

# Pupils' transition to secondary education: An exploratory study of teachers' recommendations discussed at teacher-parent conferences

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## Abstract

Educational systems worldwide are characterised by a great diversity in teachers' allocation practices of pupils at transitory moments. In the highly liberal educational system of Flanders, the crucial role of teachers' decision-making processes and recommendations to parents, as discussed at teacher-parent conferences, is highlighted. The present study aims to investigate: (1) how teachers communicate their recommendations at these conferences in the form of its content, and (2) the perceptions held by teachers that form the basis of their recommendations, as expressed by the teachers at these conferences. Using a qualitative research design consisting of an inductive approach, observational data was gathered from 36 teacher-parent conferences. The results indicate highly differentiated recommendations accentuating teachers' study choice recommendations and generally including short-term secondary study choice options. Although enrolment in the A- or B-stream is the first study choice option at the onset of secondary education, overall, the teachers did not include this option in their study choice recommendations. The school choice and study choice recommendations were predominantly based on teachers' perceptions about school characteristics (i.e. pupils' perceived opportunity to complete their school career in the school of their choice) and pupils' attributes (i.e. pupils' perceived school achievements) respectively.

**Keywords:** transition secondary education, educational recommendations, teacher-parent conferences, observation method, teachers' perceptions

## 1 Introduction

Children are confronted with different turning points in their educational careers. Educational systems worldwide show a great diversity in how pupils are allocated to educational pathways at their transition to secondary education (for a review, see Ireson & Hallam, 2001; LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). In meritocratic educational systems, such as the United States and Great Britain, allocation is based on pupils' performances in standardised tests. In contrast, less meritocratic educational systems (e.g. Germany and France) are more loosely organised and teacher-led, highlighting the importance of teachers' recommendations to parents regarding pupils' enrolment in secondary education (e.g. Eurydice, 2011; Gorard & Smith, 2004). In some of these educational systems, such as the Netherlands, teachers' recommendations are combined with the results of standardised tests. In others, such as Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium), parents can only formally rely on the teacher's recommendation due to a lack of standardised tests. Moreover, educational systems vary in the extent to which the recommendations are legally binding (e.g. Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b). In sum, less meritocratic educational systems are very open to individual decision-making, emphasising the essential role of teachers' thought processes, which are also referred to as teachers' perceptions or personal impressions. As a result, we can assume a large heterogeneity regarding the allocation practice in general, and teachers' recommendations in particular. For that reason it is important to gain insights into how teachers handle these challenges and how allocation precisely occurs.

This certainly applies to the highly decentralised and liberal Flemish educational system, in which pupils are allocated to

secondary education on the basis of teachers' perceptions of pupils' academic abilities and potential, as expressed in the teacher's recommendation (e.g. Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Penninckx, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2011). Although these recommendations are not legally binding, in Flanders teachers' perceptions of pupils are clearly essential. For many decades, researchers agree on the determining role of teachers' perceptions for behaviour and classroom practices (for a review, see Ashton, 2015; Fang, 1996). Indeed, since Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) Pygmalion study, which can be seen as the starting point of the long tradition of teachers' expectancy research, we know that teachers' expectations of pupils may shape subsequent teachers' behaviour and pupils' academic performances (i.e. the self-fulfilling prophecy effect of teachers' expectations) and, in turn, teachers' allocation of pupils (Brophy & Good, 1970; Rosenthal, 2002). Knowing this, one might wonder exactly what perceptions of pupils shape teachers' expectations of pupils' aptitude for specific educational pathways and which subsequently form the basis of their recommendations.

Unfortunately, despite the acknowledged importance of teachers' recommendations and perceptions for allocation, a lack of knowledge on this topic still exists. In the past, mainly within the field of educational differentiation or tracking, research into the consequences of allocation rather than the processes of allocation has been at the forefront. As such, the profound impact of early educational choices on pupils' (future) educational and occupational outcomes has been demonstrated (e.g. Belfi, Goos, De Fraine, & Van Damme, 2012; Dockx, De Frahm, & Stevens, 2016; Levin, 2009; Van Houtte, 2004; Van Rooijen, Korpershoek, Vugteveen, & Opendakker, 2017). Moreover, little research has specifically inquired into the allocation practice within the specific interplay between teachers and parents. In doing so, the unique character of the current study becomes apparent. Given the fairly young age of children at the time of transition to secondary education in Flanders (when pupils are aged 12), teachers and parents are jointly and actively involved in making

educational choices regarding secondary education of their children (e.g. Fallon & Bowles, 1998; Gorard, 1999). Parents' engagement is also reflected in the usual way in which the transition to secondary education is discussed, more specifically at formal teacher-parent conferences at the end of primary education (e.g. Alasuutari & Markstrom, 2011; Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Kotthoff, 2015; Lemmer, 2012). Parents' engagement can be seen as a logical consequence of their participation in their children's overall development, referring to the extent of parental involvement in education, which strongly impacts upon children's school success (e.g. Castro et al., 2015; Epstein, 1987). However, social and cultural class differences are noticeable with respect to parental involvement (e.g. Driessen, Smit, & Slegers, 2005; Fleischman & De Haas, 2016; Kim, 2009), for which explanations are commonly sought in parents' social and cultural capital (cf. the cultural reproduction theory and the social capital theory; for an overview, see Boone & Van Houtte, 2013a). Within the context of teacher-parent conferences, research has shown, for instance, that there are more disagreements between teachers and parents with a low socioeconomic status background (SES) as well as migrant parents regarding teachers' recommendations (e.g. Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Hence, given that both teachers and parents are the key actors of the allocation practice, the importance of studying teachers' allocation in interaction with parents is pointed out. Moreover, considering both the impact of parental involvement on children's school success and the possible impact of social and cultural class differences with respect to parental involvement at teacher-parent conferences, one might wonder whether, alongside teachers' perceptions of pupils, other perceptions such as those of parents influence the recommendations.

