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'Maybe life can become easier because of my good grades' : children's conflicting repertoires on aspirations and life chances

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“Maybe life can become easier because of my good grades”

Children’s conflicting repertoires on aspirations and life chances

Keywords: aspirations, children, cultural repertoires, meritocratic beliefs, social inequality

Abstract

In this article, we draw on interviews with pupils aged 11 to 13, to analyse children’s aspirations, expectations of the future, and reasonings about social inequality in the context of an early tracking education system. We highlight the conflicting yet creative ways in which children make sense of inequality in relation to life chances. Although our child-respondents prefer structural explanations for 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 upward mobility that have arisen in very different socio-economic and political contexts to make sense of inequality in their own locality.

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 a meritocratic 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 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’ and a well-paid 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). In the long term, many of these pupils will not achieve the ‘promising’ trajectory they aspire to, as both education and the labour market penalise disadvantaged groups as ‘lacking’ capital (Croll, 2008). Yet, even when confronted with

structural barriers, such as poverty, many children hold on to their meritocratic beliefs (Betz and Kayser, 2017; Franceschelli and Keating, 2018; Kim and Gewirtz, 2019; Van Praag et al., 2015).

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, assessments of life chances and meritocratic beliefs (see e.g. Author, 2014; Author II, 2019; Van Praag 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 ethnic minority pupils' chances of achieving academic and professional success. We end with a brief conclusion.

The Flemish education system: meritocracy, early tracking and strong inequalities

This paper studies the repertoires of children navigating a socially and ethnically stratified education system. While the role of the education system is not central to our analysis, it is important to provide some basic information. The Flemish early tracking education system provides an important context for children's reasoning about their life chances and inequality; it makes certain repertoires available to children, via its curriculum but also through the interactions in which children engage at school.

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 (Author, 2014). Yet, at the same time, pupils' background characteristics are 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 most European countries (Bol and Van de Werfhorst, 2016). One of the main reasons for this divide is that children are prepared for a track already at the age of 12, whereas the majority of 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 completed primary education successfully) 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 of secondary education, children are hence tracked into (1) the general 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 necessarily 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 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 (such as doctor, architect or lawyer) 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 (Author, 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 very 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 in very different ways. 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.

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 (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). 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 native and non-native children is almost nowhere as strong as in Flanders, which makes it structurally relatively 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 neighbourhoodⁱ:

Table 1 - School and pupil characteristics

#	N = 47	% children born 'at-risk-of-poverty' in school's neighbourhood	% pupils receiving study allowance	% pupils' mothers without secondary education	% pupils with non-Dutch home language	Origins	Selected for second round N = 24
1	12	11,4%	20%	15,3%	23%	Belgium, Portugal, The Netherlands, Morocco, Turkey, Ghana, Congo, Lebanon, Sweden, Sierra Leone, Poland	7
2	7	5,7%	16%	13,6%	8%	Belgium, Morocco, France, Brazil, Nigeria	3
3	11	40%	57%	49,4%	49%	Belgium, Afghanistan, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Ireland, Kurdistan, Tunisia	7
4	8	10,2%	30%	16,6%	27%	Belgium, Guinea, Georgia, Morocco	4
5	4	28,1%	78%	84,7%	78%	Turkey, Morocco, Algeria	1
6	5	39,6%	68%	71,5%	66%	Morocco	2

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, and the study was also approved by the university's ethics committee.

In the first round, the children were enrolled in the sixth and last grade of primary school. The second round, which entailed interviews with a selection of 24 children, took place eight months later, after the children's transition to secondary education. 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. Table 1 gives an overview of the pupils' migration 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 assess 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 and we investigated further their choice and underlying reasoning. 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 quotations are drawn from the second research round. 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 ethnic minority 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 stand there [at the top of the ladder].
Researcher: What are those plans?
Jeremy: Like, I mean, I would 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 differing 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. Because in January I will go in competition, I will prepare for competitions. 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 implicitly 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, the son of doctors, 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 unequal 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 e.g. 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. It's also not that... I mean, if... If I want it and if I... If I do my best, those good grades will come anyway.

(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 ethnic minority 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. Everyone... Because my aunt, she, she, she also does like yeah... 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 [an ethnic minority]. (...)

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 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, for... Because, imagine you buy your first house, then you'll already have that...

(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 ethnic minority children who speak Dutch less well may have to work harder for the Dutch classes, adding however 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 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.

(12y0, 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.

(12y0, 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.

(12y0, 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, unforeseen 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: Noooooooo. 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.

(12y0, self-identifies as Belgian)

Although Ikram studies hard so 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 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, ethnic minority 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 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. Ethnic minority 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' (Author, 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?

ⁱ Generated from <https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/?var=natcube> and <https://www.agodi.be/cijfermateriaal-leerlingenkenmerken>.

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