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Education in a federal system: A case-study of Belgium

Abstract

The administration of primary and secondary education in Belgium is divided among the three federal regions and has yielded very different results in student performances, particularly in Flanders and Wallonia/Bruxelles-Capitale: the Flemings are consistently stronger in subjects such as languages and mathematics and there are fewer students failing school in Flemish areas than in the Francophone regions (PISA 2000, 2003). Different educational systems across ethnic lines can increase social and economic inequality. In a federal country such as Belgium with pre-existing ethnic tensions, this inequality can lead to political instability. This paper investigates the disparities in education within the Flemish and Walloon-Brussels regions, how this impacts Belgian society, and the potential courses of action that can be taken to address this problem.

Keywords

federal system, education, inequality, conflict, Belgium, Brendan O'Leary, O'Leary, Brendan, Political Science

Disciplines

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Education in a federal system: A case-study of Belgium

by

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Introduction

Thesis: The separation of the educational systems by region and language in the Kingdom of Belgium has led to the increased economic and political segregation of the Flemings and the Walloons.

The administration of primary and secondary education in Belgium is divided among the three federal regions and has yielded very different results in student performances, particularly in Flanders and Wallonia/Bruxelles-Capitale: the Flemings are consistently stronger in subjects such as languages and mathematics and there are fewer students failing school in Flemish areas than in the Francophone regions (PISA 2000, 2003).

Different educational systems across ethnic lines can increase social and economic inequality. In a federal country such as Belgium with pre-existing ethnic tensions, this inequality can lead to political instability. This paper investigates the disparities in education within the Flemish and Walloon-Brussels regions, how this impacts Belgian society, and the potential courses of action that can be taken to address this problem.

For the purpose of this research, the regions are divided into Flemish Flanders and Francophone Wallonia/Bruxelles-Capitale since the data on Belgium collected by the PISA survey is organized by language: Flemish and Francophone. The schools surveyed are public or confessional institutions and all those that receive funds from the central government.

A review of the history of education and language in Belgium

It is essential to review the ethno-linguistic history of Belgium in order to understand the current federal set-up and the origin of the enduring educational disparities. Education and religion are closely linked in Belgium's history which is why this brief summary of Belgian history will focus particularly on those two important issues.

Early Belgium: the Dutch, Austrians, French and Spanish

The first traces of the modern controversy of religion and language can be traced back to the XVIth century, when a Belgian identity started to emerge. In 1579, three catholic provinces of the South formed the Union of Arras against the Protestants from the North and later signed the Union of Utrecht “which consecrated the separation of the Low Countries into what were to become Belgium and the Netherlands and adopted the religious provisions of the Pacification of Ghent” (Fitzmaurice 1996, p17). The Pacification was a peace treaty with Spain and included such conditions as the end of religious persecution and the departure of foreign soldiers and functionaries from the Provinces while accepting the Spanish king Philip II as the monarch and Catholicism as the official religion (Edmundson). The treaty was soon destroyed and the ensuing wars and religious persecution between the southern Low Countries, the Spanish and the French led to a depopulation of the Dutch intellectual elite from the South towards the North, a void which was eventually replaced by the Spanish and the Austrians. During the reign of the Austrian Emperor, the “enlightened despot” (Fitzmaurice 1996, p17), a series of important religious and secular reforms were introduced, and Catholicism was no longer accepted as an official state religion. In the XVIIIth Century, France annexed Belgium and recreated a Francophone bourgeoisie that became the elite throughout the land, even in Flanders. Belgium

became entirely officially Francophone, although there were still many Flemish ‘patois’; in fact, according to former Prime Minister Marc Eyskens, “had Napoleon won Waterloo, there would be no linguistic problem in Belgium.” Belgium was given to a Protestant country, the United Netherlands, after Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo.

Religion and Independence

Belgium was at this time already divided between the Liberals, a socialist and secular movement, and the Catholics who were opposed to the royal government’s attempts to reduce the role of the Catholic Church in public life. This led to conflicts with the protestant Dutch over the application of their constitution as well as the first disputes over education policy in the years 1814-17 and 1827-8 (Fitzmaurice 1996, p22). The Liberals supported the Catholics’ stance on the issue of religious freedom rather than an imposed Protestant doctrine which the Dutch were insisting on, and both parties formed a coalition that led to the Revolution in 1830. Religion played a fundamental role in the process towards Belgian Independence. The Belgian Constitution was drafted up in 1831, and the country became a constitutional-monarchy, run by the Francophone bourgeoisie.

Religion and Education in the XIX Century

During the XIXth Century, the main political battles were over education and the role of the Church. The Catholics achieved a victory when the Convention Nationale comprised of the constitutional and legislative assembly, created the clause for freedom of religion and education; the Loi Nothomb in 1842, the first Belgian legislation concerning education and religion, gave the Catholic movement “sweeping rights” (Witte 2000, p67) in primary and public education. The reaction to this law is illustrated in the loi Van Humbeek in 1884 which advocated the ‘écoles laïques’, or secular schools. The law required that schools offer official diplomas,

demanded government control of the curriculums and revoked the Catholic basis of education: Religious education had to be requested and was given outside of normal school hours. Municipalities were not allowed to subsidize or affiliate with private schools. The 1881 law further emphasized the government's grip over education by creating the right to establish new secondary schools wherever necessary to guarantee 'freedom of choice' in selecting institutions. The Catholics fought back, refusing Communion to families supporting public education and excommunicating individuals from the religious community. The religious elite and the clergy financially supported and created new Catholic primary schools. One of the consequences of the 'Guerres de Scolarités' (scolarity wars), was the segregation of Belgian households across religious lines. Because the Church held such importance for the social and cultural environment of the Catholics (Delwit 1999, p38), this method of coercion was increasingly successful. The 'Guerres de Scolarités' continued throughout 1879-84 with the adoption of the strongly anti-clerical school legislations, which were reversed after the Catholic victory at the elections for the Chamber of Representatives (Witte 2000, p68). At that time, the private Catholic schools still held 80% of all students in Belgium, despite the Liberals' attempt at reversing the Catholic monopoly over education. The bitter political war between Catholics and Liberals and the subsequent Catholic victory strengthened the anti-clerical feeling among the non-religious community.

The Growth of the Flemish Culture

A second important issue was the development of the Flemish language. Economic development of textiles in the North during the XVIIIth Century led to the flourishing of the Flemish culture and elite thanks to the Willemsfonds and Davidsfonds, private Catholic organizations that provided funds sponsoring Dutch culture. The Flemings and the Flemish language had been

neglected by the political system, such that the Laws of 1831 and 1845 had stipulated that only the French versions of the Acts of Parliament and royal decrees were considered as official (Fitzmaurice 1996, p30). Flemish was prohibited in government, in schools and in courts. Gradually, the situation began to change as the Flemish elite grew and started acquiring political power by forming parties and being elected into parliament. In 1851, a royal commission was set up to review the Flemish Question, which is the legitimacy of the Flemish claim to equality of cultures and languages under the Belgium system. Antwerp, dominated by the Antwerp Meeting Partij was the first province to declare Flemish as the official language of Antwerp in 1866. This was followed by the printing of parliamentary documents in both languages in 1879, and in 1888 speeches in Flemish were finally authorized. Flemish courts were subsequently set-up and reached even in the Francophones region in 1908 with a Flemish assize court set up in Brussels. 1878 saw the use of Flemish in administrative documents, but it was only after 1893 that pressure started to build up significantly with the demand of officially making Flemish a national language, which was achieved in 1898 thanks to the Flemish activists in Parliament. Laws in 1883, 1890 and 1914 extended the use of Flemish in schools in the Flemish Brabant. A Royal Flemish Academy for the Flemish culture (language and literature) was eventually set up in 1886 and the 'Flemishization' of the Belgian culture was pressed as a key issue for creating a Flemish University. In 1910, Flemish was formally introduced into Catholic schools which furthered tensions amongst the Belgians, particularly across linguistic and religious/atheist lines. This led the Francophone movement in the Senate to oppose Flemish efforts to promulgate the Flemish language.

The Flemish culture was practically forced upon the Flemings by the Flemish elite, particularly in the implementation of the Flemish language in communities in school. This is due to the

prevalence of the Francophone culture that still led the country politically and economically. In 1920, 58.7% of the communities considered themselves Francophone or bilingual. This figure went up to 70.6% in 1947 after the war. In 1939, only 19% of children in Belgium went to Flemish-speaking schools (Witte 2000, p126-7). The Flemish themselves were not convinced of the success of their language, nor did the masses support its spread. When Flemish was introduced into Belgian society and schools, it was taught as a ‘dead language’¹.

World War One and the separation of the Belgians

Meanwhile, the Armistice after World War One saw the development of the Flemish movement and the increasing hostility between Brussels and Wallonia and their Flemish neighbor. One of the reasons for this was the Flemish support of the Germans during the war in a bid for their independence where the Jong Vlaandered group laid claim to an independent Flemish state. This support did work partially in the Flemings’ favor. This is evidenced in the flemishization of the University of Ghent in the 1916 German decree and in 1917, the Vlaams Nationale Landdage obtained the administrative separation of Flanders and Wallonia, and went so far as to declare independence that same year. The Flemish support of the German invasion contrasted dramatically with the Resistance, largely led by the Walloons. The end of the war saw the two Brabants reunited under the Belgian flag, but did not disperse the hostility between the two linguistic groups and the feeling of treason the Francophones felt towards their Flemish counterparts.

Inter-war realities

The inter-war period showed that the Flemish were no longer to be ignored though, and while different Flemish parties were incapable of showing a united front, it still remained that they

were a force to be dealt with. Brussels became a bilingual area in 1921 and the principle of territoriality and the use of Flemish in Flanders were subsequently established.

An important issue during the inter-war period was the alliance between France (supported by Britain) and Belgium which was strongly contested amongst the Flemish community where it was perceived as a move against the Dutch to strengthen Francophone dominance.

World War Repeated

The alliance led both countries into World War Two, and a small group of Walloons and Flemings once again explicitly collaborated with the Germans; the Flemish Vlaams National Verbond and Elias and the members of Walloon Rex contributed to the German 'war effort'. The Résistance was again led by the Francophone regions under the Armée Secrète run by the exiled Francophone governments: the Front de l'Indépendance and the Mouvement National Belge.

La Question Royale

World War Two saw the capture of Leopold the Third by the Germans, leaving a void in the Belgian monarchical system. The King was perceived to have collaborated with the enemy because he had met with Hitler, and upon his release, the Government asked him not to return to Belgium. The monarch's demise was put to a vote which resulted with 57.6% in favor of the King's return. This majority was found in Flanders where the vote was 72% in favor of King Leopold's return, but the referendum results were not accepted in Wallonia because the Walloons objected to the King's right to reign due to his formal resignation, capitulation and alleged collaboration with the Germans. In order to avoid violence over the matter, Leopold abdicated in favor of Baudouin, his son. This ended the conflict, but contributed to embittering the relations between the two regions.

Guerre Scolaires

In the 1950s, Belgium was divided again by controversy over the status of schools. The Catholic parties having been in government from 1884 to 1950, there were very few public schools, but an urgent need to educate the masses was present after the post-war baby boom. This was used as a political tool by the freethinkers to challenge the Catholic government. The subsequent 'School Wars' were an interplay between the parties in power and the popular reaction to their laws concerning education. The Harmel government instituted laws increasing subsidies to private technical education and linked state subsidies to the number of pupils. In 1952, a law formally increased subsidies and granted full freedom of choice to parents between free and state education. In 1954, the mostly Catholic coalition lost its majority to the Socialists and Liberals who instated the "Loi Collard" after the Minister for Education Louis Collard, who was hostile to the confessional education. This new law reduced subsidies and increased the number of state schools simultaneously, and made the said-subsidies conditional upon control of the curriculum and qualifications of teachers, a move directed against the Catholic priests since only 6% of priests who taught in schools held a proper degree, leading to the restructuring of many small Catholic schools. This led to greater controversy and an outcry from the Catholic community to whom this law was directed. This mobilized many Catholics: popular reaction was evident in two demonstrations, the first in 1955, and the second in 1958, which each brought 200,000 people into the streets and led to the demise of the party at the following elections in 1958. The compromise to the School Wars was found in the "Pacte Scolaire" in 1958, an agreement in which the Catholics came out the victors (Delwit 1999, p33). This is evidenced in the figures of students attending Catholic schools in 1972; in Flanders, 66.7% of students attended Catholic schools, and in Wallonia, 42.4% of students frequented Catholic secondary schools (Witte 2000,

p191). Formally, the Pacte was instituted by the various political parties in power. In truth, it was the result of a small initiative led by the PSB-Libéraux party and the PSC. The “Pacte Scolaire” defines the different types of education, the subsidies allocated by the government to all the schools, guarantees freedom of choice in education, financially assists all forms of officially recognized educational systems and establishes the degree of autonomy the various institutions are to have. It also describes the State’s official position in recognizing Catholic education and providing subsidies to these schools. The Pacte, according to Lijphart, is likened to a peace treaty which would end the war between the Catholics and the secular Liberals for the ensuing ten years.