To sum up, little is known about teachers' allocation practices, that is, how allocation exactly occurs and how teachers communicate their recommendations to parents. Also, little is known about the mechanisms by which allocation occurs, that is, how teachers form

their recommendations or upon which perceptions held by teachers the recommendations are based. However, warranted in view of the consequences of teachers' expectations and tracking, as discussed above, inquiry of this kind is needed. Furthermore, in acknowledgement of the strong involvement of parents in allocation, we believe that the most prominent approach to studying teachers' allocation is within the context of teacher-parent conferences. Therefore, during formal teacher-parent conferences in Flanders at the time of transition to secondary education, the present study addresses the following two research questions:

1. How do teachers communicate their recommendations at teacher-parent conferences in the form of its content?
2. What perceptions held by teachers form the basis of their recommendations, as expressed by teachers at teacher-parent conferences?

Teachers' recommendations, as an outcome of the allocation process, are scrutinized. With respect to the first research question, we focus on the extent of heterogeneity regarding the recommendations. In this way, we are interested in which elements related to the content of the recommendations are distinguished (e.g. whether a distinction is made between secondary study choice and school choice options), while discussing the recommendations with parents. Based on the second research question, we investigate how teachers explain or argue their recommendations to parents at teacher-parent conferences, in which we intend to explore the broad range of teachers' perceptions that influence the recommendations. In this manner, the strong inductive nature of this study is emphasised.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Teachers' recommendations at the transition to secondary education in Flanders

In Flanders, children typically enrol in secondary education by the age of 12,

preceded by nursery education (theoretically 2.5 to 6 years) and primary education (theoretically 6 to 12 years). Afterwards, students generally attend tertiary education, including professional and academic education (theoretically 18 to 25 years). Besides mainstream education, there also exists special needs (nursery, primary and secondary) education, which is organised for children who need temporary or permanent special help because of a disability or severe learning problems. At the onset of secondary education, pupils' and parents' educational choices and, by extension, primary school teachers' recommendations encompass a specific study curriculum (i.e. a fixed set of different subjects) as well as a secondary school (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

#### *Study choice recommendations*

The specificity of the educational system under investigation is decisive for the different study 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) characterised by increasing levels of differentiation (for an overview, see Pustjens, Van de Gaer, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2008). In the first grade, pupils are recommended to enrol in the A- or B-stream, which are considered to be broad and comprehensive. In order to prepare pupils for the more specific study choice options in the second and third grade, they are introduced to as many subjects as possible. The A-stream proposes a common curriculum supplemented with optional courses 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).

Within the A-stream, pupils can be recommended to choose specific optional

courses. Schools themselves determine how to fill up these optional courses, mainly in terms of extra courses of classical languages not included in the common curriculum (e.g. Latin), extra theoretical courses (e.g. modern sciences) or extra courses of technology and expression (e.g. arts). The optional courses can be considered as forerunners for the different 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 track (e.g. economics-mathematics within GSE). The 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 tertiary education and enter 'high' status occupations. Theoretically, it is possible to switch backwards and forwards between the different tracks. In practice, however, pupils mostly 'fall back' from GSE to TSE or ASE to VSE, resulting in a cascade system. Because of a large variation in the tracks and study fields offered by secondary schools, pupils may be required to move to another school after the first grade(s) of secondary education (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

#### *School choice recommendations*

The Flemish educational system is characterised by freedom of school choice, indicating that pupils and parents can freely choose to enrol in the secondary school of their choice (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Related to the 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, 2016).

When choosing a secondary school, various choice motives can be weighted against each other. International research on school choice stresses a model of three motives (Gorard, 1999), which was also found to be applicable to the Flemish educational system (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; Creten, Douterlungne, Verhaeghe, & De Vos, 2000). More specifically, the perceived quality of education in schools (determined by, for example, the schools' image), schools' philosophies and geographical accessibility are priorities in pupils' and parents' school choice. Likewise, the schools' study offers are of great interest, since pupils' interests and personal educational goals in the longer term need to be satisfied by their school choice. Indeed, due to the socio-religious compartmentalisation of the Flemish educational system, secondary schools vary greatly in their pedagogical project and offered studies. As a result, school choice and study choice cannot be seen separately from one another (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Moreover, the majority of pupils and parents simultaneously choose a school as well as a specific study curriculum (Boone & Van Houtte, 2010; Creten et al., 2000). Although past research has already provided some insights into the choice motives of pupils and parents, far less is known about what teachers perceive as important when recommending a secondary school.

## **2.2 The impact of teachers' perceptions on allocation**

In order to investigate how allocation by teachers occurs and upon which perceptions their recommendations are based, we need to address teachers' thought processes. Indeed, since the 1980s, researchers' interests have shifted from solely teachers' behaviour and its effects (i.e. the relationship between teachers' classroom behaviour and pupils' classroom behaviour and achievements) to teachers' thinking (for a review, see Ashton, 2015; Fang, 1996). Influenced by 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 the literature, in which terms such as perceptions, cognitions and beliefs are inconsistently used, numerous researchers agree on the role of teachers' perceptions as filters that shape the interpretation of information, frameworks for decision-making and guides for action (for a review, see Fives & Buehl, 2012). In accordance with the acknowledged association between teachers' perceptions and behaviour and classroom practices, we hypothesise that the allocation practice, and more specifically teachers' recommendations as an outcome of this practice, are influenced by teachers' perceptions.

