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Elien Sneyers, Jan Vanhoof & Paul Mahieu

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The Impact of Primary School Teachers' Expectations of Pupils, Parents and Teachers on Teacher Track Recommendations

Elien Sneyers 

University of Antwerp

Jan Vanhoof

University of Antwerp

Paul Mahieu

University of Antwerp

To advance the understanding about primary school teachers' allocation process of pupils during the transition to secondary education, this study aims to investigate the influencing teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations. Using a qualitative research design consisting of an inductive approach, interview data were gathered from 15 Flemish sixth-grade teachers. The results indicate that foremost teacher expectations of pupils, more specifically of pupils' perceived motivation or interests and learning attitude, were considered by teachers as influencing their track recommendations. Although empirical evidence was also found for the impact of expectations held by teachers about pupils' parents and about themselves as teachers, as well as about teaching, teachers' awareness of the impact of one's own expectations was limited.

INTRODUCTION

Children are confronted with different turning points in their educational careers, of which the transition to secondary education is a crucial changeover (Terwel, 2006). In alignment with the worldwide tracked nature of educational systems (cf. streaming, stratification, ability grouping or other forms of educational differentiation), pupils are sorted into different groups, classes, and schools during this transition (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). Given the profound impact of pupils' early educational choices on their academic trajectories and future educational and occupational

opportunities (Belfi, Goos, De Fraine, & Van Damme, 2012; Dockx, De Fraine, & Stevens, 2016; Levin, 2009; van Rooijen, Korpershoek, Vugteveen, & Opendakker, 2017), the importance of primary school teachers' allocation process of pupils and teachers' decision-making, in this regard, is highlighted.

This particularly applies to less meritocratic educational systems (e.g., Germany and France), in which pupils are commonly allocated based on teacher track recommendations (Eurydice, 2011; Gorard & Smith, 2004). These recommendations—whether legally binding or not—can be considered as the expressions of teacher expectations of pupils' (future) abilities and potential (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013), which are traditionally discussed with parents during formal teacher-parent conferences at the end of primary education (Alasuutari & Markstrom, 2011; Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Koffhoff, 2015; Lemmer, 2012; Sneyers, Vanhoof, & Mahieu, 2017). Hence, contrary to meritocratic educational systems (e.g., the United States and Great Britain), in which pupils' allocation is exclusively based on their previous performance on a standardized performance assessment, less meritocratic educational systems are more loosely organized and teacher-led. In some of these educational systems (e.g., the Netherlands), teacher track recommendations are still combined with the results of a standardized performance assessment. In others, such as Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, parents can only formally rely on the teacher's track recommendation due to a lack of a binding, nationwide standardized performance assessment at the end of primary education (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013; Penninckx, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2011). Clearly, especially in less meritocratic educational systems, including the highly liberal educational system of Flanders, teacher expectations of pupils' (future) abilities and potential, as embodied in their track recommendations, are essential for allocation. Moreover, as stated by Elbers and de Haan (2014) and Weininger and Lareau (2003), within the context of institutionalized teacher-parent conferences, in which the rules and conditions have been prescribed by the schools, teachers occupy a superior and authoritarian position in relation to parents, of which the legitimacy is less questioned by parents with a low socioeconomic background (SES) status, compared to their counterparts. As such, teacher track recommendations are not only important, but also very powerful.

Knowing this, one might wonder exactly what information, perceptions, or personal impressions of teachers shape their expectations of pupils' aptitude for educational pathways in secondary education and, subsequently, form the basis of their track recommendations. Nevertheless, despite the acknowledged importance of teacher expectations in view of allocation, a lack of knowledge on this topic still exists. In the past, research into the consequences of allocation (more specifically of tracking) has been at the forefront, rather than the processes and mechanisms of allocation (i.e., how teachers form their track recommendations; Van Houtte, 2011). Furthermore, past research that did deal with the processes and mechanisms of allocation, mainly within the field of teacher expectancy research, is traditionally rather restricted to a single focus on (the impact of) teacher expectations of pupils. In the Pygmalion study as the pioneering work, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) were the first to identify the impact of teacher expectations of pupils' intellectual abilities (i.e., cognitive attributes) on the assessment and, in turn, allocation by teachers (i.e., the Pygmalion or self-fulfilling prophecy effect; Jussim, 2017; Jussim & Harber, 2005). However, as stated by Farkas (2003) and