Balance of Power

In the XIXth and XXth Century, Flanders developed fantastically thanks to Commerce and the strategic position of the Belgian ports in the North Sea. This helped open the Northern region to the international world which led to strong economic and political relations. Wallonia, the first to industrialize, held its industry in coal, steel and textiles which are primary sector industries. In the 1960s, the Flemings became the national majority numerically and were still developing heavily. The industrial base of the South, coal, steel, ceramics, glass and chemicals, were in decline. Ideologically, the Walloons tended to be atheist and socialist whilst the Flemings were traditionally Catholic and right-wing. With the reversal of the situation in which the Flemings began to dominate the Francophones and Walloons economically, the latter started to fear for their political future.

The construction of Federal Belgium

Originally, Belgium was a unitary centralized state with a single French language, in which the provinces had limited power, financial resources and legal autonomy. Initially, pressure for

reforms in the system came from the Flemish minority who were at a disadvantage but as Flanders modernized and overtook Wallonia/Bruxelles-Capitale economically, the dynamics changed and the Walloons and French-Speakers started asking for separation of regions as a defensive move to keep political power. Regional cleavages were already evident and clearly marked in the 1950s and 1960s with the divisions over the *Qu estion Royale* and the ‘*Guerres Scolaires*’. Each linguistic community started off demanding power over their cultural and economic spheres. Brussels, a bilingual community, could not exercise such powers, creating a void in the system. The Egmont Pact in 1977 was the first successful attempt to address the problem: “Under the Pact, Belgium would eventually have comprised the central state and three communities, each with an elected assembly and executive assembly and executive” (Fitzmaurice 1996, p124). The fundamentals of this pact led to the present Federal system. The Flemish political parties, needing the Central government less and less due to their growing economic independence, started by fighting for cultural autonomy. The South further demanded financial autonomy. With the North demanding cultural autonomy and the South insisting on financial autonomy, Belgium resorted to what is referred to as “*un compromis   la Belge*” (a Belgian compromise). In 1968-73, regional embryos started emerging in the Federal government which led to the division of Belgium into regions and communities, delegating power and autonomy over finances and culture. The devolution of power for culture and economics led to a schizophrenic situation. In the 60s, there were two ministers for culture and for National Education. A Belgian Prime Minister once said “*j’ ai deux ministres de l’ ducation sans culture, et deux ministres de la culture sans education*” (I have two ministers of education with no culture, and two ministers of culture with no education.). Successive reforms and devolution led to the Belgium Federal System in 1993.

There are five levels of power in Belgium's current federal system (Cotton 2001, p7):

-The Federal

-The Communities *based on language (Flemish, Francophone, and German) each have power over issues relevant to the population of the community: culture, education and health*

-Regional *based on geography. 3 Regions: Flemish, Walloon and Brussels. The regions exert power over the economy and planning over their territory.*

-Provinces, *of which there are ten*

-Communes, *of which there are 589.*

The Flemish community merged with the region of Flanders in 1980, emphasizing the asymmetry of Belgian federalism.

Belgian devolution began with the School Wars, when the government showed itself incapable of managing popular discontent or keeping control over the educational system. The single nation imagined by the constituents in 1830 has been transformed into a Federal State, in which education plays a central role in the stability and future of Belgium.

The structure of education in Belgium

The Belgian Constitution (1831) guarantees freedom of education: **Article 17** « L'enseignement est libre; toute mesure préventive est interdite; la répression des délits n'est réglée que par la loi. L'instruction publique donnée aux frais de l'Etat est également réglée par la loi. » (education is free, all obstructive measures are forbidden; any trespassing is dealt with by the law. Public instruction funded by the State is equally regulated by the law) (AIDH, 1831). This gives parents the choice of enrolling their children in whichever school corresponds to their philosophical and religious convictions. It also gives all Belgians the right to education free of charge.

Education is divided into the three Belgian communities in which there are two systems: the Private and the Public. Public education is organized into communes, provinces and communities. There are three major educational networks: Community education (enseignement communautaire), Free Subsidized education (l'enseignement libre subventionné) which is largely catholic, and Officially Subsidized education (l'enseignement officiel subventionné) which is organized by the provinces and the communes. Education administered by the communities has no religious or philosophical affiliations and must offer a choice of teaching in a “recognized or secular moral instruction” (A.S.S.B).

Compulsory education is from ages 6 to 18, and can be preceded by kindergarten and nursery. Secondary education is divided into general education, technical, artistic and professional, reflecting the emphasis on vocational training in Belgium. Since January 1st 1989, predating the Federal System, the communities have had a monopoly over their educational system within their linguistic area and a high degree of autonomy is allowed to the individual schools (Federal b.B.P). The Federal State controls the “start and finish of compulsory schooling” (A.S.S.B): the

conditions for fulfilling diplomas, and the pensions for teachers^{iv}. The State administers the tax system for the entirety of the country and allocates educational funds to the Communities according to specific criteria described in the Pacte de Solidarité (1959) and in the Act of January 16 1989 (COCOF)^v. The description of the distribution of educational funds states that “the annual amount is calculated on the basis of the reference year 1987 and adjusted partially each year in relation to population trends” (A.S.S.B). In 1989, the Flemish Community received 56.2% of the funds, the French and German speaking communities 43.8%. A special act sets out the amount of funding the German speaking community receives. The Belgian educational system gives students a choice of changing education systems from the age of 14 onwards. The following figure shows the different options of scolarity Belgian students have under the current system.

Figure 1: Description of the vocational Education system in Belgium for both Francophone and Flemish communities (adapted from DEAFVOC)

Option D	Vocational training				Supplementary secondary school				employment				
Option C	Technical school				Short Higher education (non Uni)				employment				
Option B	Art school				Long Higher education (non Uni)				employment				
Option A	General education				University education				Postgraduate studies				
age in year	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26

Financial Distribution of educational funds

Since 1989, education in Belgium has been communalized. The French, Flemish and German Communities are autonomous in matters of education and receive funds from the Federal State via the Loi de Financement, as is stated in article 175 of the Belgian Constitution. There is a base amount of 296 billion francs (or 7,337,648,333 euros in 1999 index) allocated to education, but this amount is indexed annually and adapted to the demographic evolution of the 3 to 18 year-old group. It does not, however, factor in the progress of national wealth, which increases a lot faster than the inflation rate. Hence the amount of funds in terms of GDP diminishes constantly. The Loi de Financement further determines the way this 'fixed' amount is divided among the French and Flemish Communities. In 1988, the Francophone education was a little bit more expensive than the Flemish education. The French Community held 42.45% of young people in schools but spent 43.5% of the national budget for education. The Loi de Financement has changed this by distributing the budget according to the amount of young people in the region, per population capita. In 1999, the Flemish Community received 57.55% of funds, whereas the Francophone Community was allocated 42.45%. It should be noted that the population of Brussels was arbitrarily divided into 20% Francophone and 80% Flemish, which favors the Flemish Community. Once the federal budget is distributed, the allocation of funds to academic institutions is up to the individual systems in each Community (Van Droogenbroek 1999).

Analysis

The Weaknesses of the Belgian Education System

As we have seen, education in Belgium is divided among ethnic lines, with the Flemish and Walloon/Francophone each isolated in their community and educational systems. This is a direct result of the federal system that allows the three federal regions to officially design and administrate their own system of education. There is, however, very little consultation and no shared standard in the various systems, which has yielded differences in the standard of education and student performance, as well as what is known as a “segregation of schools” (Hirtt 2005). The various studies such as the PISA survey conducted by the OECD have shown that the Flemish schools are considerably better in education than the schools in the French Communities, and rank amongst the most advanced scholastic systems amongst the countries in the OECD. The data collected by the PISA survey reveals the weaknesses in the education of the French Communities compared to the Flemish and other countries in the OECD, and highlights the economic and social problems in Belgium, such as unemployment, immigration and social and ethnic inequality.

PISA METHOD

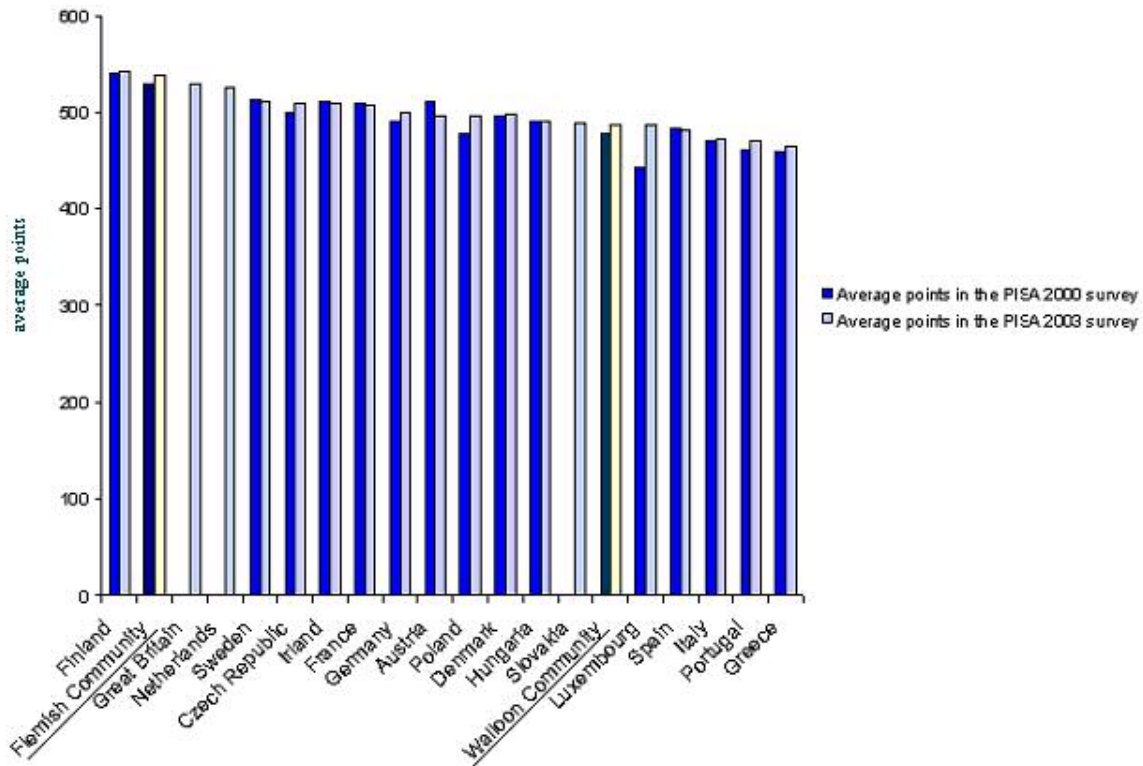
The PISA- Programm for International Student Assessment- survey is a three-yearly study conducted by the OECD that studies the academic capacities of 15 year-olds in industrialized countries. There have so far been two assessments, first in 2000 in 43 different countries, then in 2003 among 41 countries. The third assessment is set to take place in 2006. In 2003, a total of 276,166 15-year old students in 10,274 institutions were surveyed.

The study is a pencil and paper test that lasts two hours for each student. The layout is a mixture of multiple choice and free answer questions organized around “a passage setting out a real-life situation. A total of about seven hours of test items is covered, with different students taking different combinations of test items.” (OECD) There is a background questionnaire included and a questionnaire for the school principals. The data collected gives information about the students’ competences in reading, mathematics and sciences, but also social background, cultural environment, nationality, mother tongue, educational history, perception of their institution, methods of teaching etc...

In Belgium, in 2003, 8,796 students in 277 establishments were surveyed (Hirtt 2005). Since all these students were 15 years old, they should have theoretically all been in their fourth year of secondary education.