Following the long tradition of expectancy research (for a review, see Jussim & Harber, 2005), we hypothesise the crucial role of teachers' perceptions of pupils and their cognitive attributes for teachers' recommendations. In their Pygmalion study, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) were the first to identify the impact of teachers' expectations of pupils' intellectual abilities on teachers' subsequent assessments. However, as stated by Farkas (2003) and Farrington et al. (2012), just as important are teachers' perceptions of pupils' non-cognitive attributes. In their exploratory study on allocation by Flemish teachers, for instance, Boone and Van Houtte (2013b) stated that teachers take into account pupils' non-cognitive characteristics that are important for school success such as the ability to plan when allocating pupils. Hence, we further hypothesise the crucial role of teachers' perceptions of pupils' non-cognitive attributes for teachers' recommendations. Nonetheless, as argued more recently by Timmermans, de Boer and Van der Werf (2016), little is known about perceptions other than that of pupils' cognitive attributes that may shape teachers' expectations and, subsequently, teachers' allocation.

Moreover, in line with the contextual nature of teachers' perceptions, we can assume that perceptions other than those of the pupils are also important for teachers' recommendations. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which is a

framework for understanding human functioning, humans do not operate as autonomous agents. Human functioning is socially situated and can be considered to be a product of a triadic, reciprocal interaction between intrapersonal, behavioural and environmental determinants. Logically, the same holds for teachers and how they operate within their profession. As stated by Fives and Buehl (2012), teachers' perceptions are modified by and result from interactions with the context in which teachers operate, indicating the contextualised nature of teachers' perceptions. Earlier Fang (1996) also acknowledged that teachers' perceptions are shaped by many factors such as social influences. At the same time, Fulmer, Lee and Tan (2015) pointed out distinguishable levels of contextual factors affecting teachers' assessment and allocation practices. These contextual factors encompass influences in the immediate context of the classroom (micro-level: e.g. individual factors of pupils), influences outside of the classroom but with a direct impact upon the classroom (meso-level: e.g. individual factors of parents), and broad influences that only indirectly impact upon the classroom (macro-level: e.g. national educational policies). In sum, in line with the contextual nature of both teachers' perceptions and assessment practices, we intend to explore the broad range of factors influencing teachers' perceptions at the micro-, meso- and macro-level, including teachers' perceptions of pupils and parents.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

Between February and June 2015, we conducted 36 observations of teacher-parent conferences in the final school year of primary education, indicating a qualitative research design. Each conference lasted about 15 minutes. Both the teacher and (one of) the parents were present at the conferences (both parents attended 13/36 conferences and only one parent, mostly the mother, attended 23/36 conferences), and in only one case also

Table 1  
Overview of socioeconomic and ethnic composition of the schools

Incidence of low SES pupils & ethnic minorities	Socioeconomic composition	Ethnic composition	
		Belgian or North-Western European origin	Another origin
Low incidence			
School 1	55.9%	92.9%	7.1%
School 2	59.8%	64.4%	35.6%
Average incidence			
School 3	60.6%	71.4%	28.6%
School 4	53.3%	61.1%	38.9%
High incidence			
School 5	29.8%	9.1%	90.9%
School 6	57.1%	68.0%	32.0%

the pupil concerned. There are no formal rules with respect to the presence of pupils at the conferences; consequently, this is strongly dependent on the preferences of the teachers as well as of the parents and pupils. To overcome the absolute absence of pupils at the conferences, some teachers have one-on-one conversations with their pupils about their enrolment in secondary education prior to the conferences. Informed consent of the parents was orally obtained.

As part of the project *Transbaso* (see Acknowledgements), six primary schools in the cities of Antwerp and Ghent were involved because of their significant cultural and social diversity. We used a ‘three school type x two teachers x six teacher-parent conferences’ design based on stratified purposive sampling, in which the research units were divided and purposively selected based on specific selection criteria (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Firstly, in order to pursue a natural variation, the six schools were selected based on their ethnic and socioeconomic composition. As a reflection of today’s multicultural society and the high level of socioeconomic and ethnic school segregation in Belgium, Flanders has a large number of schools with a high incidence of low SES pupils and ethnic minorities. The selection of schools resulted in three ‘types of schools’ with a low, average and high incidence of low

SES and ethnic minority pupils. Table 1 presents an overview of the school types. Each school’s average of pupils’ SES is used as an indicator for its socioeconomic composition (ranging from 29.8% to 60.6%). Theoretically, this percentage can range from 0% to 100%, indicating lower- and higher-class pupils respectively (Ganzeboom, Degraaf, Treiman, & Deleeuw, 1992). The ethnic composition of a school is based on the mean percentage of ethnic minority pupils in the sixth grade (i.e. pupils of Belgian or North-Western European origin and pupils of another origin, mainly from Eastern Europe, Maghreb and Turkey). Although we only had access to data concerning the sixth grade pupils, they can be considered to reflect the reality of the schools as a whole. In order to keep the observations manageable, we further randomly selected two teachers of the final school year (out of the total group of teachers who were willing to voluntarily participate) per school type (six teachers in total), followed by a random selection of six observed teacher-parent conferences per teacher. At that point, empirical saturation was reached.

### 3.2 Research methods

Since the teacher-parent conferences offered the opportunity to observe ‘live’ teachers’ allocation in their natural context and in social interaction with parents, observations

Table 2  
Units of focus in view of the data analysis (not exhaustive)

Units of focus	Specification
Communication of the recommendations	Secondary school choice recommendations Secondary study choice recommendations First grade: A- or B-stream & optional courses Second & third grade: educational tracks & study fields Other longer-term choice options (e.g. tertiary education or profession)
Teachers' perceptions that formed the basis of the recommendations	Teachers' perceptions of pupils (at micro-level) Pupils' cognitive attributes Pupils' non-cognitive attributes Teachers' perceptions of parents (at meso-level) Other teachers' perceptions (at micro-, meso-, and/or macro-level)

were conducted. Moreover, this research method enabled ‘thick descriptions’ of the topic under investigation that went beyond the explicit perceptions of teachers, which is strongly in favour of the (ecological) validity and authenticity of the gathered data (Yin, 2011). As stated by Fives and Buehl (2012), teachers’ perceptions can be implicit (i.e. perceptions of which the teachers are unaware) and explicit (i.e. perceptions of which the teachers are conscious). In line with the inductive nature of this study, it was our intention to explore the broad range of teachers’ perceptions that form the basis of their recommendations. Therefore, through the analysis of actual teachers’ behaviour and talk (i.e. observations of teacher-parent conferences), we intended to infer both the implicit and explicit perceptions of teachers. Since only explicit perceptions can be grasped through the personal reflective practice of the teachers, other qualitative research methods such as interview protocols would have been insufficient.