Farrington et al. (2012), just as important are pupils' noncognitive attributes in shaping teacher expectations of pupils' (future) abilities and potential. Also, in their study, Boone and Van Houtte (2013) concluded that teachers especially take into account pupils' noncognitive attributes that are considered to be important for school success, when recommending an educational track. Nonetheless, as argued more recently by Timmermans, de Boer, and Van der Werf (2016), still little is known about attributes other than pupils' cognitive attributes that may shape teacher expectations and subsequent teacher track recommendations. Additionally, Boone and Van Houtte (2013) found that teachers assess pupils differently according to parents' SES, because these noncognitive pupil attributes, such as the ability to plan, are considered to be unequally distributed across social classes (cf. the cultural reproduction theory of Bourdieu; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). As a matter of fact, research in various countries has demonstrated the socially biased nature of both teacher expectations and subsequent teacher track recommendations, in which the impact of parents' social background is emphasized (Ditton & Krusken, 2006; Duru-Bellat, 2015; Ready & Wright, 2011; Timmermans, Kuyper, & van der Werf, 2015; Tobisch & Dresel, 2017).

Thus, in line with the findings of teacher thinking research and teacher expectancy research, as discussed in the following (see THEORETICAL BACKGROUND section), these results indicate the necessity to address the contextual nature of teacher expectations, in which not only the impact of pupil attributes needs to be considered. In the context of allocation, logically, alongside the pupils themselves, these social influences lie within their parents and teachers. Indeed, given the fairly young age of children at the time of transition to secondary education, teachers and parents are jointly and actively involved in the educational decision-making process (Fallon & Bowles, 1998; Gorard, 1999). Moreover, they bear the final responsibility for the children's educational choices.

In summary, although past research already provided some insights into the interplay between teacher expectations and allocation by teachers, there are still many shortcomings. Therefore, by means of inductive reasoning, the aim of this study is to identify primary school teachers' expectations related to the key actors of allocation (i.e., pupils, parents and teachers) and their decisive attributes (i.e., characteristics, skills and abilities), that influence allocation (also referred to as influencing teacher expectations). First, we explore the broad range of influencing teacher expectations about pupils and parents. Next, we opt to identify the expectations held by teachers about themselves and about teaching that underlie the allocation process. Teacher track recommendations as an outcome of the allocation process are scrutinized, as is reflected in the following research questions: (a) What teacher expectations of pupils and parents do teachers identify as influencing their track recommendations? and (b) What expectations held by teachers about themselves and about teaching impact upon their track recommendations?

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF FLANDERS

Before we turn to the conceptual framework of (the impact of) teacher expectations, we start with an elaboration of the Flemish educational system. Children typically enroll in secondary

education by the age of 12, preceded by nursery education (theoretically 2.5- to 6-year-olds) and primary education (theoretically 6- to 12-year-olds). Afterward, students generally attend higher education, including professional education and academic education (theoretically 18- to 25-year-olds; Department of Education and Training, 2008). At the onset of secondary education, pupils' educational choices and, by extension, teacher recommendations encompass a specific educational track or study curriculum (i.e., a fixed set of different subjects). Due to the socio-religious compartmentalization of the Flemish educational system, secondary schools strongly vary in their pedagogical project and offered studies. As a result, school choice and study choice cannot be seen separately from one another. Furthermore, the Flemish educational system is characterized by freedom of school choice, indicating that pupils and parents can freely choose to enroll in the secondary school of their choice (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Related to this specific educational policy of freedom of school choice is the level of socioeconomic and ethnic school segregation, which is found to be exceptionally high in Belgium, compared to other Western countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

The specificity of the educational system under investigation is decisive for the different choice options in secondary education. Unlike primary education, in Flanders, secondary education is tracked. In this way, secondary education is divided into three grades (each of two years) characterized by increasing levels of differentiation (for an overview, see Pustjens, Van de Gaer, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2008). In the first grade of secondary education (i.e., theoretically 12- to 14-year-olds), pupils are recommended to enroll in either the A or B streams, which are considered to be broad and comprehensive. To prepare pupils for the more specific educational tracks in the second grade (i.e., theoretically 14- to 16-year-olds) and third grade (i.e., theoretically 16- to 18-year-olds) of secondary education, they are introduced to as many subjects as possible. The A stream proposes a common curriculum supplemented with optional courses (e.g., Latin, moderns sciences, technology and arts) to prepare pupils for an academic education. The B stream provides education for pupils who are considered to be less suitable for academic tuition and for those who did not obtain a primary education certificate (in case of unsuccessfully completing primary education) in preparation for vocational secondary education (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

