Adapting to the system or the student? Exploring teacher adaptations to disadvantaged students in an English and Belgian secondary school

Abstract:

This article builds on research on teacher adaptations to students by exploring how a Belgian and English national context influence teachers' definitions of educational success, their explanations of educational failure and allocation of scarce educational resources to disadvantaged students. Ethnographic data from one Flemish (Belgian) and one English secondary, multicultural school suggest that teachers in both schools adapt their expectations to students in line with the perceived ability and interests of students. However, differences between England and Flanders in how students and schools are evaluated can help to explain differences between Flemish and English teachers' allocation of scarce educational resources and responsibility for educational success. The conclusions discuss the implications of these findings for social policy and future research.

Keywords: educational policy, accountability, secondary schools, Belgium, England, ethnography.

1. Introduction

A rich body of research in education has focused on the processes and factors that influence teachers' adaptations to students, in particular teachers' expectations and perceptions of students and their allocation of scarce educational resources (such as: teacher support, praise and attention). Research in this area has considered the importance of a multitude of factors and processes, including students' individual characteristics in terms of ability and classroom behavior and membership to larger social (class, racial/ethnic or gender) groups (Rist 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968), students' interactions with teachers (Woods 1984 (1978)), school selection processes; in particular processes of ability grouping or streaming/tracking (Ireson & Hallam 2001), school characteristics in terms of culture and structure (Van Houtte 2004) and broader educational policies (Gillborn & Youdell 2000).

While research on teachers' adaptations constitutes a well developed area of research, there are few efforts to integrate existing findings into one theoretical frame. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that investigates the importance of national differences between educational systems on teachers' adaptations to students. This study builds on this rich body of educational research by suggesting the usefulness of employing an ecological or embedded context approach in studying teachers' adaptations to students. Furthermore, ethnographic data collected in one Flemish (Belgian) and one English secondary multicultural inner-city school is used to explore how nationally different educational systems influence teachers' allocation of scarce educational resources (such as: teacher support, praise and attention) and responsibility for educational failure or success to disadvantaged students. The following sections first review the literature on teachers' adaptations to students and

suggest the usefulness of an ecological approach in studying such interactions. Secondly, the methods section briefly discusses the case-study research on which the analysis is based. Thirdly, the analysis section explores how a nationally specific educational system informs teachers' adaptations to disadvantaged students in secondary schools. The conclusions discuss the main findings and implications of this study for social policy and future research.

2. Reviewing and integrating research on teachers' adaptations to students

Educational psychologists and sociologists have conducted considerable research on teachers' adaptations to students in terms of pedagogy and curriculum (Berry 2008; Klingner & Vaughn 1999; Schumm & Vaughn 1991; Scott et al. 1998; Stodolsky & Grossman 2000), focusing primarily on students' and teachers' perceived attitudes to specific adaptations, applied often to particular subjects or aspects of curriculum or pedagogy (e.g. mathematics or 'inclusion' and 'fairness') and types of students (usually students with 'special needs') or teachers (e.g. teachers in training or teachers teaching particular subjects). The need to make adaptations is usually motivated by the necessity to tailor curriculum and pedagogy to the different needs of students, with particular adaptations expected to result in more motivated students, a better relationship between students and teachers and higher learning outcomes (e.g. see: Herring-Harrison et al. 2007; Vaughn et al. 1993).

In a recent publication (Stevens 2009), which uses data from the same study [1] which underpins this article, Stevens analyzed interview data from 97 students in one English and two Belgian secondary schools to investigate students' views on

differential teacher treatment. The findings suggest that the ‘ideal teacher’ not only has to find a balance between ‘freedom’ and ‘control’ (Gannaway 1984, p.192), but also between ‘equality’ and ‘inequality’, or between a strategy where all pupils are treated equally and one where some students are treated less or more favourably. Three types of students were considered by students as legitimate recipients of differential treatment from teachers, which Stevens labelled as: the *ill*, *stragglers* and *deviants*. While *deviants* can expect less favourable treatment, *ill* pupils and *stragglers* are seen as entitled to more preferential teacher treatment. The more favourable treatment directed to the *ill* is legitimized because these students cannot live up to particular role expectations for medical reasons. Similarly, *stragglers* are entitled to more preferential treatment because they are considered victims of their social situation, which hampers their success in realizing role expectations. However, these students need to demonstrate a willingness to develop into ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ pupils and failure to do so can result in their being labelled as *deviants* (Stevens 2009).