Taking into account the different dimensions of observation, the observations conducted were semi-structured in nature. In addition, considering the researcher’s role in the observations, the role of observer-as-participant was fulfilled. The researcher was present at the teacher-parent conferences, which were held in the teachers’ classrooms (i.e. naturalistic observations) (Cohen et al., 2011). Observation is a process, moving from

descriptive observation (introduction to the setting) to focused and selected observation. In the latter phases, the relevant is discerned from the irrelevant and the researcher’s focus is progressively narrowed to those aspects of concern (Spradley, 1980). In accordance with the research questions, our units of focus were: (1) teachers’ communication of their recommendations, referring to its content and distinguished elements, and (2) teachers’ perceptions that formed the basis of the recommendations, as expressed by the teachers at the teacher-parent conferences. The units of focus are shown in Table 2.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The results of the observational data were written in field notes and observation schedules. During the observations, scratch notes were taken including information about the researcher’s location (i.e. behavioural mapping). Immediately after the observations, these notes were refined and completed with notes consisting of interpretative aspects (i.e. analytic notes) and reflections (Cassell & Symon, 2004). In order to be able to, as it were, fully reconstruct the conversations and the specific context in which they took place, the teacher-parent conferences were broadly observed. Alongside the specific units of focus, as discussed above, the observation schedules included information about the actors present at the conferences, the duration of the conferences and the global concerns of

Table 3  
Example of a completed observation schedule

Teacher's & pupil's identity	IDXX
Duration of the conference	18 minutes
Present actors	Teacher Parent(s): mother
Discussion of the recommendation: content & arguments	Teacher Parent(s)
	<p>1) The social sector is meant to be: - the pupil indicates this interest herself; - also, the other pupils in the classroom recognise her talent to take care of others, to be helpful.</p> <p>2) Mother has doubts about the study choice for her daughter.</p> <p>4) Start immediately in TSE: - the pupil has to work very hard and her results are only moderate, she has already come a long way, she puts great pressure on herself; - being with her girlfriends (who will enrol in TSE) is very important for her wellbeing; - it is important for her to experience success; - it is important for her to be able to continue practicing her hobbies.</p> <p>3) An immediate start in TSE, or first two general years with the necessary support?</p> <p>5) I would advise school X. It is a good school, I only hear good things about this school. I think she will feel at home in this school.</p> <p>6) School X is an option, or perhaps School Y, where I come from. But school X is nearby and this school is known for its good reputation.</p>
Other perceptions of the pupil expressed by the teacher	<p>- A change of school choice after the first two years of GSE would not be good for the pupil, as she will have to leave the classroom and her friends at that time. This would affect her wellbeing. It is very important that the other pupils in the classroom can get to know her and that she can be closely monitored.</p> <p>- The pupil works very hard, sometimes too hard.</p> <p>- The pupil is someone who persists and she will continue to work hard and do her best, also in secondary education.</p> <p>- The pupil is extremely interested in education and in child care, which is very obvious.</p> <p>- The teacher is currently working on the pupil's plan-based skills.</p>
Global concerns expressed by the teacher	<p>The teacher recognises that the process of making educational choices is very stressful for the mother. Choosing a study option that would be too difficult for the pupil (i.e. GSE) also affects the wellbeing of the mother. The best thing for your child is not necessarily GSE, not necessarily a high diploma.</p>
Scratch notes	<p>- The teacher and the mother sit at the same table, face-to-face. I sit at another table;</p> <p>- Female teacher, middle-aged;</p> <p>- Small primary school with approximately 250 pupils;</p> <p>- The teacher does not use any working instruments or documents as a guide to the conferences;</p> <p>- The teacher indicates playing a very active role in the school: many informal contacts with parents, member of the parent committee and coordinator of the school's Facebook page.</p>

*Note. The identity of the teachers involved in the conferences and of the pupils concerned, were systematically anonymised by using ID numbers. With respect to the discussion of the recommendations, we intended to write down which elements of the recommendations were expressed in which order and by whom (i.e. the teacher or parent(s)), in order to be able to fully understand the final recommendations of the teachers and all the preceding reactions.*

the teachers with respect to their recommendations. Table 3 shows an example of a completed observation schedule. The observation schedules formed the basis from which we derived the specific units of focus in view of the data analysis.

Particularly challenging to the observation research method is the delayed registration of observations. Indeed, it is impossible to observe and take notes simultaneously while capturing everything that is relevant. Other frequently demonstrated risks are, amongst others, the selective memory of the researcher. In response to these issues, which possibly affect the validity and reliability of the observations, the teacher-parent conferences were audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards by means of the verbatim principle. The combination of the written and audio-recorded data enabled us to extract numerical data from the rich qualitative data set.

In accordance with an emic approach aiming at the generation of ‘insider’ knowledge and meanings through induction, the data analysis was based on the conceptual framework of the teachers being researched rather than on the conceptual framework of the researcher. The observational data were qualitatively analysed by means of coding and content analysis, based on the computer-based software program NVivo. All the information was encoded using open coding to label and sort the information. A basic coding scheme, based on the observation schedules, was used and adjusted with the creation of codes during the coding process itself. Furthermore, the concepts in the study were defined and the codes were further refined and deepened using axial and selective coding (Cohen et al., 2011).