The optional courses can be considered as forerunners for the different educational tracks in the second and third grade, more specifically general secondary education (GSE; broad curriculum), technical secondary education (TSE; technical subjects), artistic secondary education (ASE; art practices), and vocational secondary education (VSE; vocational-oriented), as well as for the different study fields within each educational track (e.g., economics-mathematics within GSE). The educational tracks, as well as the preceding optional courses, are commonly valued differently. Compared to TSE and ASE, which occupy an intermediate position, a relatively higher status is associated with GSE and a relatively lower status with VSE. Pupils attending GSE are more likely to attend higher education and enter high-status occupations. Theoretically, it is possible to switch backward and forward between the different educational tracks. In practice, however, pupils mostly "fall back" from GSE to TSE or ASE to VSE, resulting in a cascade system (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To investigate the information upon which teacher track recommendations are based, we address teachers' cognitive thought processes. Indeed, since the 1980s, researchers' interests have shifted from solely teacher behavior and its effects to teacher thinking (Ashton, 2015; Fang, 1996). Influenced by the developments in cognitive psychology, this paradigm shift was grounded in the growing understanding of how human action is affected by one's cognitions (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Despite the lack of clear definitions, in which concepts such as cognitions, expectations, perceptions, judgements, and beliefs are inconsistently used, numerous researchers agree on the role of teacher cognitions as filters that shape the interpretation of information, frameworks for decision-making and guides for action (Fives & Buehl, 2012). In line with teacher expectancy research, we employ the term *teacher expectations* to refer to the outcomes of teachers' cognitive thought processes or decision-making regarding pupils' enrollment in secondary education.

Within this research tradition, teacher expectations are defined as the inferences made by teachers about pupils' (future) abilities and potential, based on teachers' knowledge base about their pupils (Good, 1987). As stated by Tobisch and Dresel (2017), some parts of these expectations are shaped by actually observable attributes of pupils; other, more hidden, parts are estimated by teachers based on, for instance, their personal experiences and personal systems of knowledge and beliefs. These findings are in line with Kelchtermans' personal interpretative framework (1993, 2009), in which two strongly interwoven sets of cognitions or expectations of teachers are distinguished, that affect teachers' professional behavior. As such, teachers have certain conceptions of themselves as teachers, that is, a professional self-understanding (e.g., one's self-image, self-esteem, and job motivation), as well as personal systems of knowledge and beliefs about teaching and education, that is, a subjective educational theory (e.g., teachers' professional know-how in terms of experiential knowledge about pupils and their parents).

Despite their contextualized nature, generally speaking, prior research into teacher expectations has paid only little attention to the social influences of these expectations. Nevertheless, as stated by Fang (1996) and Fives and Buehl (2012), teacher expectations are modified by, and resulting from, interactions with the context in which teachers operate. Earlier, Bandura (1986) also acknowledged the socially situated nature of human functioning. According to his social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which is a framework for understanding human functioning, humans do not operate as autonomous agents. Instead, human functioning can be considered to be a product of a triadic, reciprocal interaction between cognition or other intrapersonal determinants, behavior and environmental influences. Logically, the same holds for teachers and how they operate within their profession. To sum up, Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) recognizes the interplay between teacher cognitions (e.g., teacher expectations) and teacher behavior, and the impact of social influences on this interplay. In acknowledgement of the strong involvement of teachers, pupils and parents in the allocation process, we can assume an impact of teacher expectations related to the attributes of these three key actors on allocation. Similar conclusions were drawn by research into assessment and allocation by teachers. As such, the multilevel model of Fulmer, Lee, and Tan (2015)

pointed out distinguishable levels of contextual factors affecting teachers' assessment and, in turn, allocation practices. These contextual factors encompass, among others, influences in the immediate context of the classroom (i.e., the micro-level), including individual factors of teachers and pupils, as well as social factors related to teacher-pupil interactions, and influences outside of the classroom but with a direct impact upon the classroom (i.e., the meso-level), such as parental influences.

By way of conclusion, teacher expectations can take many forms. Regardless of the forms they take, teacher expectations impact upon teaching. In acknowledgement of this association between teacher thinking and teacher behavior, we hypothesize that allocation by teachers, and more specifically teacher track recommendations, as outcomes of the allocation process (i.e., teacher behavior), are influenced by teacher expectations (i.e., teacher thinking). In line with the contextualized nature of both teacher expectations and teachers' assessment practices, we must consider the influencing expectations held by teachers about pupils, their parents, and the teachers themselves, as well as teaching.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Method

Face-to-face discussions are traditionally used to access respondents' thick descriptions of the research topic under investigation, enabling the researcher to examine situations, experiences, and meanings true to the respondents' eyes (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As argued by Cohen et al. (2011), these authentic, context-specific, and rich data are strongly in favor of the internal or theoretical validity and dependability (i.e., their notion of reliability in the specific context of qualitative research). As such, when studying allocation by teachers and teachers' cognitive thought processes or decision-making, in this regard, a qualitative research design is particularly suitable. More specifically, the influencing teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations were examined by means of 15 in-depth interviews with primary school teachers (i.e., sixth-grade teachers). The interviews were conducted in the period from May to June 2015 and generally lasted 1 hour to an hour and a half. As part of the Transbaso project, 11 primary schools in two Flemish cities (i.e., Antwerp and Ghent) were involved. As a reflection of today's multicultural society and the high level of socioeconomic and ethnic school segregation in Belgium, Flanders counts a large number of schools with a high incidence of low-SES and immigrant pupils. As such, the results of this study can be considered to be representative of the context of Flemish urban, high-multicultural schools.

