

Comparing performance of the Flemish and Francophone educational systems

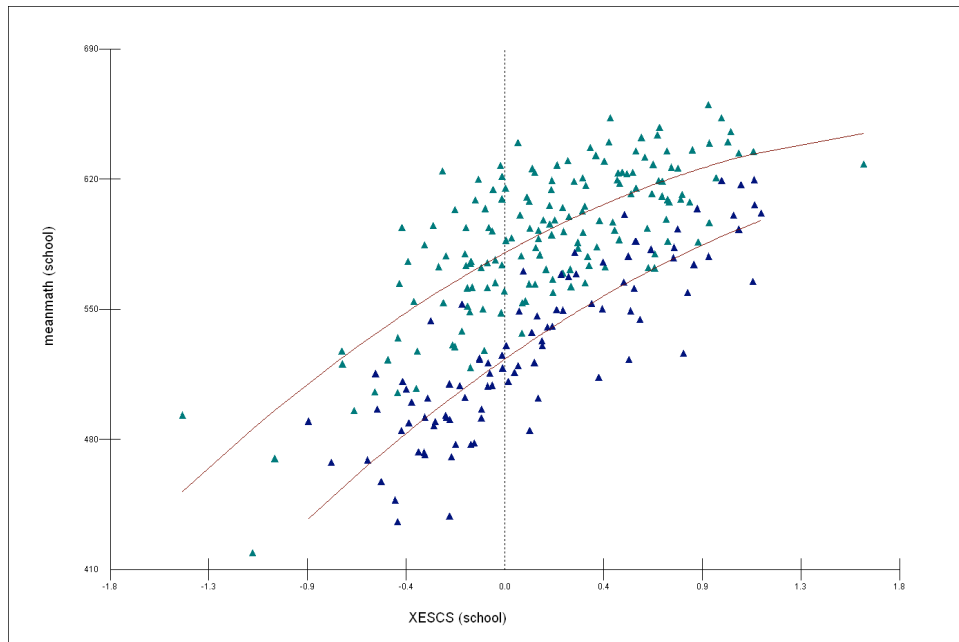
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In his paper on interregional educational discrepancies in Belgium, Vandenberghe (2010), making use of the well known PISA data, correctly points out that, regardless of the average socio-economic status of their pupils, Flemish schools consistently perform better than Francophone schools. The higher average scores for PISA for the Flemish community compared to the Francophone community are therefore not merely the result of some elitist schools on the Flemish side outperforming elitist schools on the Francophone side. It is neither the effect of schools with pupils at-risk underperforming even more on Francophone side than on Flemish side. Indeed, every type of school - judged by the composition of the student population - scores better in the Flemish community than in the Francophone community. This finding reported by Vandenberghe (2010), entirely confirms our own analysis of the PISA-data for the King Baudouin Foundation (Jacobs et alii, 2009).

In figure 1 we once again visualize the link between mean socio-economic status of the school population (X-axis) and the average score for mathematics (in PISA 2006) per school (Y-axis). The figure, however, not only shows that Flemish schools systematically outperform Francophone schools. It also shows that the relation between school composition and educational performance is almost linear on Francophone side but curvilinear on Flemish side. This is not without importance.

From a certain threshold onwards an increase in mean socio-economic status of the school population has a much weaker effect on educational attainment in Flanders. More elitist schools (in terms of mean socio-economic status of the school population) show less increase in average educational attainment compared to middle class or mixed schools on Flemish side than on Francophone side. Furthermore, Flemish schools tend to be more concentrated in the right-upper quadrant of the figure, while Francophone schools are dispersed all along the regression line. This equally suggests that school segregation has a bigger impact on Francophone side than on Flemish side. Although it is too early to formulate a final interpretation on these tendencies, they do seem to provide indirect proof that the earlier start of regulation of school enrolment and targeted policies (aiming at equal opportunities) on Flemish side has started to pay off. This being said, there is nevertheless still a systematic difference between Flemish schools and Francophone schools. What could explain this difference? It can be shown, making use of the PIRLS-study, that there are more schools with economically disadvantaged pupils on Francophone side than on Flemish side (Mullis et alii, 2007: 250). This undoubtedly pulls the average Francophone achievement level down, but it does not help to explain why also schools with few economically disadvantaged pupils consistently score worse on Francophone side. PIRLS, by the way, also showed that the problem of pupil absenteeism is considerably higher on Francophone side than on Flemish side (Mullis et alii, 2007: 268), a potentially important explanatory factor which, however, necessitates more in-depth analysis distinguishing different types of schools.