## 4 Results

The analysis of the observational data focused on two main aspects. Firstly, in order to answer the first research question concerning teachers’ communication of their recommendations at the teacher-parent conferences, the content of the recommendations was analysed. We

examined if teachers made a distinction between different choice options with regard to secondary education, with a focus on the content of the study choice recommendations. Secondly, as expressed by the teachers at the conferences, we searched for indications of the perceptions held by the teachers that influence their recommendations, in view of the second research question.

### 4.1 Teachers’ communication of the recommendations to parents

#### *Study choice and school choice recommendations*

In the majority of the teacher-parent conferences (in 31/36 conferences), both secondary school choice and study choice options were simultaneously discussed. Lucy (Teacher 3), for example, mentioned the following in a conversation with a parent:

*“It is good that he will start in the A-stream [study choice – A-stream in the first grade]. But eventually... He is very interested in programming. I think that you should keep in mind that it can be interesting for him to, it might sound strange, follow TSE [study choice – educational track from the second grade]. There are a lot of schools that offer technical education at a very high level. From this perspective, I think School X is a good choice [school choice].”*

However, more attention was paid to the choice for a specific study curriculum. Whereas only one teacher did not discuss the study choice of the pupil concerned (study choice recommendations were given by the teachers in 35/36 conferences), four teachers did not mention school choice (school choice recommendations were given by the teachers in 32/36 conferences). This also became clear when looking at the teachers’ concrete recommendations. While all of the teachers who discussed pupils’ study choice also expressed a particular study choice recommendation at the conference, not all of the teachers gave personal recommendations with regard to school choice (pupils’ school choice was discussed in 23/32 conferences). At a conference with Dana (Teacher 1), for

Table 4

Distinguished elements of the study choice recommendations and number of times expressed by the teachers

	Dana	Warren	Lucy	Jennifer	Karol	Lennard
First grade						
A- or B-stream	2	0	0	1	1	1
Optional courses	1	5	4	5	4	0
Second & third grade						
Educational tracks	1	0	1	1	4	7
Study fields	1	1	3	0	1	1
Tertiary education	0	0	0	0	1	0
Profession	0	0	0	0	2	3
Recommendation in non-specific terms	1	0	0	0	0	0

Note. We used fictitious teachers' names.

instance, parents explicitly asked the teacher about her opinion regarding a secondary school for their daughter. Although this topic was discussed, the teacher did not give a personal, final recommendation:

*"I always say try to visit as much schools as you possibly can. Let the children watch for themselves. Recently we visited School X with the pupils and everyone was very impressed by the high walls of the school [referring to a large school with a reputation for discipline]. We also visited School Y, of which the appearance and the culture were totally different. One child will love a more authoritarian school culture and the other one will not. If your child likes certain schools, make sure you visit these schools."*

#### *Distinguished elements of the study choice recommendations*

Table 4 shows the results of the analysis of the content of the teachers' study choice recommendations, as expressed by the teachers. For every teacher involved in the study (six teachers), we describe which and how many elements he or she distinguished when discussing the study choice recommendations at the teacher-parent

conferences (six teacher-parent conferences per teacher). As described below, some teachers included only one element in their recommendations with regard to each pupil, compared to other teachers who expressed multiple elements.

When teachers expressed their recommendations concerning pupils' study choice for secondary education, both short-term and longer-term choice options were discussed. Teachers not only had ideas about pupils' potential and preferences regarding (the onset of) secondary education (i.e. first, second and third grade choice options), they also mentioned future educational (i.e. tertiary education) and professional expectations with regard to the pupils. Furthermore, one teacher expressed her study choice recommendation in a rather vague, non-specific way by stating *"the luxury you [referring to the parents] have is that she [referring to the pupil] can handle everything"* (Dana: Teacher 1).

Approximately a two-thirds majority of the teachers (in 24/35 conferences in which teachers gave study choice recommendations) expressed a single study choice recommendation in each individual

conference consisting of only one element (e.g. one of the educational tracks from the second grade), compared to a minority of the teachers (in 12/35 conferences) who incorporated multiple study choice options within their recommendations (varying from two to five options as a combination of the aspects described in Table 4). The following study choice recommendation of Karol (Teacher 5), for example, illustrates this:

*“I rather see him in the social sector [profession]. Now, you can always start in 1A [A-stream in the first grade] with modern courses [optional courses in the first grade]. If you notice after the first year that it is not going well, it is possible to change to 1A with a few hours of technology [optional courses in the first grade]. That is why I think, yeah, let him try GSE [educational track from the second grade], that should work [...]. Computers, that is why I thought of Industrial Sciences [tertiary education] and history. These are the things that interest him the most.”*

According to the specificity of the Flemish educational system, pupils have to make study choices within each of the three grades of secondary education, starting with the first grade. In line with this structure and as shown in Table 4, the greater part of the teachers recommended a (single) study choice in terms of the optional courses in the first grade (in 19/35 conferences), followed by the educational tracks from the second grade of secondary education (in 14/35 conferences). Latin (i.e. an optional course recommended in 9/19 conferences) and TSE (i.e. an educational track recommended in 8/14 conferences) were recommended the most, although teachers also often recommended GSE (i.e. an educational track recommended in 6/14 conferences). Warren (Teacher 2), for example, explained to one of his pupils *“I think that you are able to follow Latin”*, while Lennard (Teacher 6) recommended to a pupil *“when we looked together at what you want to do next school year, we discussed TSE. If you keep doing your best and if you keep improving, it can become GSE”*. Remarkably, other optional courses

besides Latin (i.e. art, technology, language, modern courses and science) were mentioned to a far lesser extent (each in a maximum of 2/19 conferences), and ASE and VSE (i.e. educational tracks) were not advised at all by the teachers. Although enrolment in the A- or B-stream is the first study choice that pupils have to make at the onset of secondary education, few teachers actually included this choice option in their recommendations (in 5/35 conferences). Nobody was recommended to enrol in the B-stream.