The data gathered from PISA are dated 2000 and 2003. There have been mild changes in the average results of individual countries, but overall the results of PISA 2003 reflect no substantial change in education and performance in said-countries since 2000 (see graph 1). Some countries, such as the Netherlands, completed too few surveys to be significant and their results were not included in the analysis of PISA 2000

Graph 1: Results of PISA 2000 and 2003 by country (adapted from Echev Scolaire)



Countries without 'redoublement' - Countries with redoublement:

f:Finland, R:Great Britain , S:Sweden, D:Denmark, i:Ireland, V:Communauté flamande de Belgique, N:Netherlands, T:Czech Republic, F:France, A:Germany, a:Austria, P:Poland, H:Hungaria, s:Slovakia, W:Communauté française de Belgique, L:Luxembourg, E:Spain, I:Italy, p:Portugal, G:Greece.

PISA Data

The results of the PISA survey show the disparity in performance between the students in the Flemish Community and the Wallonia-Brussels Community. Table 1 compares the average results in points from each community in reading, mathematics and scientific competence. In all three categories, the Flemish score considerably higher than their Francophone counterpart.

Table 1: Comparison of PISA Results (average points obtained by students) by Flemish and Wallonia-Brussels Communities (2000)

	Reading comprehension	Mathematical Culture	Scientific Culture
Flemish Community	532	543	519
Wallonia-Brussels Community	476	491	467

To put this in perspective, Table 2 shows the scores and placement of each community in perspective with other European countries and the average of the OECD countries. The Flemish Community registers one of the highest performances in education, second only to Finland, and is the strongest of all countries in Mathematics capability. The Flemish are second in Reading Comprehension but performed more poorly in scientific tests. This illustrates the strength of the Flemish system compared to the educational systems in other European countries.

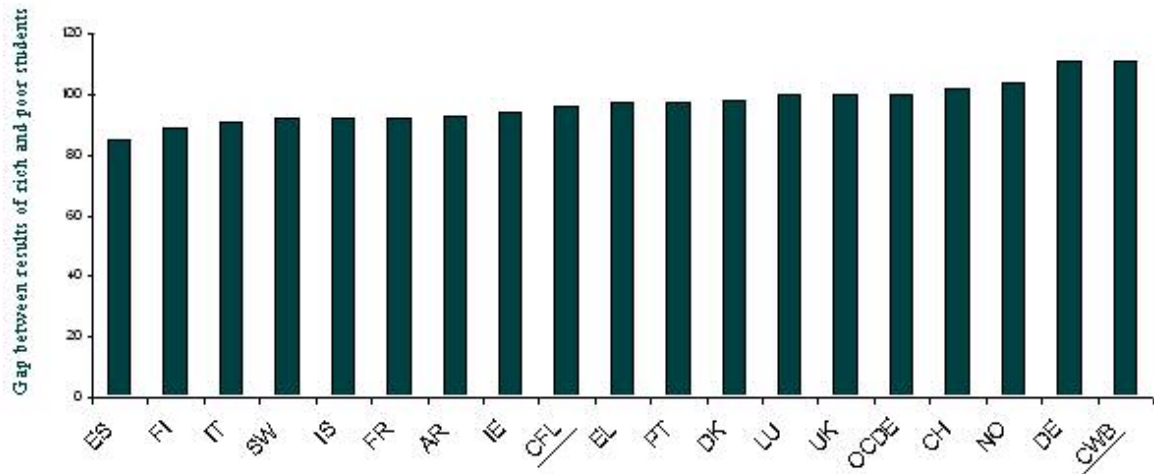
By comparison, the Wallonia-Brussels Community scores poorly in Reading comprehension, Mathematical Culture and Scientific Culture. The Francophone system rates fourth to last among all European countries but performs relatively better in Mathematics.

Table 2: Results of PISA by European country and Flemish and Wallonia-Brussels Communities in 2000 (adapted from TOUDI 2000, p7)

	Reading comprehension	Mathematical Culture	Scientific Culture
Finland (FI)	546	536	538
Flemish Community (CFL)	532	543	519
Ireland (IE)	527	503	513
United Kingdom (UK)	523	529	532
Sweden (SW)	516	510	512
Austria (AT)	507	515	519
Iceland (IS)	507	514	496
France (FR)	505	517	500
Norway (NO)	505	499	500
OCDE countries	500	500	500
Denmark (DK)	497	514	481
Switzerland (CH)	494	529	496
Spain (ES)	493	476	491
Italy (IT)	487	457	478
Germany (DE)	484	490	487
Wallonia-Brussels Community (CWB)	476	491	467
Greece (EL)	476	447	461
Portugal (PT)	470	454	459
Luxembourg (LU)	441	446	443

The PISA data reflects the relative efficiency of the educational system in the particular area/country in which the survey was taken. Of course, overall results are not the only data that reflect the effectiveness of an educational system. It is also worthwhile to investigate the equity of the system through the dispersion of results around the mean. This gives an idea about the disparity between the performances of the poorest students and the strongest. Graph 2 presents the importance of the gap between the poor and strong students around the OECD average of 100. A gap greater than 100 in a given country means that there is a more important spread in the results between students than the average for the participating countries.

Graph 2: Gap in results between poor and strong students by country in 2000 (adapted from TOUDI 2000)



The Walloon-Brussels Community has the most important spread between student performances, reflecting the inequity in the Walloon system. The system in the Flemish Community is more equitable since the spread in results of the students is lower than the average of the OECD but Belgium as a whole remains one of the most unequal system among the countries of Europe with a high spread in results.

Another significant figure in analyzing the differences between the Flemish and Walloon-Brussels systems is the distribution of students of the same age by year and formation. The PISA survey examines this in the questionnaire the subjects fill out prior to being tested.

Table 3: distribution of students in the Francophone communities by year and type of study. In 2003 (adapted from Hirtt 2005)

Type of education	2nd year in %	3rd year in %	4th year in %	Total In %
General		25.8	63.1	46.0
Technical		36.2	25.3	9.0
Professional		32.4	11.2	18.2
Other	100.0	5.5	0.4	8.0
Distribution by year	5.2	36.6	56.5	100.0

Table 4 shows the distribution of students in the Flemish communities by year and by type of study in 2003 (adapted from Hirtt, 2005)

Type of education	2nd year in %	3rd year in %	4th year in %	Total in %
General		16.0	57.8	46.1
Technical		35.8	28.3	29.0
Professional		39.7	13.1	19.0
Other	100.0	8.5	0.8	8.0
Distribution by year	2.6	24.1	71.9	100.0

The comparison of the two tables reveals the differences in the rates of ‘redoublement’ (this term is used for students who have repeated at least one year) in the two communities. In the Francophone community, only 56.5% of the students are ‘on time’, which shows the extremely high rates of ‘redoublement’ in the community: one student out of twenty has repeated more than one year. In the Flemish Community, the rate of ‘redoublement’ is relatively weak. 72% of students reach their fourth year of secondary school without repeating a year, and only 2.6% of students have repeated more than one year of school. Similarly, it is significant that 25.8% of the Francophone students who have been kept back a year remain in the general educational ‘route’, whereas 36.2% are directed towards a technical school. This illustrates the policy of systematic reorientation by failure. It is worth noting that, while there is a higher tendency to repeat a year in the Francophone system, the Flemish Community has higher rates of reorientation towards

technical and professional schools: only 16% of students who have repeated a year of school remain in the general education system. Overall, the data shows that there is a higher rate of ‘redoublement’ in the Francophone Community, but more reorientation in the Flemish Community.

Analysis of data

The results of the PISA survey have not been accepted on all fronts and certainly must be put in perspective.

According to José Fontaine, the Walloon-Brussels schools perform at 90% of the Flemish schools: “we are inferior, that is evident, but it is not catastrophic”.

The Flemish newspaper, De Standaard, argues that the difference in performance is due to the higher number of foreigners in the Francophone areas and thus in the Francophone schools. These foreigners study in a language that is not their own, and their parents are either both working or do not speak French fluently. Brussels holds about 31% of the foreign population in Belgium while Walloon has about 36% of the foreign population (Statbel 2005). One of the observable impacts on the results of the PISA survey is the lack of reading proficiency in the immigrant community where the first language is not always French. It should be pointed out, however, that one of the reasons that the Francophone area has more foreigners is due to the immigration of North Africans from former French colonies in search for employment, and hence their language of education *is* often French since the schooling system is still modeled on the French *Lycées*. PISA does not only reflect the efficacy of the educational system but it is also a demographic revelation of immigrants in Francophone schools. Furthermore, the education system in Wallonia-Bruxelles is strongly influenced by the French system which practices a policy of ‘redoublement’ holding students back a year if their academic performances do not

meet expectations. The Flemings on the other hand perceive this practice of ‘redoublement’ as ineffective. The difference in policy is reflected in the PISA survey as the students are surveyed by age, not by grade, and hence the Francophone students who have not reached the same level of study (being in the grade below) as their Flemish counterpart receive a lower result on the tests.

The reliability of PISA is questioned because of the format of the survey. PISA was set up with an Anglo-Saxon influence, and hence arguably favours educational systems which are close to the Anglo-Saxon system of education. English is the closest language to Dutch after German and has many similarities in the grammar and vocabulary (Wikipedia). Furthermore, the multiple choice format of the PISA survey is a method of testing which is often used in Anglo-Saxon and Flemish systems of education, but is rarely, if ever, found in French exams. This supports the argument that the PISA survey favours an Anglo-Saxon education system and puts the Francophone schools at a comparative disadvantage that must be taken into account when comparing the results between the two education systems.

It has also been argued that the mathematics tests rested on mathematical literacy, and not proficiency, and hence does not reflect the quality of mathematical education, but the ability to recognize and understand basic concepts (Braams 2002).

Consequences of PISA on parental choices.

It is widely known among the general population in Belgium that the PISA results of the students in the French Community are one of the worst among the countries of the OECD whereas the young Flemings are amongst the top students. The Flemish are well known for their strength in mathematics and languages and many children from bilingual (Flemish and French) families end up in a Flemish school in order to receive the best education on offer. It is also assumed that

Flemish is a more difficult language to learn, so it is best to be educated in it and to speak French in the family or learn it at a later date. This creates a discrepancy between the French and Flemish schools, since the bilingual families choose to desert the Francophone system, giving the Flemish a linguistic advantage, and leaving the Francophone schools to students from single-language backgrounds, disadvantaged families, or foreigners.

The State of Education

The differences in the results obtained by students in the Flemish and Francophone schools reflects the intrinsic differences in the two educational systems. This is partly due to the cultural ties of the two regions to their linguistic ‘partners’, France and the Netherlands. The regional schools have created a hybrid system of education in which they selectively adopt policies from the French and Dutch systems. This section will compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the two educational systems: the Flemish and the Francophone

It is interesting to note that the Netherlands (Nederland) is stronger in mathematics than both the French and the Belgians overall (see table 5). In fact the Netherlands are ranked as fourth in mathematical achievement in all the countries surveyed by PISA and second among European countries. Similarly, in Reading comprehension and Mathematics, the Netherlands rank higher than both France (Frankrijk) and Belgium (Belgie) (see tables 6 and 7), albeit falls in the ranking (9th in reading and 8th in Sciences).

France ranks after Belgium in all subjects save Science (13th place) where its average results are just a little bit better than its northern neighbor. In Mathematics, Belgium and France rank as 8th and 16th among selected countries, and in Reading Comprehension, France is notoriously bad in the 18th position, whereas Belgium is ranked as 11th.

These results reveal the comparative superiority of the Netherlands to the French and Belgian education systems in Mathematics, Reading Comprehension and Sciences. It also shows the comparative weaknesses of French education. Since both the Netherlands and the French have had a significant influence on the Belgian educational systems, it is natural to find that Belgium overall is ranked between its two neighbors in education performance. The Flemish Community, led by the Dutch tradition, pulls up the overall average of the Belgians in education surveys, whereas the Francophone Community follows a weaker French education system and hence brings down the average, leaving Belgium acting as evidence of the strong tradition of education in Netherlands and the weaker one in France. It is interesting to note that the Federal model, in which the regions are allowed freedom to design their own institutions and compare and compete with one another, has not been effective in the area of education. The Flemish and Walloon regions, instead of comparing and competing with one another, have opted to model themselves on their transnational neighbors: the Netherlands and France.

