot. Terwijl Antwerpen een superdiverse populatie heeft, wordt de stad bovendien geconfronteerd met een sterke anti-immigratie- en anti-islamretoriek, wat leidt tot zogenaamde 'symbolische grenzen' tegen deze etnische en religieuze minderheidsgroepen. Hoewel er al heel wat onderzoek is verricht naar de dynamieken en impact van deze ongelijkheden, is nog maar weinig geweten over de ervaringen van kinderen en hoe zij zich hiertegenover verhouden.

Verderbouwend op inzichten uit de cultuursociologie en de 'New Sociology of Childhood', draagt deze dissertatie bij tot de literatuur over symbolisch grenswerk door na te gaan hoe kinderen etnische en sociale grenzen onderhandelen in een superdiverse omgeving die gekenmerkt wordt door etnische ongelijkheid. Gebaseerd op drie interviewrondes die zijn afgenomen bij kinderen (11-14 jaar) over een periode van twee schooljaren, en enkele ouders en leerkrachten, analyseer ik hoe kinderen praten over etnische en sociale klasseverschillen, hoe ze zich identificeren met etnische en nationale identiteitscategorieën, welke symbolische grenzen ze trekken om etnische en sociale klassegroepen te definiëren, en hoe hun visies over diversiteit en racisme interageren met die van hun ouders en leerkrachten. Ik bestudeer verder welke aspiraties de kinderen hebben, hoe ze hun eigen levenskansen inschatten en hoe ze de relatie tussen ongelijkheid en levenskansen in het algemeen ervaren. Intussen reflecteer ik ook op de aanwezigheid van symbolische grenzen in onderzoek met kinderen vanuit mijn positie als een etnische minderheid met een arbeidersachtergrond.

In het algemeen wijst mijn analyse uit dat kinderen een grote mate van agency vertonen. Ze internaliseren dominante percepties op diversiteit en ongelijkheid niet passief, maar ze kiezen, combineren en reconstrueren actief de symbolische grenzen, repertoires en identiteitscategorieën die hun eigen visies en zelfconcept ondersteunen.