#### **4.2 Teachers' perceptions that form the basis of the recommendations**

##### *School achievements in view of study choice recommendations*

A two-thirds majority of the teachers (in 22/35 conferences in which teachers gave study choice recommendations) considered pupils' perceived school achievements when discussing the study choice recommendations. How well or badly pupils performed in general or in specific school subjects was decisive in this regard. In particular, pupils' performances in different languages and maths seemed to be important for the more academic secondary education choice options such as Latin (i.e. an optional course in the first grade) and GSE (i.e. an educational track from the second grade). Warren (Teacher 2), for example, explained the following:

*“His school results are higher than normal, higher than the average. He is very strong in maths. I have decided that he is a very strong pupil and I agree with his choice for Latin. Also because... if we do a dictation in the classroom or something with spelling and I ask who has everything right? Yes, mostly he has, and then I say, look, these are the pupils for Latin, those who can do that perfectly.”*

Half of the teachers (in 18/35 conferences) also mentioned pupils' perceived interests and personal motivation in light of the recommended study choice. The same was true for pupils' perceived work or learning attitude (in 16/35 conferences). Examples such as *“if you think of GSE for next school year, that is questionable for me, because you*

do not meet our expectations when you have to study seriously” (Lennard: Teacher 6), and “we should really work on his learning attitude and independently doing his homework, and we should follow his planning of school work” (Jennifer: Teacher 4) illustrate which aspects are essential for teachers in this regard (next to pupils’ working speed, concentration, persistence and the extent to which they work precisely). Furthermore, pupils’ self-image was expressed by the teachers as an important factor in the study choice recommendations, but to a lesser degree (in 4/35 conferences). Considerations such as being able to deploy talents and experience success, and to have sufficient time for things outside of school (e.g. hobbies), were included in the study choice recommendations. The importance of both pupils’ work and learning attitude and self-image can be underlined, since teachers also mentioned these aspects more generally as important areas of concern in light of the transition to secondary education.

A single teacher (in 1/35 conferences) took the wellbeing of a pupil’s parents into account when discussing the study choice recommendation. In particular, the teacher recommended TSE, whereas the mother initially preferred GSE. Because of a perceived imbalance between the pupil’s school results and the amount of effort needed to achieve those results, which had already created a lot of stress for the mother, the teacher recommended a less demanding academic track.

*A long-lasting school career in view of school choice recommendations*

When recommending a specific school, a quarter of the teachers (in 9/32 conferences in which teachers gave school choice recommendations) looked at the possibility of pupils to complete their school career in the school of their choice. Two main aspects were important in this perspective. Firstly, teachers found it desirable for pupils to be able to continue the study choice made in the first grade after the first two years of secondary education in the same school. Therefore, the recommended school needed to offer a similar package of study curricula throughout the three grades of secondary education. Secondly,

the possibility for pupils to change their study choice in the school of their choice after the first grade was crucial. Dana (Teacher 1), for example, expressed such concerns when discussing an optional school with parents:

*“Which choice do you have to make? If you choose School Y, then she will have possibilities to redirect. If you conclude in November it is really not going well you can still give her another chance until the Christmas holidays [in view of the first examination period which then takes place]. If she fails her exams, she can possibly change her study curriculum within the school. In case of School X, that is not a possibility.”*

Furthermore, the school choice recommendations were based on teachers’ perceptions about the care, guidance and support of pupils (in 8/32 conferences) as well as the precise study offer of secondary schools (in 7/32 conferences). Reactions such as “School X has a good care programme” (Dana: Teacher 1) and “your daughter needs continued guidance in working with her resources [as a result of a learning disability], but School Y is a good choice in that perspective” (Jennifer: Teacher 4) illustrate this. With respect to the schools’ study offer, as large as possible as well as rather specific study offers (e.g. the offer of sports) were pursued in order for pupils to “search for their talents and preferences” (Lucy: Teacher 3). To a lesser degree, teachers also mentioned the schools’ reputation (determined by the perceived quality of education, the schools’ degree of discipline and others’ satisfaction about the schools) (in 6/32 conferences) and geographical accessibility (in 4/32 conferences). Lastly, some teachers were convinced by the importance of the schools’ common way of assessing pupils (e.g. a system of continuous assessment instead of regular examination periods) (in 2/32 conferences) and size of the school (in 1/32 conferences).

In addition to these perceived school characteristics, a minority of teachers (in 6/32 conferences) mentioned perceptions with respect to the pupils. From this point of view,

the school had to respond to the pupils' wellbeing (e.g. the school as a familiar and 'safe' environment due to a brother or sister that was also going to the same school) as well as to their personal motivations (i.e. the school had to be the school of their choice).

*Recommendations resulting in positive and negative study choices of pupils*

Since perceived school characteristics were the most crucial influence on perceptions when discussing optional schools, the teachers' recommendations about schools were a rather neutral message. However, with regard to the different study choice options in which pupils' perceived attributes dominated as influencing perceptions, teachers communicated in favourable and unfavourable ways. A small number of teachers (in 6/35 conferences in which teachers gave study choice recommendations) communicated an exclusively negative message with regard to their study choice recommendations, whereby negative work and learning attitude and pupils' weaker school results were important. However, almost half of the teachers (in 16/35 conferences) gave an absolutely positive study choice recommendation on the basis of only positive perceptions. In these cases, the recommendations were argued especially as being in line with pupils' interests and motivation, followed by their strong school results and achievements, positive work and learning attitude and self-image. In addition, one third of the teachers (in 10/35 conferences) took a combination of both favourable and unfavourable perceived pupils' attributes into consideration. In the following example, Lucy (Teacher 3) reflected on the pupil's work and learning attitude and personal interests as a reaction to the parents' question concerning the possibility of GSE (i.e. an educational track from the second grade) for their daughter:

*"In terms of capacity she might have more to offer than she always shows. Her working speed is the main difficulty here and maybe also her motivation to study. In this perspective, I think that additional general courses [optional courses in the first grade considered by the teacher as a forerunner of*

*GSE] probably are not the best option for her. Because, not looking at her capacities, but at her own motivation, she would be able to do that. But I think that doing something artistically with those optional courses really fits her like a glove."*

## 5 Conclusion and discussion

In the present study, we investigated Flemish primary school teachers' recommendations regarding pupils' enrolment in secondary education, as discussed at formal teacher-parent conferences. Based on the results of the observations of the conferences, we were able to gain insights into how allocation exactly occurs (i.e. the teachers' communication of their recommendations to parents in terms of its content; cf. Research Question 1), and how recommendations are formed (i.e. the influence of teachers' perceptions upon which the recommendations are based; cf. Research Question 2).