Table 5: Average Mathematics results for selected countries in 2003 (adapted from CITO)

Country	Average points
Hong-Kong China	550
Finland	544
South-Korea	542
the Netherlands	538
Liechtenstein	536
Japan	534
Canada	532
Belgique	529
Macau-China	527
Switzerland	527
Australia	524
New Zealand	523
Czech Republic	516
Island	515
Denmark	514
France	511
Sweden	509
Austria	506
Ireland	503
Germany	503

Table 6: Average Reading results for selected countries in 2003 (adapted from CITO)

Country	Average points
Finland	543
Korea	534
Canada	528
Australia	525
Liechtenstein	525
New Zealand	522
Ireland	515
Sweden	514
the Netherland	513
Hong-Kong China	510
Belgium	507
Norway	500
Switzerland	499
Japan	498
Macau-China	498
Poland	497
United States	495
France	496
Denmark	492
Iceland	492

Table 7: Average science results for selected countries in 2003 (adapted from CITO)

Country	Average points
Finland	548
Japan	548
Hong-Kong China	539
Korea	538
Liechtenstein	525
Australia	525
Macau-China	525
the Netherlands	524
Czech Republic	523
New Zealand	521
Canada	519
Switzerland	513
France	511
Belgium	509
Sweden	506
Ireland	505
Hungaria	503
Germany	502
Poland	498
Iceland	495

Strengths of the Flemish system

The Flemish Brabant has stayed very close to the Netherlands which shares the same language (Dutch) and heritage, including a dominant Christian religion (US Department of State). The Netherlands has a history of scientific and mathematical accomplishments, evidenced in the number of Nobel Prizes won by Dutch scientists (Nobel website). This tradition is emulated in the Flemish education system through an emphasis on hard sciences and mathematics. The strength of the Flemings in sciences and mathematics is evident in the PISA results, where they rank as second among OECD countries (see table 2).

Furthermore, “Flemish was introduced as a dead language, and hence was taught with care and strictness particularly with regards to spelling”^{vi} which explains the advantage of the Flemish in reading comprehension. Most television channels in the Flemish Brabant show English shows, but usually use subtitles instead of dubbing the voices. This has helped immerse the youth in the

Anglo-Saxon culture and facilitated the learning of English. Moreover, the Flemish population has traditionally learnt French as a second language. The Flemish have recently taken to learning English as a second language, as opposed to French, and have developed strong ties with the Anglo-Saxon world, leaving them with a comparative advantage in international business and politics. In a bilingual country, speaking both languages is practically a guarantee of finding employment, a fact that is evident in the rates of unemployment in Flanders and in Walloon which will be discussed later.

Weaknesses of the Francophone system

There is a panoply of literature speculating on the reasons for the disparity between the results of the Flemish Community and the Walloon-Brussels Community. These mostly focus on the weaknesses of the Francophone education system, particularly the inequity of the schools, the nefarious impact of the 'redoublement' and the hierarchic set-up of the schooling institutions. With regards to the influence of the French, it is evident that the French educational system is intrinsically weak, particularly in Reading Comprehension where it ranks 18th out of all OECD countries, but also in mathematics and sciences. It is uncertain how far the French system influences the Francophones in the instruction and content of the particular subjects, but the results obtained by the Francophone Community, as opposed to their Flemish counterpart, are interestingly close to the results obtained by the French and imply a certain level of consistency between the two systems. In Mathematics in 2000, for example, the French results are 517, while the CWB mean is 491. The spread between the results of France and CWB is consistently negligent. Nonetheless, France consistently performs better in the PISA survey than the Francophone Community, so its influence, while not insignificant, does not account for the relative weakness of the Francophone system in Belgium.

Still, a tradition borrowed from the French system is that of the ‘redoublement’ (the French term for *repeating a year*) which penalizes students who have not performed satisfactorily in school by making them repeat the school year. Graph 1 shows that the practice of the ‘redoublement’ actually does not improve the performances of the students overall. In fact, the countries with the highest performance in education do not use the ‘redoublement’ at all, as is the case with Finland, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Ireland. Their standard of education is not reduced by leaving students with difficulties in the same classes as their peers. To the contrary, high rates of ‘redoublement’ are associated with the low rates of performance of the Francophone Community in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, etc...

So why practice a policy of redoublement? Many professors view the practice of ‘redoublement’ as giving a second chance to the students who have not reached the expected level of education and would fail if allowed to move up a year. Research (Crahay 1996) shows that in Switzerland and Belgium, keeping a student back a year is often motivated by the perceived student’s lack of development and maturity which allegedly influences the student’s capacity in working and dealing with a ‘normal’ social environment. The ‘redoublement’ is also justified as incentive for the students to work harder, or as a way to avoid classes that are too heterogeneous. This last argument is most frequently used, as it is believed that students with difficulties will hold the entire class back and monopolize the teacher (Meuret 2002). The ‘redoublement’ is hence practiced in order to increase the quality of students with diplomas.

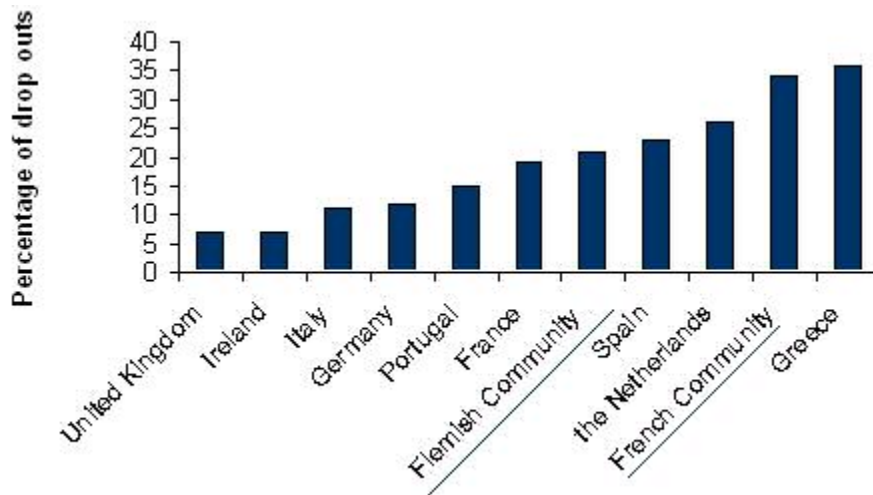
Statistics have shown, however, that the ‘redoublement’ is more harmful than it is good and acts both as a factor of failure, demoralization and social segregation. This is evident already in the comparison between Flemish students and Francophone students: The Flemings, who rarely apply the policy of ‘redoublement’, have much higher results in all subjects than their

Francophone counterparts. This shows that keeping the students back does not make them more competent in school. Besides, the objective of education is the teaching of all students, not the selection of the best. It has also been argued that keeping students back a year acts as a factor of demoralization and stress and has contributed to the high failure and reorientation rates in the Francophone Community. 16% of students in Wallonia-Brussels are kept back at least one year, but an extra 8% are reoriented out of the general education system towards a vocational school. Overall, this means that 24% of students fail in general school. About 4000 students are kept back in the Francophone Community *every year*. This is extremely costly for the Community, as it only receives subsidies by the federal government for students up to the age of 18. The schools, however, receive more funds in keeping the students back one year or two as they are subsidized by capita, regardless of age. This leads to a contradiction, as the Francophone Community receives less money, but is expected to distribute more as the schools get larger. The Association de Parents Luttant contre l'Echec et l'Abandon Scolaires fights against this culture of 'redoublement', arguing that the policy is directly correlated with the rates of drop-out and explaining that "if you don't stop a student, he will of course continue. Either he will eventually reach the required level of education and competence, and he will in any case not have needed to stay back a year, or he hasn't, and a final exam, or eventually his employer, will show the student that he is lacking." (Kerckhofs 2003)

The shockingly high rates of drop-outs in Belgium testify to the inequality of the education system. The Francophone Community has a rate of drop-out of **34%**, the second worst in the European Union before Greece! This phenomenal rate of dropout means that one out of three students in the Francophone Community leave school without obtaining a diploma; this is reflected in Wallonia, where 31% of the 25-34 year olds have not received a high school diploma

(Kerckhofs, 2003). Drop-outs have been associated with high rates of ‘redoublement’, demoralization, but also social discrimination.

Figure 3: Drop-outs by country and Community adapted from Echee Scolaire



One of the reasons for the failure of the Francophone education system, according to Bernadette Arnaud (TOUDI, p7), is the classification of the schools by the socioeconomic backgrounds and academic strengths of individuals. This has been turned into a strong selectivity of the education system in which only the strongest students continue with ‘general’ education while others are relegated to vocational schools and the like as soon as they encounter the slightest difficulty. This selectivity is correlated to the students’ socioeconomic background and ethnicity of the students, although these tend to go hand in hand in Belgium. Studies have in fact shown a high correlation between social segregation in schools and poor performances, and according to the PISA survey, there is “no country in which the disparity between standards of education in the different schools is higher than that of the French Community in Belgium” (Hirtt 2006) (see graph 2). This leads to the social classification of “rich schools” and “poor schools”. This segregation takes place in the Community for several reasons. First, the students in the French Community are redirected towards various educational orientations according to their academic

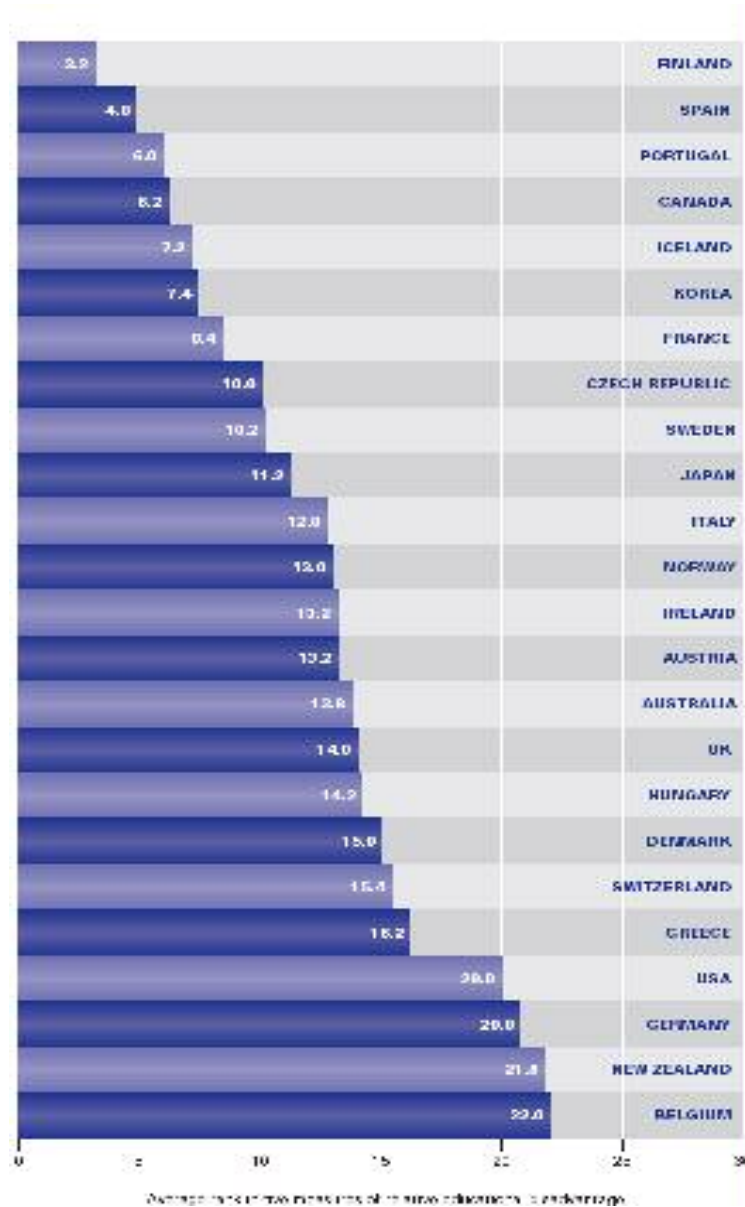
strength from the age of twelve. Thus, the strongest students remain in the general system while others leave to go to a technical or professional school. The system of education in Belgium is very elitist, and students following a vocational education are looked down upon by their peers. The students who abandon the general system are disadvantaged in subjects such as math and French, science, history and geography, since these subjects are not emphasized in vocational schools. This contributes to widening the gap between the strong students and the weaker ones, and it comes as no surprise that these differences are reflected in the PISA survey.

A second reason for the disparity in student performances is the lack of support and individual attention given to students with academic difficulties. Schools in the French community count on the parents to fill the gap when the student is falling behind, an unrealistic expectation in families where both parents work as is the case in many poor or middle-class families. The lack of support has been justified by a shortage of funds, and a need to uphold a high quality in education by not compromising the standards of education for students who are unable to keep up.