Figure 1. Mean socio-economic status of school population and average mathematics scores per school



In his lead paper, Vandenberghe (2010) argues that “hybrid governance” – the lack of a coherent governance framework -, caused by the presence of a fragmented educational policy landscape (which in turn is linked to the existence of several organisational networks) contributes to poor performance. There would be a bigger problem of “hybrid governance” on Francophone than on Flemish side. As the author himself, however, points out, organisational networks (leading to hybrid governance) also exist on Flemish side. Even though it is true that one catholic network dominates on Flemish side, one might wonder whether this really explains a differential degree of “hybrid governance”. Furthermore, does the level of “hybrid governance” constitute a sufficient explanation for the poorer overall results on Francophone side? If it does, it still needs to be shown what exact elements of “hybrid governance” lead to worse results. The causal chain is not clear.

We have ourselves never taken up the challenge to explain the interregional educational discrepancies in Belgium. Let us note, however, that in our ULB-report for the King Baudouin Foundation (Jacobs et alii., 2009) we have stated that the explanations suggested by Hirtt (2008) seem to be plausible. He highlights the differential level of financial investment in the educational system – average amounts spent per pupil are substantially higher on Flemish side than on Francophone side. He furthermore points to the differences in precision of educational objectives – there are more elaborate “eindtermen” on Flemish side compared to more vague “socles de compétences” on Francophone side. Perhaps this is the missing link when discussing “hybrid governance”. There is more centralisation in goal setting and methods of evaluation on Flemish side than on Francophone side. Educational objectives are more precisely defined on Flemish than on Francophone side, but we are not in a position to assess to what extent this is caused by the relative weight of different educational networks.

Hindriks & Verschelde (2010) have claimed that a higher level of school autonomy and flexibility – measured through a composed index of variables linked to recruitment of staff, allocation of budgets and choice of textbooks – explain better outcomes. As Vandenberghe (2010) and Hindriks & Verschelde (2010) have pointed out, the score on the school autonomy index of PISA is higher on Flemish side than on Francophone side (and this is mainly due to lower autonomy of Francophone public schools). Consequently, Hindriks & Verschelde (2010) plead for more school autonomy on Francophone side. It should, however, be noted they do not see this in contradiction to the need for more centralised methods of evaluation (i.e. socles de compétences and use of external evaluation).

I am not convinced that unconditional granting of more school autonomy (in staff recruitment and budget allocation) in itself is a good idea, as Hindriks & Verschelde (2010) seem to be suggesting. Indeed, I fully agree with Vandenberghe (2010) when he states that schools serving at-risk students should be enabled “to

attract (or simply retain) better and more experienced teachers”. Enlarging school autonomy, however, will not necessarily lead to this effect. Competition for “better”, more motivated and more experienced teachers will then probably only increase and why would schools serving at-risk students win this competition if this policy is not accompanied by other measures?