Regarding the first research question, we conclude that there is a large variation in teachers' recommendations. As reflected in its content, the teachers made a distinction between school choice and study choice recommendations while discussing pupils' transition to secondary education, although teachers' study choice recommendations were more at the centre of the conversations. In line with the specific structure of the Flemish educational system (Department of Education and Training, 2008), teachers mostly communicated a single study choice recommendation particularly in terms of the short-term study choice options in the first and second grade of secondary education. The teachers also integrated longer-term study choice options in secondary education in their study choice recommendations with regard to the pupils' future educational and professional careers. This wide range of study choice options, demonstrating a large heterogeneity with respect to the teachers' recommendations, is consistent with the recognised essential role of teachers and their individual decision-making processes for the allocation of pupils in less meritocratic

educational systems (e.g. Eurydice, 2011; Gorard & Smith, 2004). This clearly applies to the Flemish educational system as well.

Firstly, the large heterogeneity is related to the content of the recommendations as well as to the frequency of the elements integrated in the recommendations. In a sense, the teachers skipped the first grade of secondary education in their study choice recommendations by not (explicitly) mentioning the distinction between the A- and B-stream at the onset of secondary education. None of the teachers recommended that any pupil should enrol in the B-stream. This finding is partially in line with what we would expect, given that in Flanders the larger part of the pupils are recommended to enrol in the B-stream based on their age. When pupils reach the age of 15 years before the end of primary education, they are obliged to proceed to secondary education (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Based on our results, it seems unlikely that the B-stream, in contrast to the A-stream and its optional courses, would be a study curriculum that pupils, parents and teachers consciously and positively choose or recommend, for instance on the basis of pupils' actual interests in a vocational education. Otherwise, Latin (i.e. an optional course in the first grade) and TSE and GSE (i.e. educational tracks from the second grade) were recommended the most by the teachers. In line with the hierarchical, tracked nature of the Flemish educational system, these are exactly the study choice options that are valued the most in our society and that are considered to prepare pupils for more academic education (Department of Education and Training, 2008). Given that the majority of the teachers gave exclusively positive study choice recommendations based on positive teachers' perceptions, it may be that they generally perceive their pupils as doing well at school and, consequently, that they positively assess the pupils' aptitude for enrolment in the more academic study choice options in secondary education. As such, teachers' decision-making regarding allocation may be nested in hierarchical thinking, with a risk of confirmation and reinforcement of the existing cascade system in Flanders. This raises questions about primary school teachers'

knowledge of the Flemish educational system and their conceptions of pupils' allocation and transition. Logically, the same holds for other educational systems that are considered to be tracked. Secondly, differences with regard to the teachers' recommendations were noticeable not only with respect to each individual teacher, but also between the various teachers included in this study. Now the question arises as to whether allocation is in fact a process shaped by the individual teacher and/or by the school (policy). Also, one might wonder whether these interpersonal differences can be explained by teachers' (background) characteristics such as gender and social and cultural backgrounds. Due to the exploratory scale of this study, we were not able to investigate this in more detail. In order to draw even more powerfully supported conclusions concerning allocation by teachers, examining this topic on a larger scale would add value to our current knowledge base.

Regarding the second research question, our first and main conclusion is that in agreement with the long tradition of teachers' thinking research (e.g. Ashton, 2015; Fang, 1996) and teachers' expectancy research (e.g. Jussim & Harber, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) teachers' perceptions are crucial for teachers' behaviour and classroom practices, and in particular for teachers' allocation practices of pupils (e.g. Fulmer et al., 2015). The teachers included in this study expressed multiple perceptions at the teacher-parent conferences related to pupils, secondary schools and, to a lesser degree, parents in order to argue their recommendations. Thus, in line with the contextual nature of both teachers' perceptions (e.g. Bandura, 1986; Fives & Buehl, 2012) and assessment practices of pupils (e.g. Fulmer et al., 2015), these results indicate that perceptions other than that of the pupils (at the micro-level) also exert an influence on the teachers' recommendations. Although the teachers also considered school characteristics (at the macro-level), we found only limited indications for the importance of teachers' perceptions of parents in view of their recommendations (at the meso-level). Future qualitative research that enables study of these contextual influences and their

possible impact in-depth may provide more insight. Following Fives and Buehl (2012) who state that teachers' implicit perceptions cannot be grasped through reflective practices, perhaps a combination of observations and in-depth interviews with teachers are the most effective, in this regard.

Differences were noticeable between the influencing perceptions of the teachers' school choice and study choice recommendations. In contrast to perceived school characteristics that dominated teachers' school choice recommendations, the teachers primarily focused on pupils' attributes when discussing their study choice recommendations with parents. In line with the international three motives model of pupils' and parents' school choice (Gorard, 1999), our results indicate the importance of the schools' reputation and geographical accessibility, as perceived by the teachers. Nonetheless, other teachers' perceptions were more important, more specifically the perceived opportunity for pupils to continue but also change their initial chosen study curriculum in the school of their choice, the schools' care, guidance and support of pupils and the schools' study offer. The importance of the study choice options offered for school choice is thus highlighted, questioning the finding of Boone and Van Houtte (2010) and Creten et al. (2000) that school choice and study choice are made simultaneously and are essentially the same.

