

Aspiration is the key for educational achievement

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Vandenberghe's paper is a highly stimulating contribution to our debate. First of all, it contributes, albeit critically, to a proper understanding of our country's institutional problems as the result – or at least the corollary – of a complex set of vicious circles. Secondly, my reading of the evidence presented by Vandenberghe should also warn the Flemish side against complacency. Admittedly, that is my reading of this very interesting paper.

It is well known that there are important correlations, at the level of individual people and/or households between (i) levels of education and levels of income (and labour market position), (ii) levels of education (and income) and health status, (iii) social, economic and cultural status of parents and their children's educational achievements, (iv) expectations concerning the return to investment on education and the motivation to invest effort in one's own education... So, when in one region income is on average lower and unemployment higher, relative to the other region, it is no surprise that in the first region the average health status is worse and educational achievement is less, relative to the second region. Less educational achievement leads to lower future incomes and less future employment. And so you obtain vicious circles of (growing) differences in average income levels, unemployment levels, educational achievement and health status. Such vicious circles explain why, added to linguistic and cultural issues, the socio-economic divide has become so entrenched and is so crucial in our institutional debate.

The question is, then, *primo*, whether such vicious circles are the only explanatory factors for interregional divergence in income levels, educational achievement, unemployment, etc., and *secundo*, even if they have explanatory power today, how they historically emerged. Vandenberghe's contribution is interesting, because he destroys a number of simplistic stories about these vicious circles. His figures undermine deterministic and reductive hypotheses one might entertain concerning the link between "context" (budgetary context, socio-economic context...) and "educational achievement". To put it bluntly, neither the socio-economic background of students, nor the return on investment in human capital, nor the budgetary resources devoted to education can explain the interregional difference in educational achievement: either their impact is not sufficient for an explanation (or there is no differential impact at all), or their impact cannot historically explain the long term divergence in educational achievement between the French and the Flemish community. It is this long-term divergence which is most remarkable in Vandenberghe's figures.

What then is the explanation? Vandenberghe points to differences in governance. But here I have to take issue with him. How could a difference in governance in the 1950s and 1960s explain the emerging divergence in outcomes in the 1960s? At that time education was still a truly unified federal competence. For sure, after the de-federalization of education in 1989, the Flemish government opted for a (new) policy of autonomy both in the state and the non-state sector (with the much-debated creation of the ARGO, The Autonomous Council for the Official Flemish Community Education Network). Since then, the Flemish Minister of Education's impact on the former "state" sector is as limited as his impact on the free, catholic sector. We have given schools a lot of autonomy, whilst guiding them, not with a system of central examinations, but with a rather dense set of "eindtermen" (achievement targets). But that policy change cannot explain what happened before 1990. However, the underlying hypothesis in Vandenberghe's presentation may be linked to differences in the relative weight of the state versus the non-state sectors in the two communities: the relative weight of the state versus the non-state sectors might explain why already in the 1950s, "on average" governance in the Dutch-speaking community yielded more autonomy to schools than in the French-speaking community. Vandenberghe does not explicitly pursue this line of argument, and it would need more analysis to corroborate it.

My personal guess is that a different explanation has to be introduced, linked to socio-cultural factors, which I would like to summarize in one word: “aspiration”. Aspiration is crucial for success in education. I believe that that is so, both on the level of individuals and on the level of their local communities or even the broader society to which they belong. Maybe, one of the main drivers of educational achievement, first of all in the catholic colleges and the state atheneae in Flanders in the 1950s, and then in the rapidly expanding Flemish higher education system in the 1960s, was the drive for emancipation of a community that considered itself at a disadvantage and for which more and better education was part of an attractive “new frontier”. I think that collective aspiration was a key to the rapid democratization of Flemish secondary and then tertiary education in the 1950s and 1960s. Admittedly, this is a speculative explanation, but it is supported by so many individual testimonies and school histories, that I believe it to be the crucial factor.

Vandenberghe is right in pointing out the importance of governance for the effectiveness of schools, not just for the average performance of students, but also for implementing policies for real equality of opportunity. Investing more resources in schools with a disadvantaged population is part and parcel of policies for equality of opportunity, but will not guarantee results. That is the reason, why as a Minister for Education I launched a “Decathlon for Equality of Opportunity in Education”, with ten challenges. The first test in the Decathlon turned on differential funding. However, we repeated times and again that budgets are only a precondition for creating equal opportunities. What really counts is what happens in the classroom, in the school or the university. Mediocre teaching will not create equal opportunities, as we have often said. So the remaining tests in the Decathlon all revolve around the quality (implying issues of language, choice, parental involvement, governance and structure) of education.

A fundamental issue, which is difficult to “organize”, let alone “legislate”, is the level of aspiration of learners and their families and the aspiration of teachers. Aspiration remains crucial. So, in my interpretation, Vandenberghe’s story may signal a warning to us, Flemish people. If, historically, the remarkable surge in educational achievement was the result of a drive for emancipation of a community that considered itself at a disadvantage but aspired for a “new frontier”, complacency with our current situation may be the biggest danger we face. Complacency may turn advantage slowly into disadvantage. Also for that reason, it was necessary – and still is necessary – to call for a real Decathlon in Flemish education.