A third reason for disparities, according to Nico Hirtt (2006), is the policy of choosing one's school. Belgium is one of the few countries in which there is no organization of the distribution of students among various schools. In fact, the selection of schools is made on the basis of a 'free market' principle in which the parents choose the school according to quality, reputation, etc... Many schools acquire a good reputation according to their selectivity; hence those that filter out the bad students are in higher demand, creating a vicious circle of ongoing segregation. Meanwhile, "écoles poubelles" (Wallonie 1998) develop, regrouping the worst students together and making it nearly impossible for the teachers to effectively keep up the level set by other schools. There is also very little coordination between the different institutions in Wallonia-

Brussels with those in Flanders. Schools must generally follow a set program of education with a certain number of hours per subject per week, and cover certain topics for each class, but the liberalization and deregulation of schools have obscured the lines between the compulsory program, and the teachers' self-determination. Furthermore, the Catholic schools continue, in the name of their autonomy, to create their own educational programs, creating a greater break between the Flemish (mostly Catholic) and the Walloons (who tend to be in government schools). This also makes it particularly difficult for students to change from one school or system to the other. Finally, the Liberal education system is characterized by the complete freedom of the schools and teachers to evaluate the students according to their own criteria, with no or little consistency between the different schools. Figure 4 shows that countries that have high inequality are allowing wide educational gaps to open between the academically successful students and the weaker ones. Belgium, the last country in the table, is unable (and arguably unwilling) to manage the educational disadvantages of its population, despite the social and economic consequences (which we will discuss later). Students in Belgium and particularly in the French Community are disadvantaged in terms of social mobility, since the education system feeds directly into social elitism. If a student attends a certain school, not only will he receive a low standard of education, but he will be penalized if he attempts to change schools, systems, or continue further education.

Figure 4: Countries by extent of the difference in achievement between children at the bottom and at the middle of each country’s achievement range. It shows the average rank in five measures of relative educational disadvantage: the difference in test score between the 5th and 50th percentiles in each country in survey of reading, maths and science literacy of 15 year olds (PISA) and of maths and science 8th grade achievement (TIMSS) from UNICEF



The educational ‘market’ is divided according to social background. The literature condemning the social selectivity of schools is vast, particularly for Belgium. The ‘redoublement’ and

reorientation of students is strongly linked to their social background. In Figure 5, among the poorest students, 65% are a year late in their studies at the age of 15, whereas only 18% of the richest (wealthy) students have repeated a year in the Francophone Community. The Figure contrasts the statistics of both the Flemish and the Francophone Communities to show that social segregation in schools is prevalent in all of Belgium, not just in the Francophone Community (this explains also why Belgium is last in Figure 4).

Figure 5: ‘redoublement’ of students in the Francophone Community and Flemish Community (at age 15) according to social class with 1 as the poorest and 10 as the richest class (adapted from (Hirtt, 2006 and 2005).

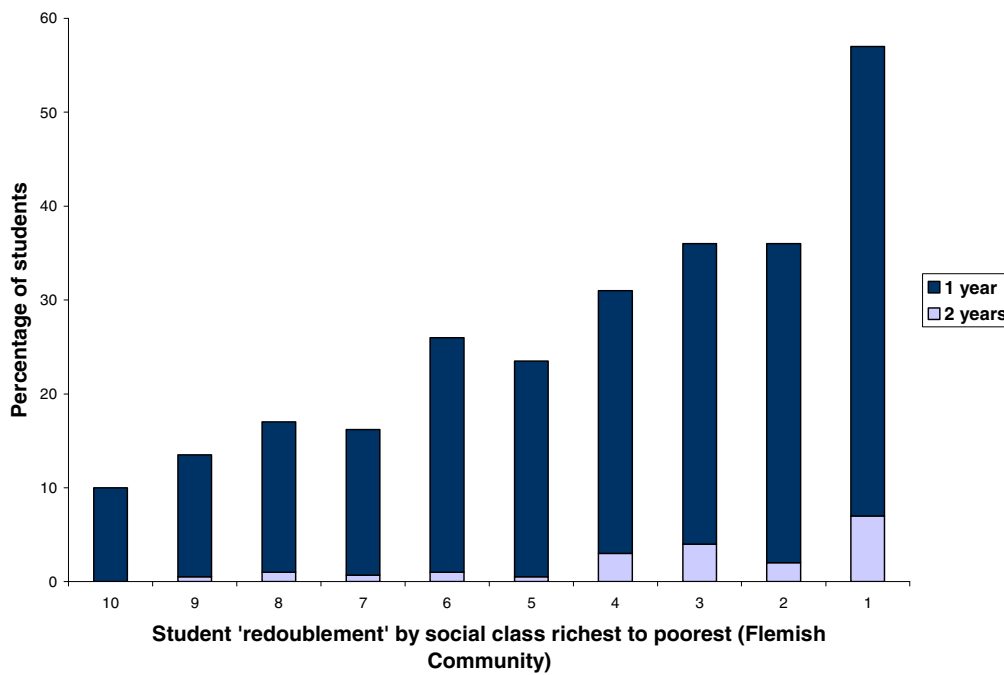
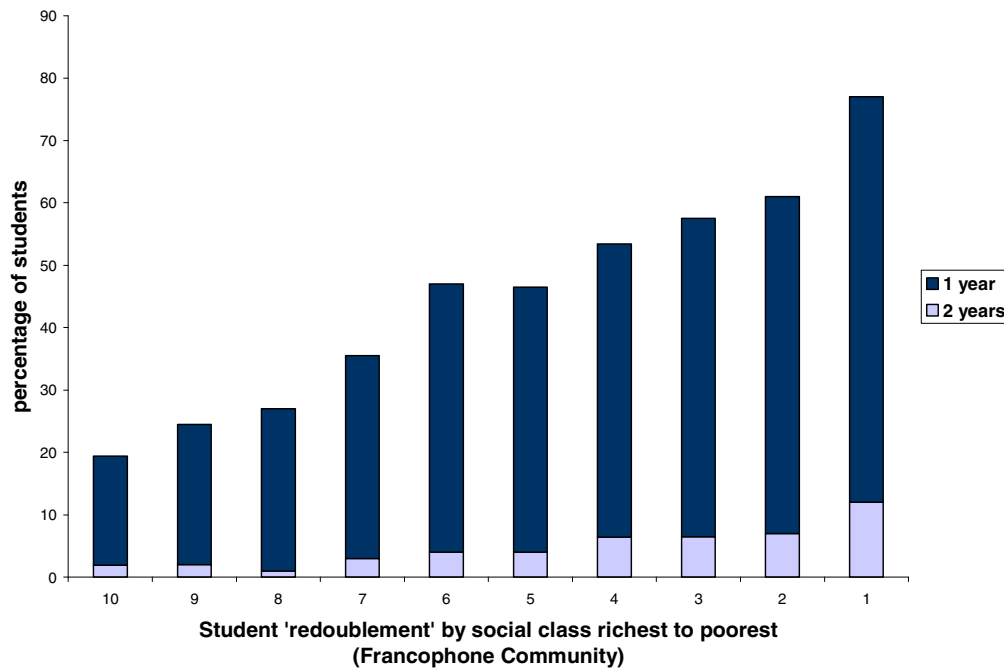


Figure 6: Reorientation of students in the Francophone Community and Flemish Community according to social class and system with 1 as ‘poor’ class and 10 as ‘high’ class (Hirtt, 2006 and 2005).

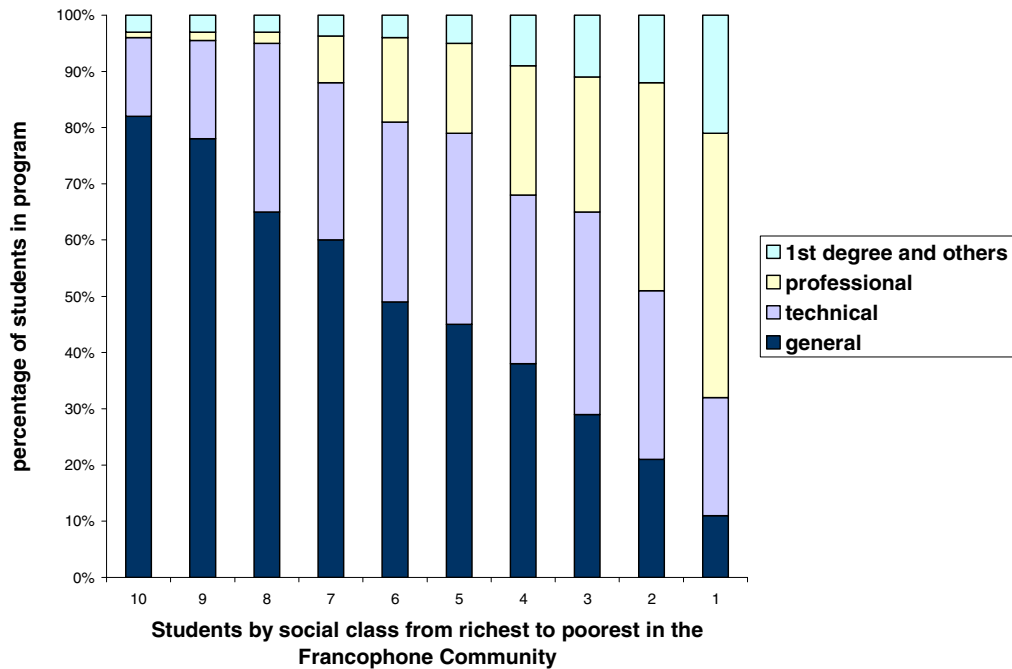
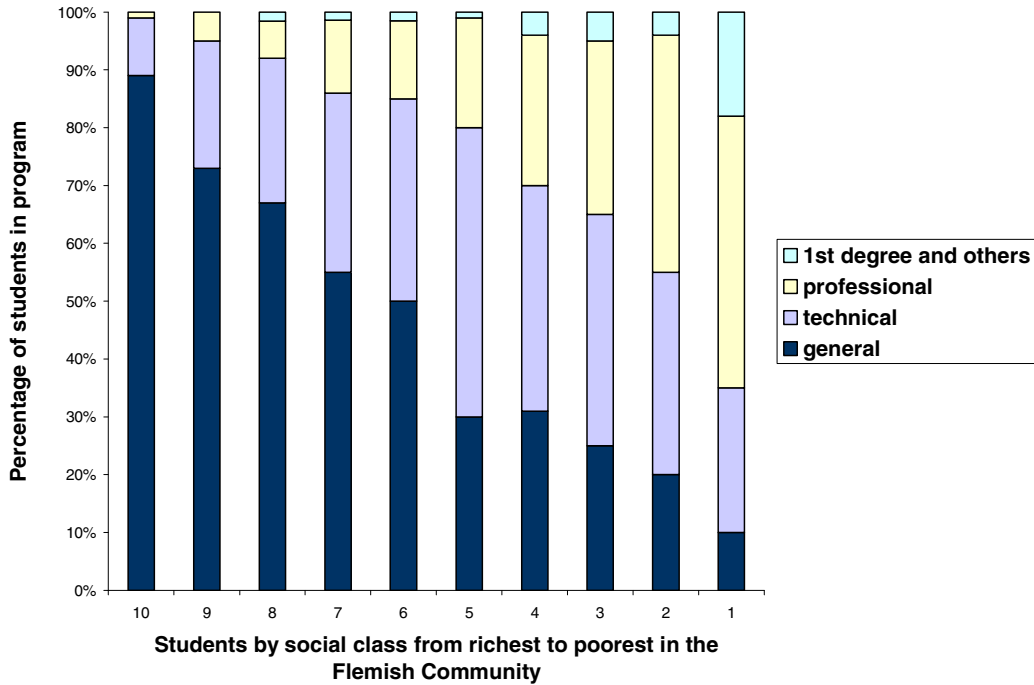
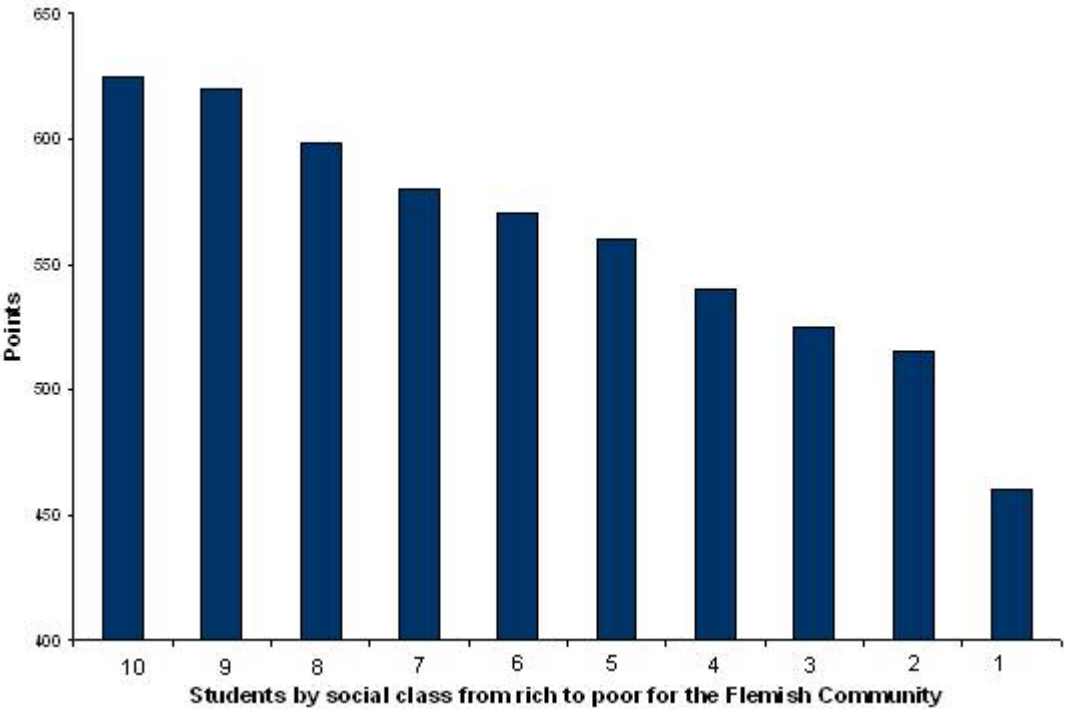
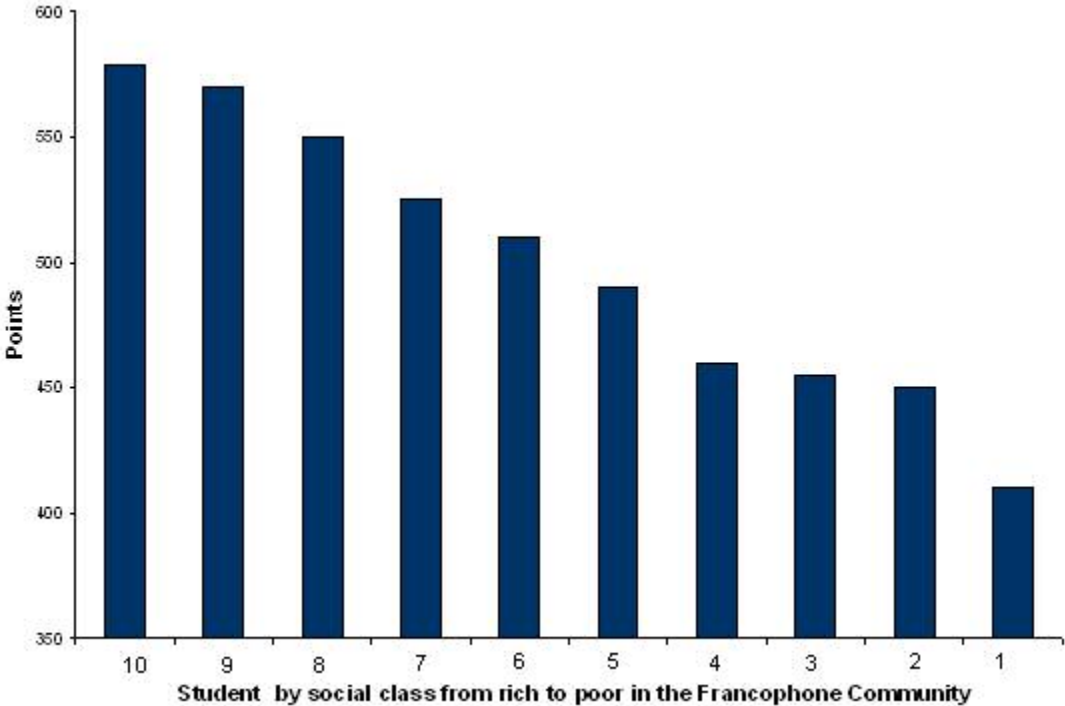