As a key feature of purposive sampling (i.e., nonprobability sampling), the research units were chosen for a specific purpose based on specific selection criteria (Cohen et al., 2011). First, the selection of schools was based on their socioeconomic and ethnic composition. Information on this criterion was based on official information of the Flemish Department of Education and Training (2015). In accordance with the large amount of multicultural schools in Flanders, our goal was to address schools with a high social and cultural diversity. At the

same time, due to the inductive research approach of this study, we pursued a natural variation with respect to the pupils and their parents included. Therefore, we purposively selected three types of schools in terms of their incidence of low-SES and immigrant pupils. This resulted in a representation of 11 primary schools with a low (one school, three teachers), average (six schools, seven teachers) and high (four schools, five teachers) incidence of low-SES and immigrant pupils. Next, by means of voluntary response sampling, all sixth-grade teachers of the selected schools were asked to participate in the study, to access those who are responsible for, and have in-depth knowledge about, pupils' allocation to secondary education. Fifteen teachers were willing to participate. Moreover, empirical saturation was reached at that point (i.e., theoretical sampling; Cohen et al., 2011).

Data Collection

Similar to the interview guide approach, as one of the distinguished interview types by Patton (1980), we conducted semistructured interviews. Open-ended questions were used, in which the interviewee's response was minimally restricted (Cohen et al., 2011). Considering the research objective aiming at exploring or generating theories concerning the influencing teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations, three main interview topics were specified in advance in the form of an interview guideline, though the sequence and wording of the questions could be dealt flexibly. The choice for these main interview topics depended on the specific research questions of the present study: (a) What teacher expectations of pupils and parents do teachers identify as influencing their track recommendations? and (b) What expectations held by teachers about themselves and about teaching impact upon their track recommendations? In line with these research questions, our interview topics were: (a) teacher expectations of pupils (cf. Research Question 1), (b) teacher expectations of parents (cf. Research Question 1), and (c) teacher expectations about the teachers themselves and about teaching (cf. Research Question 2), and their experienced influence on the track recommendations of teachers.

Data Analysis

After obtaining the permission of the teachers, the in-depth interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by means of the verbatim principle. Based on the computer-based software program NVivo, the data were qualitatively analyzed through coding and content analysis. All of the information was encoded by using open coding to label and sort the information. In accordance with the inductive nature of the data collection, a basic coding scheme was used and adjusted with the creation of codes during the coding process itself. The codes were further refined and deepened using axial and selective coding, moving from specific to general theory building (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Cohen et al., 2011). Additionally, the data analysis was approached from an emic point of view. The data analysis was based on the conceptual framework of the teachers being researched, rather than on the conceptual framework of the researcher (i.e., etic approach), to be able to generate theories concerning the influencing

teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations (cf. inductive approach; Arthur, Waring, Coe, & Hedges, 2012). Although face-to-face interviews are interpersonal and, therefore, inevitably subject to bias, an emic data analysis approach benefits the internal validity and dependability of the gathered data. Furthermore, by giving the respondents the opportunity to check the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews and to add further information (i.e., respondent validation; Cohen et al., 2011), we consciously took measures to minimize validity threats.

RESULTS

To explore the broad range of primary school teachers' expectations that influence their track recommendations, the participating teachers were asked which attributes of pupils, their parents, and themselves as teachers, as well as the teaching practice, are taken into account when allocating pupils to secondary education and in what way. In line with the inductive nature of the data collection, the influencing attributes were questioned both spontaneously and explicitly. This resulted in an identification of crucial pupil, parental, and teacher attributes, as decisive factors of the teacher expectations related to these actors.

When the participating teachers were asked, "Which actors and/or factors do you think play an important role for your track recommendations?", pupil, parental, and teacher attributes were spontaneously mentioned, though not to the same extent. As one might expect, all of the teachers indicated that they especially consider pupil attributes when deciding on their track recommendations. In contrast, only one teacher spontaneously indicated that he or she considered his or her own attributes. Parental attributes were further found to be important by half of the teachers. In comparison with the findings, as described, different results were found when the participating teachers were explicitly asked to identify which pupil, parental, and teacher attributes are influencing their track recommendations. Table 1 describes the number of times each participating individual teacher expressed pupil, parental, and teacher attributes. Pupil attributes remained the most frequently mentioned (mentioned 56 times in total) and, also, parental attributes were considered by a substantial number of teachers (mentioned 20 times in total). Surprisingly, when looking at the teacher attributes, a different picture occurred. Teacher attributes were considerably more taken into account (mentioned 32 times in total), when questioning its influence on teacher track recommendations explicitly. Hence, we can conclude contradictions in findings concerning the influencing character of teacher attributes depending on the spontaneous versus explicit phrasing of the question. Consequently, the extent to which the teachers are aware of, or recognize, their own impact on pupils' allocation can be questioned.

