

Does social class play the same role in explaining the ethnic gap in education for the first and second generation? Results from the 1991 and 2001 Belgian Census compared.

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This study considers the role of migration and group-specific ethnic penalties in minority groups' life chances. More specifically it focuses on the ethnic and class inequalities in educational achievement in Belgium with 16- to 18-year old youngsters using the 1991 and 2001 Census.

The limitation of the age-group is based on the so-called 'cascading system' or downward orientation which operates in the Belgian educational system. It has a hierarchical tracking structure, which divides pupils in three types of tracks: general, technical and vocational secondary education. It are mainly those students who follow general and, to a lesser degree, technical secondary education who make the transition to higher education. At the age of 14 an important selection is made to channel students into each type of secondary education. Through considering the 16-to-18-year-olds we focus on students well beyond that selection point. Since education is compulsory in Belgium until the age of 18, our entire research group still finds themselves at school. Therefore we distinguish between their educational achievement through the track in secondary education that students are in.

The association between social class and educational attainment has been extensively documented (Duncan & Blau, 1967; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1991; et al.). How the effect of social class varies by ethnicity is less clear. Minority ethnic groups are heavily concentrated towards the bottom of the class structure and it might therefore be expected that many of the inequalities in performance can be explained by the differential distributions of the major ethnic groups across the occupational framework.

Classic assimilation theory is based on the premise that the process of individual adaptation leads to the convergence of the individual and the group characteristics with those of the host society over time (Gordon, 1964; et al.).

Portes and Zhou (2001 [1993]) adapted this to form the theory of segmented assimilation which describes the various patterns of adaptation followed by different ethnic minorities resulting in convergence or divergence with the host society. Can we speak of a segmented assimilation in Belgium as well?

Various research has shown that ethnic underachievement in Belgium is quite common and that ethnic minorities are over-represented in vocational training (Lesthaeghe, 2000; Neels, 2000, Timmerman e.a., 2003). In comparison to other OECD countries Marks (2006) found the achievement gap for the second generation in Belgium among the largest. One possible explanation for this ethnic underachievement is provided in the deficit-thesis which states that the ethnic gap can be accounted for in terms of deficient qualifications (Veenman, 1996). This would imply that ethnic underachievement is less pronounced with the second generation

and with offspring of more privileged backgrounds.

Recent research with the Belgian second generation has shown that ethnic disadvantage is perpetuated from one generation to the next mainly through mechanisms of class disadvantage (Phalet, Deboosere & Bastiaenssen, 2007). Evidence was also found of cumulative ethnic and class disadvantage for Turkish and Moroccan minorities.

British research has shown that patterns describing intergenerational change of socio-economic background not only explain for differences between the ethnic minorities and the native population but also for differences among ethnic groups themselves (Heath & Ridge, 1983; Heath & Smith, 2003; Platt, 2005). The first generation often experiences a downward social mobility in terms of educational attainment compared to their parents (Heath & Smith, 2003). If the deficit-thesis can be applied to this, we can expect succeeding generations to profit from this and gradually decrease the ethnic gap.

This study adds to the existing research by examining whether social background influentials play the same role for the first and second generation compared to the indigenous population. Furthermore it compares results for the 1991 Belgian Census and the 2001 census and thus examines whether this ethnic gap in education is maintained, widened or decreased over the last decade. Because of the numerous efforts made by the government to improve the educational situation of migrant minorities and the place it covers on the political agenda, one could expect the ethnic educational gap to have decreased over the last decade.

The data used in this study are the 1991 and the 2001 Census. The exhaustivity of the data enables us to map the position of the youngsters in detail without having to worry about the number of students in our group.

Different ethnic groups are identified through ancestry rather than nationality. Because of the enhanced possibilities for ethnic minorities and their children to obtain the Belgian nationality, nationality in combination with nationality at birth no longer suffice to identify youngsters of immigrant origin. By taking their parents nationality at birth into account we maximize the number of people with ethnic backgrounds.

Various migrant generations are distinguished by considering the place of birth of both them and their parents in combination with the nationality.

Most research on intergenerational mobility has focused on the role of the father as the main determinant of social class origin. This study uses a scheme that includes social class of both parents. Social background is measured through occupational status, profession, educational achievement and quality of housing of the parents. Very often the nature of self-reported earnings are unreliable, therefore the quality and ownership of housing provide a better estimation of material wealth.

Since Belgian education is in the hands of the various regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) we also include region as a covariate.

Educational achievement is explained by comparing the results of multinomial logistic modelling for the various ethnic groups and migrant generations. We expect analysis to show that gender, region and social background insufficiently explain educational underachievement and thus

provide evidence of differential processes operating not only for different ethnic groups but also for different migrant generations.

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