Figure 6 shows the tendency of students from poor social backgrounds to leave the general system of education and be reoriented in both Communities. Thus 83% of 'rich' students remain in the general system, whereas only 11% of 'poor' students are still in the general system at age 15 in the Francophone system.

It should be observed that the phenomenon of social segregation is equally present in Flanders, although the rates of 'redoublement' are substantially lower, with a high of 50% of poorest students and 10% of richest students. Nonetheless, social background is still a determining variable in the distribution of students by vocation, even more so in Flanders than in Wallonia-Brussels: Figure 6 shows that 10% of poor students remain in the general education system, versus 88% of rich students. The similarities in these statistics between the Flemish and the Francophones shows a prevalence in the Belgian education system to discriminate according to social class/background, a factor that is emphasized in the lack of social mobility in the kingdom and criticized by the UNICEF Innocenti Report Card in November 2004.

Another way to view the disparities between students is in their math scores from the PISA survey. The gap is astonishingly apparent in figure 7 for both the French and Flemish Communities, although it has to be noted that the overall points are much higher for the students in the Flemish Community, giving them an additional advantage over the Francophones, irrespective of social background. Poor students in category 2 in the Flemish Community have a higher math average than richer students in category 7 of the Francophone Community.

Figure 7: Maths points in the French and Flemish Communities by social background with 1 as the poorest students and 10 and the richest (adapted from (Hirtt 2005))



Not only is there a ‘natural’ social selection, but the PISA survey revealed that 60% of directors in schools admit to selecting (illegally) the students according to their previous academic results and even, some times, according to their parents’ religion.

It is consequently obvious in this study that social background can affect academic performance in Belgium, particularly in the Francophone Community. As is observed in figure 4, Belgium is the “champion” (Arnaud 2002) of social discrimination in schools and generates social stagnation among the population.

The reasons for this social discrimination are outlined by Nico Hirtt in his article “l’école démocratique n’est pas encore au programme de Marie Arena” in November 2004, where he singles out the lack of funds in the educational system at all levels and in all systems. Classes are too big, teachers are overworked, schools are falling apart, are overfilled, there is a severe lack of didactic material, lack of pedagogic support etc... Most of this can be remedied with more funds and a succinct plan for education reforms. Second, Hirtt stresses the nefarious impact of the precocious selection of students towards vocational training as one of the principal causes behind the gap between students’ academic performance. It has been established that countries in which there is a common system of education until the age of 16 (not 12 as is the case in Belgium) have higher scores in education and are less subject to social discrimination. Finland is often used as an example to illustrate the success of a common education until a later age, a fact that is statistically observable in figures 2 and 4. Students in Finland have compulsory common education until the age of 16 after which they can continue in the general system, reorient or leave school.

Third, Hirtt criticizes the ‘free market’ of schools as a factor of discrimination, as well as the substantially large free-reign the institutions have in designing their academic curriculum.

Students tend to amalgamate in schools that are appropriate to their 'level', i.e. to their social class. This social segregation feeds into the regional Francophone-Flemish segregation by widening the gap in academic performances between the students along ethno-linguistic lines.

Objections: Money, social class and Church

The social and ethnic discrimination between the Flemings and Bruxellois/Walloons in the Belgian educational system brings up salient issues such as the distribution of funds across regional lines in a Federal system, and the presence of confessional schools in a modern society. The 'refinancing' of education has become the center of the debate on education in Belgium. Since 1980, public spending on education has fallen from 7% of GDP to 5.2% of GDP. This means that there is 5 to 6 billion euros less being spent in education in Belgium than would have been the case on a full indexing, even though schools have continued to grow as has the overall population. The Walloon-Brussels call for increased spending on education has faced three objections (Hirtt 2004): 1) the Flemings will not agree; 2) the money isn't there; 3) education is already too costly.

Concerning the first objection, the Flemings have in fact also asked for an increase in spending on education, particularly since they too are victims of systematic social segregation in schools. The second and third objections are due to the political system, in which a reduction of taxes has led to a reduction on spending, particularly with respect to education. It has been argued that this is leading *down* to a perceived 'American socialism' in which there is less social security and public services in exchange for paying lower taxes. Nonetheless, Belgium's spending on education is comparatively low; Finland's investment in education is 22% higher than Belgium's, while Denmark spends 73% more than Belgium on schools and education.

The proposal of dispensing with the policy of ‘freedom of choice’ for parents in choosing their children’s education is threefold: first, a geographic distribution of students by school (which is currently the case in France) would allegedly perpetuate the social discrimination of schools since people from similar backgrounds tend to congregate in the same neighborhoods. This has merit, since the wealth in Belgium is heavily distributed by commune, such that Waterloo and Uccle are particularly wealthy, whereas Scharbeek and Charleroi are relatively poorer.

Nonetheless, it has been pointed out that the level of social segregation in schools today is higher than the geographic segregation (Hirtt 2004). The comparison with France is appropriate, since, with the strategies to overcome social segregation, social inequality in French schools is 30% lower than the level of social segregation in Belgium (see figure 4). Second, parents will never accept to forego their right to choose the academic institution for their children, even though this puts foreigners at a disadvantage, as they do not have the same information as Belgian parents and are more liable to choose an institution by chance than through an educated decision. Third, and perhaps most salient, is the polemic on religious schools. The Walloons-Bruxellois, most particularly, are vocal about this issue, and question whether the existence of state-sponsored confessional schools is still justified in a democratic society? The Catholic and ‘free’ educational systems contribute to the segregation of students across regional lines, since most catholic schools are in Flanders whereas Walloons-Bruxellois choose to put their students in the free system. Although traditionally there is a tendency to view Catholic schools as superior to other institutions, it could be argued that religious schools exert more discipline through their application of the 10 Commandments (Eykens). Furthermore, Catholic schools used to be run by priests who did not have a teaching diploma, but this has changed and the teachers in these schools tend to be highly qualified, perhaps because the schools have the means to pay them

more than the free schools. There is no convincing evidence that the Catholic schools are better academic institutions than their secular counterpart^{vii}, but the culture of a religious school and their freedom to create their own academic curriculum contribute to the segregation of the Walloons and Flemings by creating a different basis in education, and instilling a sense of religious identity to a select ethnic group.

Conclusion of data analysis

It has been established that the Flemish education system is more successful in preparing students for studies of sciences, mathematics and reading/languages than the Francophone education system. There is a substantial gap in proficiency between the students in the region of Flanders and the region of Wallonia-Brussels. This is due to the differences in the academic programs, the influences of neighboring countries, the culture of the ‘redoublement’ and reorientation and the prevailing social segregation of students into elitist schools and “écoles poubelles”. The consequences of two regional systems of education in Belgium is the division of Belgians across ethnic and linguistic lines and has led to economic and political devolution within the kingdom which will be discussed in the following section.

Socio-Economic Consequences

There is a shortage of literature regarding the correlation between education and its socio-economic consequences in Belgium. The various interviews conducted reflected a popular view that education and economic growth are interrelated. Marc Eyskens, the former Prime Minister, stated that “it is possible and probable that [the better results in the North] are the result of a better economic situation”. Previous research on the economic consequences of education, however, along with the convincing statistics on economic development in Flanders and in Wallonia, indicates that the inequality in the education systems of both regions has contributed to the growing economic gap between the Flemish and the Walloons. To establish this, it is necessary to compare the economic status of both regions.