When focusing on the specific nature of the influencing pupil, parental, and teacher attributes, seven different pupil attributes were distinguished by the teachers in view of their track recommendations, compared to five parental attributes and five teacher attributes. The attributes, which are discussed in the following three subsections, are shown in Table 2 and listed in order of their perceived importance, based on the number of times expressed by the teachers.

TABLE 1.
Number of Influencing Pupil, Parental and Teacher Attributes of Teacher Track Recommendations, as Expressed by Teachers

<i>Teachers^a</i>	<i>Pupil Attributes</i>	<i>Parental Attributes</i>	<i>Teacher Attributes</i>	<i>Total</i>
Lily	2	0	2	4
Daniel	5	2	4	11
Logan	4	3	2	9
Evelyn	4	1	2	7
Matthew	4	1	2	7
Jennifer	5	1	3	9
Vivian	3	0	2	5
Patricia	3	2	1	6
Gloria	4	1	2	7
Melanie	4	3	1	8
Sandra	4	1	1	6
Wesley	2	0	2	4
Kate	5	2	2	9
Kirsten	3	2	3	8
Jack	4	1	3	8
Total	56	20	32	108

Note. ^aWe used fictitious teacher names.

TABLE 2.
Identification of Influencing Pupil, Parental and Teacher Attributes of Teacher Track Recommendations and Number of Times Expressed by Teachers

<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Expression</i>
Pupil attributes	
Motivation or interests	13
Learning attitude	13
School achievements	11
Well-being	8
Talents or strengths	7
Intelligence	2
Maturity	2
Parental attributes	
Support of schoolwork	10
Parental involvement	5
Availability of resources	2
Expectations of the child's educational career	2
Family structure	1
Teacher attributes	
Educational beliefs	13
Personality beliefs	6
Experience with allocation	3
Relationships with pupils	3
Confidence and perceived role regarding allocation	2

Influencing Pupil Attributes

Both cognitive and noncognitive attributes of pupils were considered by the teachers in view of their track recommendations, of which the latter were considered to a slightly greater extent than the first-mentioned. Thirteen out of the 15 participating teachers indicated the influencing nature of pupils' motivation or interests for certain choice options of secondary education, referring to "the educational tracks that pupils prefer" (Jack, Teacher 15) and "what pupils want to be when they grow up" (Matthew, Teacher 5). The same is true for pupils' learning attitude, referring to, amongst other things, their effort and participation in the classroom and the extent to which they work independently. Furthermore, pupils' school achievements were mentioned by approximately a two-thirds majority of the teachers. Pupils' well-being and talents or strengths were taken into account by roughly half of the teachers, followed by a few teachers who indicated that they consider pupils' intelligence and degree of maturity. The following reaction of Matthew (Teacher 5) illustrates the perceived importance of several of the aforementioned attributes and the extent to which they are decisive for his track recommendations:

I put the school report [school achievements] at the top; that is the most important thing for me. Then, the interests of the pupils, what they like [motivation or interests], and, of course, also their talents, what are their strengths [talents or strengths], because pupils are not necessarily good at what they like. Also very important is the work attitude or how the child studies [learning attitude]. These are the most important aspects for me.

Also Daniel (Teacher 2) explained the perceived importance of pupils' motivation or interests for certain choice options of secondary education, as well as pupils' talents or strengths:

I think that, above all, two aspects are very important, more specifically what is a pupil good at [talents or strengths] and what does he or she like [motivation or interests]. Pupils should choose an educational track based on their strengths or their personal preferences, preferably based on both. If a pupil should have to choose either one, then I would prefer the latter.

Last, Kate (Teacher 13) commented on the importance of pupils' intelligence or cognitive abilities in view of her track recommendations regarding pupils' enrollment in secondary education:

One's intelligence [intelligence] is something else than one's school results [school achievements], something broader than only performances. Currently, I have a pupil in the classroom who is very worldly and open-minded. He can talk about everything. But there are also other pupils who are, for example, very practically oriented. That is also intelligence. I would recommend both pupils a different educational track, not because the one is more or less intelligent than the other, but because they are both intelligent in their own, different way.