In view of the teachers' study choice recommendations, they especially considered pupils' school achievements. Thus, consistent with the Pygmalion study of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), the teachers' recommendations are predominantly based on pupils' perceived cognitive attributes. Nevertheless, as stated by Farkas (2003), Farrington et al. (2013) and Boone and Van Houtte (2013b), teachers' perceptions of pupils' non-cognitive attributes are also important for teachers' recommendations; in the present study teachers expressed views about pupils' perceived interests and personal motivations for certain study choice options and work or learning attitude. As such, following Timmermans et al. (2016), this study makes a valuable contribution to the

evidence base of teachers' perceptions of pupils' non-cognitive attributes that influence their recommendations. However, the question remains on what information the teachers' perceptions were actually based: teachers' personal impressions or 'objective' pupils' assessments? This is essentially a question about the accuracy of teachers' perceptions and, in turn, of teachers' recommendations. As Timmermans, Kuypers and van der Werf (2015) state, bias with regard to teachers' recommendations can occur in two ways. Whereas general bias refers to recommendations that are systematically too high or too low for most pupils, specific bias refers to recommendations that are systematically too high or too low for specific (subgroups of) pupils. As a matter of fact, research in various countries has demonstrated the socially biased nature of teachers' recommendations, in which the impact of pupils' and parents' SES is emphasised (e.g. Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Ditton & Krusken, 2006; Duru-Bellat, 2015; Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, Klapproth, & Bohmer, 2013; Timmermans et al., 2015). From this perspective, regardless of pupils' level of achievement, children from low SES parents are more likely to receive a recommendation to enrol in less academic tracks of secondary education, compared to their counterparts with high social backgrounds. Important policy-related implications can be found in these consequences. In this way, it is very important for (student) teachers to become (more) aware of their allocation practices, that is, how and why recommendations are formed or upon which perceptions the recommendations are based and the possible impact of their recommendations.

Notwithstanding the unique strength of observation as a very authentic method of data collection, observation studies are not without their critics (Cohen et al., 2011). One of the ethical dilemmas that needs to be considered is the risk of bias in terms of the researcher's own position during the observations and the influence of the researcher's presence on what is taking place during the observations (i.e. observer effects).

Given that the observations in the present study were direct (i.e. the researcher was present at the observations) and overt (i.e. the role of the observer as researcher was known), one might wonder to what extent the teachers and parents observed may have changed their behaviour and communication because they knew that they were being observed. Although observer effects are inevitable in this type of observation, we consciously took several appropriate measures to, to the best of our ability, overcome the risks of reactivity of the participants. First, the teachers and parents included in this study voluntarily choose to take part after being informed about the nature of this study and after it being explicitly explained that an anonymous processing of the data is guaranteed. By asking for informed consent, we can assume that the participants did think about the researcher's presence and its possible consequences. Second, the observations took place in the teachers' natural environments. Also, for parents it is self-evident that teacher-parent conferences, in which pupils' transition to secondary education is discussed, take place in the school of their children. In this way, the participants 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 observations took place.

Finally, as also described by Cohen et al. (2011), as a traditional characteristic of observation, the researcher intended not to intervene in the teacher-parent conferences and not to participate in the conversations in any way. In this manner, the researcher was presented only a snapshot of the daily reality of the teachers. Consequently, as a restriction of the observation method used in the current study, no additional information about the parents and pupils concerned was collected. Nonetheless, considering the impact of pupils' and parents' social background on the recommendations given by teachers (e.g. Boone & Van Houtte, 2013b; Ditton & Krusken, 2006; Duru-Bellat, 2015; Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Glock et al., 2013; Timmermans et al., 2015), questions concerning differential allocation practices of

teachers regarding subgroups of pupils may arise. Future research could investigate the extent to which teachers' perceptions of pupils are biased, while considering pupils' demographic background characteristics. Similarly, no additional information about the effects of the teachers' recommendations, that is, after enrolment in secondary education, was collected. In the knowledge that the teachers' recommendations are not legally binding in Flanders, it would be interesting to investigate whether pupils and parents actually follow these recommendations. This question is relevant in the context of school effectiveness research and deserves further clarification through future (longitudinal) research.

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## Samenvatting

### **De transitie van leerlingen naar het secundair onderwijs: Een verkennende studie naar het advies van leerkrachten zoals besproken tijdens oudercontacten**

Onderwijssystemen worden gekenmerkt door verschillen in de manier waarop leerkrachten leerlingen oriënteren naar het secundair onderwijs. In het Vlaams liberale onderwijssysteem vervult de leerkracht van de lagere school een sleutelrol, gezien het grote belang van diens advies dat wordt besproken tijdens oudercontacten. Deze studie heeft als doel om te onderzoeken: (1) hoe leerkrachten hun advies communiceren tijdens oudercontacten in termen van de inhoud en (2) welke percepties van leerkrachten de basis vormen van het advies. Aan de hand van een kwalitatieve en inductieve onderzoeksoepzet werden observatiedata verzameld van 36 oudercontacten. De resultaten tonen aan dat het advies sterk gedifferentieerd is, waarbij de leerkrachten meer de nadruk legden op hun studieadvies en op de studiekeuzeopties op korte termijn. Hoewel instromen in de A- of B-stroom de eerste keuze is die leerlingen en ouders dienen te maken bij aanvang van het secundair onderwijs, werd deze keuzeoptie door de leerkrachten vrijwel niet opgenomen in hun studieadvies. Tot slot vormen vooral percepties van leerkrachten over kenmerken van de secundaire school (zoals de mogelijkheid voor leerlingen om hun schoolloopbaan te voltooien in dezelfde school) en over leerlingkenmerken (zoals hun schoolresultaten) de basis van respectievelijk het school- en studieadvies.

**Kernwoorden:** overgang secundair onderwijs, school- en studieadvies, oudercontacten, observatiemethode, leerkrachtverwachtingen

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