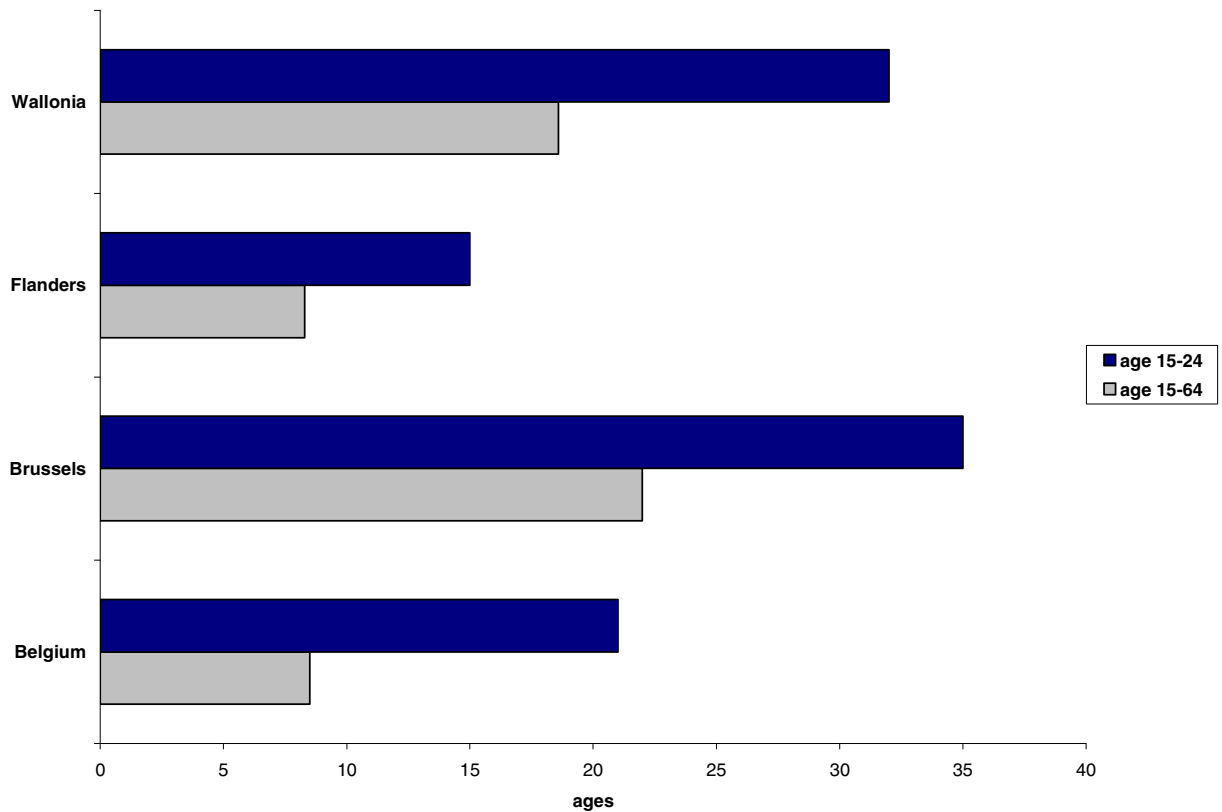
Flanders’ economic development is significantly more successful than Wallonia’s. Productivity is about 20% higher per citizen in Flanders compared to Wallonia (OECD 2005), although this is probably linked to the high rate of unemployment in the Francophone region. Belgium has a high rate of unemployment of about 8.5% for 2005 (OECD 2005). While unemployment rates have moderately stabilized at 8.5%, there is a tendency among the unemployed to remain in that state: Thus 60% of the unemployed have not held a job for over two years and over 80% for more than one year. This is partly due to the generous welfare system that supports unemployment.

Nonetheless, a large part of the unemployed are found in Wallonia-Brussels where unemployment has been on average double that of Flanders for the past 20 years. In November 2005, Flanders had an unemployment rate of 8.3%, Wallonia of 18.6%, and Brussels of 22.0% (see figure 8). There are also significant disparities in the sub-regions in Wallonia: the Brabant Wallon has the highest GDP per capita in Belgium, whereas Liège and Hainaut have

unemployment rates of 25% and 30% respectively (OECD and CIA). Flanders has attracted more investments and made more investments in research and development into their region than Wallonia, whose industry remains more traditional. Ten billion euros of ‘solidarity funds’ are transferred from Flanders to Wallonia every year, and before transfer, revenue per capita is 10 to 15% higher in Flanders^{viii}. This transfer has possibly contributed to the lack of competition and efficiency of the Walloon industry.

The loss of revenue in Wallonia compared to the Flemish is of 4000 Euros per year per capita^{ix}. “This phenomenon, not to say problem, is interrelated to the prevalence of foreigners. There is a high rate of emigration in Wallonia, although this is starting to change. Immigrants have also contributed to the difference in the level of education in the two regions.^x” There is in fact a high percentage of immigrants in Wallonia and the Brussels region with an average education level far below that of native Belgians.

Figure 8: Unemployment rate by region and age. (OECD 2005)



It is evident that Flanders has a higher employment and growth rate than Wallonia and its economic development has been much more successful (Statbel, 2006). There is no indication how far this is linked to the superior education of the Flemish, but vast research has implied a correlation between economic success and quality of education. Using Card and Krueger’s research on the subject, one can conclude that education does impact economic growth “our review of the literature reveals a high degree of consistency across studies regarding the effect of school quality on students’ subsequent earnings. The literature suggests that a 10 percent increase in school spending is associated with a 1 to 2 percent increase in earning for students later in their lives.” (Card 1996) Another finding in their research is the positive correlation between educational attainment and school quality: “students will invest in more years of

education if they perceive that higher quality schooling increases the payoff to each additional year of education.” This particular finding is highly relevant to the problem of early vocational schools in Belgium that serve as a factor of demoralization and drop-out due to the perception that these are ‘second rate’ schools. Wachtel (1975) hypothesizes that the labor market returns on school quality tend to be lower for younger workers and to rise with experience. While this has not been proven in Belgium, it supports the thesis that there is a correlation between quality and productivity.

There has been much debate on the relation between school quality and future earnings. First, Heckman et Al. and Card and Krueger (1992a) found that “school quality has a weak and inconsistent effect on earning of those with exactly 12 years of schooling”, which denies the impact of primary and secondary education which is the subject of our study. Second, Hanushek (1986) finds that school resources have no impact on students’ test scores which in any case are a weak indicator of a student’s success in the labor market. Nonetheless, an important finding to us in Card and Krueger indicates that weaker students who benefit from quality schools are “less likely to drop out or to be held back a grade.” (Card, 1996) This shows that the superior education of the Flemish feeds into its low rates of drop-outs and ‘redoublement’ and vice versa. Conversely, the lower quality of education in Wallonia and Brussels contributes to the high rate of failure in their schools.

In his cross-national study of education and economic growth, Thorvaldur Gylfason (2000), referring to Alfred Marshall, found that education is a generator for growth: “No change would conduce so much to a rapid increase of material wealth as an improvement in our schools, and especially those of the middle grades, provided it be combined with an extensive system of scholarships, which will enable the clever son of a working man to rise gradually from school to

school till he has the best theoretical and practical education which the age can give” (Gylfason 2000). This castigates the social segregation of the Belgian, most particularly, the Francophone education system that obstructs social mobility and intellectual ambition among the lower classes. It also shows that the quality of primary and secondary education is vital to the economic development of Wallonia. In failing to improve the quality of education among the French Community, Wallonia is contributing to the economic inequality between the Walloons and the Flemish and will continue to depend on the northern region in order to sustain itself economically. Likewise, Flanders must wake the South out of idleness and encourage them to become academically and economically competitive if it does not want the eternal burden of sustaining a weaker region. It seems relevant to refer here to the German problem in which Eastern Germany has created economic problems for West Germany which is forced to sustain the former communist regions. This drastic difference in economic development between the regions has hindered the economic development and competitiveness of Germany. Currently, the Walloon Region is impeding Belgium’s economic growth and competitiveness as well as possibly slowing down its northern region.

Education and Identity

“There does not exist a single, self-evident national identity in Belgium” (Vos 1998, p199).

Belgian is a relatively new concept, as the Kingdom of Belgium was only established in 1830, but the country has a long history of multiculturalism with invasions, immigration etc... While Belgians all use a common passport, there is probably more identification to one's Region than to the country itself. In fact, when a Belgian introduces himself, he will usually state what *kind* of Belgian he is: “Je suis Belge-Wallon/Flamand”. With the Federalization of the country, Regions have gained autonomy and engaged into identity-building, particularly in the Flanders Region where the Regional Government uses funds to promote Flemish national identity. The Flemish and Walloon Regions have since grown further apart, separated first by language and religion/seculars, then economically and culturally, and finally politically. It is safe to say that there are at least two independent identities in Belgium, a Flemish and a ‘French/Walloon’. Brussels arguably has its own ‘identity’, but is also seen as the “last possible link between the linguistic communities in the federal state” (Govaert 1998). The future of Belgium is often questioned in view of the Regions’ push for increased autonomy. This chapter will investigate the impact of education on the creation of the identities in Belgium and the political consequences this might have.

Belgian separatism

Since the 1940s, there have been increasing tensions between the two Belgian regions, characterized by the Flemish separatist movements, the Vlaams Blok, now renamed Vlams Belang, but for all intents and purposes is exactly the same as the Vlams Blok, and the

Mouvement Populaire Wallon (Witte 2000, p244). The political power these separatist groups have been attaining has contributed to the federalization and devolution of Belgium:

In 1995, Flemings and Walloons were able to elect for the first time their own parliaments. The results showed the Flemings' preference for a Flemish Belgium, as the Vlaams Blok won 12.3 per cent of the votes, whereas the Volksunie, a progressive socialist party obtained only 9

percent. The Flemish nationalists had won the election. The Vlaams Blok owes its success to its nationalist aspirations. Using the slogan "Eigen Volk Eerst" (One's own people first) the VB

reoriented the political priorities towards developing the Flemish identity and culture and

fighting for independence. Not surprisingly, most of the supporters of the VB are the

underprivileged and the unemployed sectors of the population whose situation is disadvantaged

compared to the rest of the citizens. Huyse et al (1992) has coined this phenomenon "racism of

despair". The program of the VB includes an independent Flanders, where the state is governed

by the elite, in which there are no migrants or foreigners, strict restrictions to the power of the

trade unions, a conservative perspective on the role of women, the abolition of abortion etc...

The ideology of the Vlams Blok is not just nationalistic; it is highly conservative and perceived

as extreme rightist. Despite the apparent success of the Vlams Blok, only about "10 percent of

the Flemish population exclusively identifies with Flanders and is in favour of a separate Flemish

state." (Vos 1998, p199)

Threatened by the Flemish nationalist push for cultural and political supremacy, the Walloons

have reacted by creating their own parties in which the objective is the "la défense de la

suprématie du français dans l'État belge"(the defense of the supremacy of the French language in

Belgium) (Joris, 1995). These groups have three goals: 1) preserve the professional interest of

the Francophones threatened by the perspective of bilingualism; 2) oppose the use of the Flemish

dialects in the Belgian cultural and social scenes; 3) a patriotic movement that opposes the Flemish movement's efforts of devolution in an effort to keep a unified nation (Joris 1995). It is generally agreed upon that the Mouvement Wallon is a defensive movement, a reaction against Flemish separatism (Vos 1997). Most Walloons, and in fact most Belgians in general, are against a separation of the Flemish and Walloon regions into two separate states, and yet, there is unquestionably a push towards more regional autonomy, and even a call for a confederal State that would make the regional governments responsible for nearly all aspects of government; currently the Federal government is still responsible for the important aspects of governments.

Brief theory of nationalism

Prior to investigating the consequences of nationalism and regional identity in Belgium, it seems appropriate to give a brief review of the literature addressing the subject, particularly referring to Gellner and Smith, leading theoreticians on nationalism. Ernest Gellner, in *Nations and Nationalism*, defines nationalism as “primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent”. He perceives nationalism as a modern sociological necessity, a political creation to encourage industrial competition and fuse the nation and the state, which to him are two separate entities. Nations and nationalism are shaped by industrialism, literacy, education systems, mass communications, secularism and capitalism. In *Nationalism and Modernism*, Anthony Smith, describes nationalism as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation”. Nationalism emerges when an ethnic group aspires to manifest and preserve its culture through securing an independent state; it is hence the politicization and territorialization of a pre-existing sense of ethnocentrism. Whereas Gellner claims that nationalism “aims to create a new form of social

organization that depends on high values”, Smith argues that nationalism originates in the “desire for independence, territory and self rule for the culturally based ethnic group” (Isiksal 2002). A departure from these two theories can be found in Hans Kohn’s argument that nationalism is the conscious integration of the population into a united and common political society. Hence, nationalism is the practice of amalgamation and homogenization of a people based on the existence or idea of a centralized government (Kohn, 1961).

Education and the creation of national identity

The nationality issue in Belgium impacts public opinion, policy making and the future of the Belgian State, which is why it is important to understand the factors that affect national consciousness. It is argued in Maddens (1998) that “national consciousness can be approached from both a structural and a social-psychological perspective” (Vos 1998, p203). The first approach implies that the citizen’s loyalty to the state is determined by his social and economic status in his society: Nielsen (1985) suggests that subnational identities develop when there is economic competition among ethnic groups; this fits in with Gellner’s theory of nationalism, since a certain stage of development and competition needs to be attained. The social-psychological framework explains that feelings of national identity originate in the individual’s values. This theory is denied by Maddens who argues that feeling ‘Belgian’ or ‘Fleming’ has nothing to do with values. It seems probable that economic competition has exacerbated the Regional identities of Belgians. While the Flemings use a discourse promoting the Flemish culture and ethnocentric values to explain the Flemish identity, the Walloons argue that regionalism is necessary to protect the social and economic interests of the Walloons in the Belgian State. They do not defend the need of promoting a Walloon cultural heritage. The Flemish nationalist feeling finds its origin in its historical and cultural heritage, and is manifested

in the desire to promote Flemish culture, autonomy and independence, as is described by Smith. The Walloon manifestation is a reaction to Flemish nationalism to maintain a unified state that protects both the existence of a single nation, and the interest of the Walloons. It appears that Gellner's theory best describes the existence of Walloon nationalist feeling. In the case that a unified Belgium is desirable, Kohn prescribes that the national government creates a sense of *national identity* or *nationalism* so that the citizens will desire political unity. This would indeed be the case in a unitary system. France is a perfect example where education is managed by the central government with the aim of creating an ideal French citizen. The Federal system of Belgium has delegated the management of education to the regions with an outcome of two separate and very different education systems and identity.