With respect to the pupils' well-being, examples such as "pupils' position in a group: are they leaders, are they followers or are they outsiders?" (Evelyn, Teacher 4) and "a child will not succeed if he or she does not feel at home" (Kirsten, Teacher 14), illustrate the

emphasis the teachers laid on pupils' social functioning, self-image, and need for care support or guidance.

Influencing Parental Attributes

When deciding on track recommendations, a two-thirds majority of the teachers considered the extent to which parents support their children in their schoolwork at home. By this, the teachers referred to, for example, the supervision of schoolwork and offering help with studying. Patricia (Teacher 8), for instance, considers parental support in the light of her track recommendations:

In secondary education, pupils get a lot of homework and the subject matter becomes more difficult [compared to primary education]. I want to avoid advising, for instance, GSE [considered as the most demanding educational track in the second and third grade] to a pupil that has to work very hard and which I suspect that he or she will not get any support at home. However, if the pupil will get support, he or she is less likely to fail and to lose his or her interest in school.

Additionally, one-third of the teachers expressed the importance of parental involvement with respect to school and education. Compared to the support offered by parents, parental involvement was rather situated at the emotional or psychological level and encompassed more than just assistance with pupils' schoolwork. A minority of teachers further mentioned the extent to which parents can make important (financial and cultural) resources available for their child (e.g., access to the internet) and the specific family structure (i.e., searching for a compromise regarding track recommendations in case of divorced parents). The conversation with Logan (Teacher 3) illustrates the importance he attaches to the occurrence of financial resources and the involvement of pupils' parents:

How is the financial situation at home? When pupils make the transition to secondary education, they will need a computer when doing their homework and for that, you need access to the internet. Can parents realize that financially and can they handle money wisely [resources]? But also, do the children get support from their parents and can they talk to their parents? What I find very important is whether parents are interested in what happens at school [parental involvement].

Furthermore, a minority of teachers expressed their perceived importance of parental expectations concerning their children's educational career. As such, the teachers indicated a connection with parents' sociocultural background, which they strongly emphasized. Particularly, immigrant parents have high and often unrealistic expectations, as experienced by the teachers. Specific beliefs about how the future of their child should look and preconceptions regarding the Flemish educational system, in which certain track options of secondary education are more valued than others, were held responsible for this. It further appears that the child's cognitive school results were highly valued by immigrant parents, as the basis on which they make educational choices with respect to secondary education (and thus without

or insufficiently taking into account the child's preferences). The following example of Melanie (Teacher 10) illustrates her experiences, in this respect:

Most of the time, my track recommendation corresponds with the choice of the child's parents. But there are still a lot of parents, especially immigrant parents, who have very high expectations and who do not always have a realistic view of the school results and the qualities of their child. They then want to aim too high [referring to choosing one of the most demanding educational tracks in secondary education], resulting in an unhappy child. ... One of my pupils is not going to obtain his primary education certificate at the end of the school year. If I had known in advance that his parents would make a wise choice [regarding enrollment in secondary education], I would have let him graduate. But I know that his parents prefer a secondary school that is unrealistic for him, so I have decided to force him into the B`stream [one of the oriented streams within the first grade of secondary education for those pupils who did not obtain their primary education certificate].

Next to the teachers who considered parents' expectations concerning their child's educational career in relation to sociocultural background, four other teachers expressed similar experiences. They also acknowledged the importance of this parental attribute, however, they did so without allowing it to be of any influence for their track recommendations. Irrespective of the fact that the teachers did, or did not, experience an impact of parents' sociocultural background on pupils' allocation, it was much debated. Wesley (Teacher 12), for instance, underlined that he is, in a sense, powerless in comparison to immigrant parents and the educational choices they make:

There is a large difference between immigrant parents and native parents. I have certain immigrant parents in mind who refuse to send their son to a technical secondary school [referring to the study offer of mainly TSE and/or VSE] because they believe that a general secondary school [referring to the study offer of mainly GSE] is superior. I, however, do not consider parents' and pupils' sociocultural background in view of my track recommendations. I simply want the best for my pupils, but some immigrant parents have a different opinion than mine and there is nothing that I can do in order to change this.

Influencing Teacher Attributes

Both expectations related to the teachers themselves (cf. a teacher's professional self-understanding) and to teaching or education in general (cf. a teacher's subjective educational theory) were found to influence teacher track recommendations. As such, the majority of teachers reported various educational expectations. Two main groups could be distinguished in this respect: (a) expectations concerning the Flemish educational system and its specific structure and (b) expectations concerning the compatibility between pupil attributes and their educational choices. Looking at the first group, Matthew (Teacher 5) demonstrated that "I try to pass on to my pupils that every track option is equally good and that it does not matter what you choose, as long as it is something you are comfortable with." In addition to the equality of the different track options of secondary education in the Flemish

educational system, the changeable and nonpredictive nature of the initial track choice of pupils was also emphasized. Wesley (Teacher 12), for example, stated that, “I say to my pupils that they will not be attached to the track choice made at the start of secondary education. Look at me; six years of TSE followed by something completely different in higher education.” In line with the previous findings regarding the influencing pupil attributes of teacher track recommendations, the teachers of the second group believed that pupils’ track choices of secondary education need to be compatible with certain pupil attributes. Next to pupils’ motivation or interests and learning attitudes, “pupils should definitely employ their strengths [talents or strengths], when deciding on a track choice,” as illustrated by Jack (Teacher 15).