Our multi-level analysis for the FRB-report (Jacobs et alii, 2009) has shown that, in both linguistic communities, the effect of the mean socio-economic status of the school population on educational attainment is substantially bigger than the effect of the socio-economic status of individual pupils. In our discussion of these results, we have argued that this should not necessarily be interpreted as a pure school composition effect or a so-called “peer-group effect”, i.e. the mutual influence pupils have on each other. Indeed, as Vandenberghe (2010) has also pointed out in his paper, schools who find themselves at the lower ends of both the average score for mathematics and the mean socio-economic status of the school population, have a particular characteristic. They tend to have a particular staff situation and a high turnover. School heads complain it is more difficult to attract and especially keep specialised and motivated staff. I wish to study this phenomenon more closely in the future, but it is hence plausible that this correlation of teacher characteristics with school composition leads to a spurious effect. If schools with a particular type of pupils tend to attract a particular type of teachers, the school population composition effect might be less related to a peer-group effect and should rather (or at least also) be understood in terms of differential levels of teacher turnover and teacher’s efficacy, i.e. the (degree of) belief or conviction of teachers that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Guskey & Passaro, 1994). Let us explicitly stress that efficacy is not a synonym for efficiency. It has, however, been shown by several scholars that once teacher’s collective efficacy beliefs are taken into account, effects of student characteristics on achievement are reduced in a substantial way (Newmann et alii, 1989; Bandura, 1993). The challenge is hence to boost teacher efficacy beliefs in schools catering to at-risk pupils.

Enlarging school autonomy in attracting teachers does not seem to be a good option here, if schools with high numbers of at-risk pupils, have no additional advantages to offer to teachers. One should in such a scenario perhaps consider differential incentives (on the level of salaries or other benefits) to allow schools catering to at-risk pupils to attract the “best” teachers. I am aware that this is easier said than done. It will not be easy to introduce differential pay schemes in the educational system, while there is now a practice of fixed salaries regardless of the type of school one is teaching at. Furthermore, one would wish to curtail perverse effects of such a system, as it has to be evaluated precisely what is “a school catering to at-risk students” and one does not want to penalize schools which do a good job in moving at-risk students to the status of out-of-risk students either. Undoubtedly economists are better equipped to invent solutions to such challenges than a sociologist as myself.

Unfortunately, the Francophone community of Belgium did not participate to the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) which allows for international comparison of teacher characteristics, including teacher self-efficacy. Perhaps I failed to locate them, but I currently have no knowledge of other sources allowing for a systematic cross-regional comparison of the level of teacher efficacy in the two linguistic communities in Belgium. It is, by the way, a real pity that the Flemish and Francophone communities seldom participate jointly to major international educational studies as TIMMS, PIRLS and TALIS – PISA being luckily a notable exception. In my opinion this would be very useful as it would allow us to for instance assess whether the lower results for educational achievement on Francophone side are related to lower levels of teacher self-efficacy (the belief one can make a difference) compared to the Flemish community. If this is the case, the next question is to explain where these differences in efficacy beliefs come from (professional and societal status, salary level, career stability, external guidance, school climate, management style, etc.). I would not be astonished if the differences in precision of educational objectives – “eindtermen” and “socles de compétences” – have an impact here, which brings us again to the point of Vandenberghe with regard to the debate about “hybrid governance” and the plea by Hindriks & Verschelde for more school autonomy. According to the PIRLS study (Mullis et alii, 2007), 96% of Flemish schools compared to only 20% of Francophone schools use textbooks as a basis for reading instruction. As reading skills are better on Flemish than on Francophone side, this seems to be an element pointing to the need for more standardisation and less autonomy rather than the contrary. I have argued that with regard to staff recruitment we probably do not need more (unconditional) school autonomy either, but rather a targeted human resources strategy.

Let me conclude that it is no exaggeration to state that the challenges for the Belgian educational system(s) are immense. It is a comforting thought, however, that we know that it is not an utopian idea to be able to combine equal opportunities (i.e. the neutralization of the effect of socio-economic background on educational performance) with the goal of excellence. The PISA study shows that a country like Finland is able to achieve several goals at the same time: the Finnish pupils are among the best performers in the world (with a high average and a substantial proportion of pupils achieving the highest cognitive levels), the number of Finnish pupils not reaching minimum standards is fairly limited and the impact of socio-economic background on educational attainment is nowhere as low as in this Nordic country (Jacobs et alii, 2009). The Flemish community might be doing well in the ranking of educational attainment, but it scores very poorly as far as equal opportunities are concerned. The Francophone community has mediocre to poor results on both indicators. Although this is a very legitimate and important issue, let us not just focus on differences between the two educational systems, as the shared challenges of assuring equal opportunities and tackling school segregation are just as important. Undoubtedly we should then also start studying them in better and closer cooperation.

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