Effects of education gap on identity.

Schools can be used to create identity. They welcome the student into the institutional community and proceed to instruct everyone with the same resources. The environment in which a student is educated is important in creating an identity, whether religious, ideological or political. It has been established that the French and Flemish education systems instruct their pupils in different languages, set independent curriculums, and produce different results. First, it is necessary to establish that language is a determining factor in creating identity. Language is a reflection of history, a common means of communication for the members of a community; it is a unifying factor which differentiates one group from another (Smith 1998). In preferring a language above the other, schools in Belgium are creating two communities that diverge across linguistic lines. Conversely, Eugen Weber shows how language was used as a unifying factor to create the French nation. In *From Peasants into Frenchmen*, Weber outlines the conscious efforts of the government to institute an artificial form of the French language that all citizens

would speak. The effect of schools in creating national identity is emphasized by Weber in his analysis of the French identity. Weber shows that schools were responsible for implementing one national, albeit artificial, language by enforcing French in schools through the discipline of dictations which taught students to express themselves in a way that would be understood by their peers. There was a conscious effort on the part of the French government to create a sense of patriotism by using education: “there is no better instrument of indoctrination and patriotic conditioning than French history and geography, especially history which, when properly taught, is the only means of maintaining patriotism in the generations we are bringing up” (Weber 1976, p333). Schools were made compulsory and free, enforcing the political grip of the government on all future citizens in the country, irrespective of social class or geographic belonging: “Schools brought suggestions of alternative values and hierarchies. And of commitments to other bodies than the local group. They eased individuals out of the latter’s grip and shattered the hold of unchallenged cultural and political creeds- but only to train their votaries for another faith” (Weber 1976, p338). Weber shows how schools can create an identity, whether regional or national. In Belgium, Francophone schools generate the future Walloonians, whereas Flemish schools educate the Flemish population. There is little, if any, overlap, and two very different types of citizens are being shaped. Inspectors of education, for example, found that schools in Wallonia taught federalism as a failing system^{xi}. The Walloon perception of the passage from a unitary state to a federal state is viewed as a bad decision, and this is reflected in the tone of the Francophone press and in the teaching of the subject in schools. Flemish schools tend to instruct federalization as a positive development in Belgium. Language in Belgium is unquestionably a source of tension, particularly over which should be the official language of the country. This polemic divides Belgians across linguistic lines, and consequently, across ethnic lines. As we

have seen in the introduction, language and education are closely linked to politics, as both Regions have fought for the preservation and domination of their language, particularly through the creation and autonomy of schools in their said-language. Consequently, it can be safely assumed that the education systems in the various regions of Belgium perpetuate a sense of regional identity through the existence of ‘regional’ (as opposed to ‘state’) schools, and their differences to each another.

The effects of regional identities are also observable in the antagonism between Flemings and Walloons on a day to day basis. A prime example of this is the celebration of the “bataille des Eperons d’Or” (battle of the Golden Spurs) as the Flemish National Day; this battle took place in 1302 when France tried to annex the country of Flanders. The citizens of Bruges, exiled from their homes by the French troops, returned to their city and murdered every Frenchman. They identified the French by asking them to pronounce the Dutch sentence “schild en vriend” (shield and friend). Subsequently, the French sent forces to avenge the massacre and the troops met the Flemish in the battle of Kontrijk which was won by the Flemings. Flanders now celebrates this day as a commemoration of their victory over the French.

The devolution of the political system in Belgium as well as the ‘nationalist’ movements in Flanders and, to a lesser extent, in Wallonia, has led to talks of secessionism. Frank Vanhecke, President of the Vlaams Belang explains that “Flemish secession from Belgium is the only way to save both Flanders and Wallonia” (Vanhecke 2005). Prime Minister Marc Eyskens, however, dismisses this possibility; he attributes the success of the Vlams Blok to racism, not to separatism and explains that most Belgians, about 90% of voters in Wallonia and 60 to 80% in Flanders would reject separatism. Yet at meetings, individuals speak English even if they are able to communicate in Flemish and French, which shows the reluctance of the Belgians to really

resolve their differences. While there is debate whether the secessionist movement should be taken seriously in view of the disastrous political consequences this might have on both regions, there is no doubt that linguistic discrimination is taking place in Belgium. This is evidenced in the petitions presented to Parliament protesting against the discrimination of Francophones in the Flemish region but also, to a certain extent, of Flemings in the Walloon regions. Petition 10115 in March 2004 presented by French-speaking citizens living in municipalities in the Brussels periphery (in the Flemish Region) on access to medical care using their own language illustrates the prevalence of ethnic discrimination in Belgium: “The first example concerns the existing emergency arrangements for the French-speaking population. They can only be served by ambulances and mono-lingual Dutch-speaking staff of the Flemish Region and in emergencies can only be addressed in Dutch in hospitals of the Dutch-speaking region. The second example concerns the free cancer screening service run by the Flemish province of Brabant, which by refusing to accept the use of French indirectly excludes French-speaking women from the scope of this service. We have also been informed that Dutch-speaking Belgian citizens have addressed a petition to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, based on their right to health, claiming health care provision using the Dutch language, particularly for emergency services, in public hospitals in the bilingual region of Brussels” (COE). On an individual level, says PM Eyskens, there is no linguistic problem; people get around their business without feeling the political and economic tensions, but practically, there is much evidence to show the existence of discrimination across ethno-linguistic lines in Belgium, stressing the separate identities of the two fractions. There is undeniable tension between the Flemish speakers and the Francophones, and this situation has been exacerbated by allowing the two regions to develop and cultivate a sense of regional identity in schools.

Conclusion

Belgian 'federalism' has led to the devolution of power to the Flemish and Walloon and Brussels regions. Among other things, education has become a matter dealt with by the regions in whichever manner they choose. While a federal system can lead to improved situations as regions are given autonomy to experiment and improve their policies by comparing themselves to their neighbors, this seems to have failed in Belgium with regards to the education policies: instead of comparing themselves to each other, Flanders and the Francophone regions have modeled themselves on their linguistic neighbors, the Netherlands and France. This has led to more successful academic results in Flanders, where the education system is modeled on the Netherlands', while Walloon/Brussels education system is comparatively weaker than their Dutch counterpart since the French model is relatively poorer due, among other things, to the practice of the 'redoublement'. Not only has the Belgian education system been divided linguistically, it is also divided academically, with the Flemings performing relatively better. This academic partition has contributed to the creation of regional identities in Flanders and Wallonia/Bruxelles-Capitale which in turn have increased tensions across ethno-linguistic and consequently political lines. Secessionist movements have been active and threatened to tear the country apart, but Former Prime Minister Marc Eyskens remains positive about the outcome: "While cultural autonomy is a necessity, it leads nonetheless to a lack of harmony; the defederalization of Belgium is not catastrophic, since the two communities have never collaborated as well as they do today. Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve have Erasmus programs where they send students to the sister university and the royal academies work closely together". Politically, Belgium has a long way to go: "The reform of the state is unfinished" says PM Eyskens, "there is still a lot of work to do; it is particularly important for the federal state to

arbitrate over the regions since there is currently no arbitrage between the federal state and the regions. Regions are able to sign international treaties, create their laws, distribute funds etc... and they are under no obligation to make their norms coincide with those of their regional neighbors.” Between 1970 and 1993, four constitutional reforms created Belgium’s unique brand of federalism in order to bring peace to the nationalist aspirations of the Flemings and the Walloons. Falter (1998) explains that devolution “probably prevented the nationalistic tensions from becoming violent”. Belgium, however has built its federal state through decentralization, rather than centralization as is usually the case. Consequently, no political party presently has “a cooperation with its sister-party on the other side of the language-border anymore. (Vos, 1998, p193). It is very important to increase communication and cooperation between the two regions in order to harmonize the country. Both the Flemings and the Walloons need Brussels, and it is improbable that Belgium will be officially divided, since the national and international costs would be very high.

The effect of schools on Belgian society has largely been ignored by intellectuals and politicians, yet the strong disparities between the Flemish and Francophone systems can only have a nefarious effect on the economy and perpetuates ethno-linguistic tensions. It is not feasible to believe in a united or federal Belgian State when there is such tension between the two dominant ethnicities.

The highest people on the Walloon social scale all send their children to be educated in Flemish (the elitist school Seint Jean Berghamens, for example, welcomes the children of some *very* prominent Walloons) so as to arm their offspring with the best tools to face the economic and political tensions in Belgium and in Europe. Belgium’s problems are in fact typically European. Tensions across ethnic and linguistic lines can be found throughout Europe: between the

Catalans and the Castilians in Spain (but also the separatist factions in the Basque countries); between the Irish and the British in Northern Ireland, but also the Scottish movements to retain regional identity, language and academic autonomy; ethno-linguistic tensions are also found in France with the Corsicans and the Bretons who claim the right to teach their language in schools instead of French etc.... The case-study of Belgium can be applied to most European countries, but in an age of globalization and the development of a more integrated Europe, education needs to be above local problems.

Efforts have already been made in Belgium to try to overcome the academic disparities between the Flemings and the Walloons/Bruxellois:

The Ecoles à Facilité, for example, are schools in which students are taught both in Flemish and in French and come out of school entirely bilingual. Since bilingualism is highly correlated with employment in Belgium, it is assumed that the students are better off learning both languages.

The program of these schools, however, is closer to the Flemish system than to the Francophone system.

Ecoles d'Immersion, in which students are taught *in* the other national language than the one they were brought up in. There is a reticence on the behalf of the Flemings to accept this system, since a majority of Belgians are Flemish speaking. Prime Minister Eyskens claimed to be a big supporter of this system of education which has also been applauded by various Francophone newspapers, including the Libre Belgique. The Ecoles d'Immersion encourage regional cultural understanding but a national identity through the belief that Belgium is a trilingual country with various cultures that complement one another.

There has also been speculation about the denationalization of education in favor of a European educational system, for instance. The "Europe of Education" suggests education surpasses

national interests, and instead should encourage harmony between the future citizens by creating exchange programs such as Erasmus where students, researchers and academics of any university are able to study in other European countries. In order to do this, it is essential to standardize education policies and academic opportunities in across all participating countries. Such proposals have already been made in the conference of Bologna and the Sorbonne. To reach this point, Belgium has to first harmonize its own educational systems: there needs to be collaboration between the communities; bilingualism must be encouraged in schools and languages must be taught by professors from the particular regions. Overcoming the intrinsic obstacles to reforming education will be very difficult, but it is also necessary in order to create a stable society in which all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, will have the same education, same economic opportunities, and one overarching identity. There needs to be more research on the correlation between education, economic and identity-building in the process of creating a harmonized Belgian and European educational system.

The Flemings and Walloons give Belgium a formidable advantage in terms of cultural understanding and diversity. A bilingual Belgium is an opening to the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon world, an incredible asset for all citizens. Brussels is the capital of the European Union and symbolizes the cooperation between European States in order to guarantee peace on the continent. The Flemish and Francophone regions should learn from this historical achievement and cooperate in order to educate the citizens in an equal and equitable manner, offering all students equal opportunity, regardless of regional affiliation. Belgium must learn from the European example, but it could be a model for the other European countries that are facing the same challenges. The future of Belgium is interrelated with the future of Europe, and it is in the best interest of all to increase knowledge on the socio-economic and political impacts of

education and cooperate in order to harmonize the educational systems of member States of the European Union.

ⁱ Private interview with Marc Eyskens.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} see Belgian Constitution 1989, article 59

^v les lois spéciales du 16 janvier 1989 relatives au financement des communautés et des régions

^{vi} Private interview with Marc Eyskens

^{vii} Private interview with Marc Eyskens

^{viii} Private Interview with José Fontaine

^{ix} Private interview with Marc Eyskens

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Private interview with José Fontaine

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