Approximately one-third of the teachers also reported a perceived influence of their personalities on teacher track recommendations. Examples, such as the impact of a very positive approach to life on the attached importance to pupils’ self-confidence and self-image, were mentioned. Also Jennifer (Teacher 6) explained the perceived impact of a very performance-oriented attitude on pupils’ global self-fulfillment:

As a child, I was very performance-oriented. Even now, I still push my pupils to achieve their potential. The choice for a specific educational track in secondary education may not be a “lazy” choice. I have already learned that a child can perform at different levels and that the best track choice is not always the most intelligent or demanding one. A child can also stand out in a different way. But it is still true that I want to help my pupils to become the best possible version of themselves. This inevitably has an impact on how I allocate my pupils.

In addition, Lily (Teacher 1) talked about the importance she attaches to the pupils’ well-being as a result of her being very empathetic:

I strongly pay attention to the children’s well-being and where they are going to feel at home. I think that is just a part of who I am, that I very much try to empathize with the children and focus on the care of pupils. Pupils, for example, who think studying is horrible ... you cannot advise them to enroll in Latin [an optional course of the A stream in the first grade that can be considered as forerunner for GSE from the second grade]. I do think I allow such feelings to take part in the allocation of pupils.

Lastly, some teachers stated that their experience with pupils’ allocation and the extent to which they feel confident to allocate (e.g., feeling very confident in deciding on track recommendations and also defending it with great vigor toward parents) are important issues in view of teacher track recommendations. The same was true for teachers’ relationships with pupils. The teachers pointed to certain aspects of these relationships that exert an influence on the extent to which they earn pupils’ respect and really get to know them, which is, in turn, important to be able to allocate pupils in a good way. Examples, such as “an open and friendly atmosphere, in which pupils experience no obstacles to ask me things or to tell me things” (Vivian, Teacher 7) and “pupils who know the real me and vice versa” (Kirsten, Teacher 14), were mentioned, in this respect.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the crucial role of teachers' individual decision-making regarding pupils' enrollment in secondary education, a contribution to the inquiry into the processes and mechanisms of allocation was made by addressing the influencing teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations. Given the lack of knowledge on this research topic, an inductive approach was used to explore the broad range of influencing expectations held by teachers about pupils and their parents (cf. Research Question 1), and about the teachers themselves, as well as about teaching (cf. Research Question 2). This resulted in an identification of decisive pupil, parental, and teacher attributes that influence teacher track recommendations.

With regard to the first research question and consistent with the traditional focus in teacher expectancy research on pupil attributes (i.e., cognitive abilities; Jussim, 2017; Jussim & Harber 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), our first conclusion is that the teachers, above all, take attributes of pupils into consideration, when deciding on a track recommendation. As such, pupils' perceived motivation or interests for educational choice options of secondary education and their perceived learning attitude are found to be the most decisive, followed by their school achievements. Thus, in line with the findings of Farkas (2003), Farrington et al. (2012), and Boone and Van Houtte (2013), teachers consider noncognitive pupil attributes to be slightly more influential in comparison to cognitive attributes. As such, following the plea of Timmermans et al. (2016) for more insight into the impact of pupils' perceived noncognitive attributes, this study makes a valuable contribution to the evidence base of teacher expectations of pupils' noncognitive attributes that influence teacher track recommendations. Second, we conclude that, alongside pupil attributes, the teachers also consider parental attributes, particularly in terms of perceived parental support, when deciding on track recommendations.

Hence, in line with the contextual nature of both teacher expectations (Bandura, 1986; Fang, 1996; Fives & Buehl, 2012) and teachers' assessment of pupils (Fulmer et al., 2015), our results indicate that teacher expectations other than that of the pupils (at the micro-level) also exert an influence on teacher track recommendations. These results are particularly innovative, as they provide exploratory evidence for the impact of parental attributes (at the meso-level) and, in response to the second research question, teacher attributes (at the micro-level), on top of pupil attributes, which enlarges our current vision and knowledge base about the research topic under investigation. In accordance to the distinguished teacher expectations by Kelchtermans (1993, 2009), the teachers of this study express the importance of attributes related to themselves (cf. a professional self-understanding; predominantly in terms of their perceived personality), as well as to teaching in general (cf. a subjective educational theory; e.g., in terms of the specific structure of the Flemish educational system) in view of their track recommendations.

However, questions can be raised about the extent to which the teachers are aware of, or recognize, the influence they can exert on allocation, given that the importance of their own attributes only becomes apparent when explicitly questioning this issue. The same is true for the influence that teacher expectations of parents can exert on teacher track recommendations (referring to the teachers' negative experiences with respect to [immigrant] parents'

expectations of their children's educational career and whether or not they allow it to influence their track recommendations). In line with Boone and Van Houtte (2013) stating that the impact of parents' SES is rather indirect, the teachers might unconsciously consider parents' SES through their expectations of pupils' noncognitive attributes, such as the learning attitude. Furthermore, despite teachers' positions of great power in education (Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Weininger & Lareau, 2003), the teachers of this study rather experience feelings of powerlessness with respect to (immigrant) parents—presumably associated with the nonbinding character of teacher track recommendations in Flanders—which might also play a role in the teachers' perceived interplay between parents' SES and teacher track recommendations.

Considering the profound impact of tracking on pupils' (future) educational and occupational trajectories (Belfi et al., 2012; Dockx et al., 2016; Levin, 2009; van Rooijen et al., 2017), it is very important for (student) teachers to become (more) aware of the ways in which they allocate pupils and the ways in which their track recommendations are shaped (in terms of the influencing teacher expectations), especially in less meritocratic and tracked educational systems, such as Flanders. Indeed, our results emphasize the subjective nature of teachers' decision-making of track recommendations regarding pupils' enrollment in secondary education, in which personal expectations held by teachers about pupils, their parents and the teachers themselves as well as teaching are found to be of significant importance, as perceived by the teachers. Important opportunities for future research can be found in these policy-related implications. To fully understand the influencing teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations, further research is needed that goes beyond the exploratory. First, in acknowledgement of the perceived influence of teacher expectations in view of teacher track recommendations and after having identified the influencing teacher expectations, the question arises as to what extent teacher expectations impact upon teacher track recommendations and in what way. Due to the qualitative, exploratory scale of this study, we were not able to investigate these interrelationships in more detail. Examining this topic on a larger quantitative, explanatory scale would add value to our current knowledge base about allocation and tracking. In studying the interplay between teacher expectations and teacher track recommendations, future research should ideally integrate the traditional single approach of teacher expectations of pupils with a contextual approach, in which attributes other than that of the pupils are also included. Additionally, with respect to the latter, there is an urgent need for more in-depth research addressing the identification of influencing teacher expectations about the teachers themselves, as well as about teaching and about parents, given that teachers' awareness of its influence in view of allocation is found to be limited. Nevertheless, in today's multicultural society, in which phenomena like educational inequality manifest itself, it is crucial that teachers are aware of the possible influence of family background characteristics on allocation. Following Fives and Buehl (2012), who stated that only teachers' explicit expectations (i.e., expectations of which the teachers are conscious) can be grasped through reflective practices such as in-depth interviews, special attention should be given to unraveling teachers' implicit expectations (i.e., expectations of which the teachers are unaware), perhaps through real-life observations.

Second, our results indicate that the influencing pupil, parental, and teacher attributes of teacher track recommendations are marked by a large heterogeneity with respect to each

individual teacher (referring to the number of attributes expressed), but also between the various participating teachers (referring to the content of the attributes). This heterogeneity between the participating teachers of different schools raises the question as to whether allocation is, in fact, a process shaped by the individual teacher and/or by the school (policy). Consequently, we also need research that investigates the influencing teacher expectations of teacher track recommendations within the school context, transcending the individual teacher level.

Notwithstanding the unique strength of in-depth interviews as a method to access very authentic and thick descriptions of the subjects under investigation, this method of data collection is not without its critics (Cohen et al., 2011). One risk of bias that needs to be considered is the researcher's presence and active involvement during the in-depth interviews and its possible impact upon what is taking place during the conversations. In this way, one might wonder to what extent the teachers interviewed may have changed their communication and/or behavior, for instance in terms of socially desirable responding. Although this type of bias is inevitable in qualitative research, we consciously took several appropriate measures to, to the best of our ability, overcome ethical risks. First, the teachers included in this study voluntarily choose to take part after being informed about the nature of this study and after being explicitly explained that an anonymous processing of the data is guaranteed. Additionally, the in-depth interviews took place in the natural environments of the teachers, that is, the primary schools and the teachers' own classrooms. This means that the teachers operated in their familiar environments, which makes them less susceptible to influences exerted by the researcher, at the very least with respect to the context in which the in-depth interviews took place.

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ORCID

Elien Sneyers  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4315-8695>

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