This article builds on this study and other research on teacher adaptations by suggesting the importance of both individual student-characteristics and nationally different selection-systems in studying teachers’ adaptations. In so doing this study suggests the usefulness of an ecological approach in understanding why teachers make certain adaptations to students.

The most developed area of research on teachers’ adaptations to students focuses on the importance of *students’ individual characteristics*. Of central importance in this research tradition is the alleged influence of teachers’ perceptions of students’ differential ability (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968; 2000 (1968)), classroom behavior (Hargreaves 1976) or social and racial background characteristics (Becker

1968 (1952); Rist 1970) on their treatment of students (Brophy 1983; Fiske 1978; Goldberg 1992; West & Anderson 1976). These studies suggest that white, middle class teachers have higher expectations of students with the same social background (Becker 1968 (1952); Rist 1970). Furthermore, teachers have higher expectations of students perceived as having higher ability (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968; 2000 (1968)) and are more likely to punish, apply stricter rules of behavior and offer less support to students perceived as deviants (Hargreaves 1976).

While these studies emphasized the importance of students' individual characteristics in influencing teachers' adaptations to students, a wealth of case studies has illustrated the negotiated nature of *classroom interactions*, particularly the active involvement of students in establishing classroom standards (Hammersley & Woods 1984; Hargreaves & Woods 1984). Woods (1984 (1978)), for example, illustrated how "schoolwork" is not a fixed category, but a continuously negotiated commodity, whose meaning both students and teachers take an active role in defining. Similarly, other researchers have shown how parents influence teachers' expectations and practices and how parents' strategies and success depend on the kinds of capital they can activate, which, in turn, is informed by their social class and "racial"/ethnic background (Lareau & Horvat McNamara 1999). This body of research suggests the importance of students and their parents/caregivers as active agents in negotiating teachers' adaptations to students.

In addition, considerable research since the 1960s has illustrated the importance of specific *school characteristics and processes* in influencing teachers' adaptations to students. A particularly well developed area of research in the United States (Finley 1984; Oakes 1985; Page 1992) and the United Kingdom (Ball 1981; Hargreaves 1967; Ireson & Hallam 2001; Lacey 1970) focuses on the effects of

ability grouping on teachers' pedagogy and practice. These studies have suggested that the differentiation of students according to ability or behavior informs the students' school experiences by restricting access to higher-status curricula, pedagogy, and expectations to students who are perceived (and differentiated) by teachers as having high ability. In response to such processes, students in lower streams develop anti-school attitudes, which, in turn, affect their school-related behavior and outcomes.

Furthermore, a unique large-scale quantitative study conducted in Belgium suggested that students and teachers in technical or vocational streams develop a culture that is less study oriented than the student or teacher culture in general education streams, which, in turn, explains, to a large extent, the differences in educational outcomes among students (Van Houtte 2004; 2006). In sum, these studies highlight the importance of specific school characteristics, such as processes of streaming and school cultures in researching teachers' adaptations to students.

Finally, a few studies have emphasized the importance of social policy and, more generally, *the characteristics of the larger social environment or institutions* that interact with the educational system, in developing teachers' classroom behavior. Coburn (2004), for example, showed how reading instruction is informed by conceptions of appropriate instruction in the institutional environment. While these pressures do not determine teachers' behavior, teachers actively mediate them in a process that is framed by their preexisting beliefs and practices, which, in turn, are rooted in past encounters with institutional pressures.

Of particular importance to this study is the influence of nationally specific evaluation systems on teachers' adaptations to students. A developing body of research in the US (Nichols & Berliner 2007; Orfield & L. 2001) and to a lesser

extent the UK (Gillborn & Youdell 2000; Youdell 2004) has critically analyzed how the process of teaching and learning in schools is influenced by policies aimed at making education more 'efficient' and 'accountable' through, for example, standardized testing of students and public evaluations of schools on outcome related indicators. Recent research in the US suggests that high-stakes testing has been associated with suspicious forms of data manipulation, a deterioration of the teacher-student relationship, a narrowing of the curriculum (which focuses increasingly more on the particular forms of knowledge and skills required to pass specific standardised tests), demoralization of teachers, and less positive attitudes towards learning amongst students (for whom learning becomes less meaningful and joyful) (Amrein & Berliner 2003; Jones et al. 2003; Nichols & Berliner 2007; 2008). In addition, recent studies in the UK and US show that in response to pressures to 'raise achievement', school management and staff implement a form of 'educational triage' (Booher-Jennings 2005; Gillborn & Youdell 2000). Such processes relate to the allocation of scarce educational resources (such as additional in-class support for students) not to the lowest achieving students but to those students who are expected to meet the standards of achievement imposed by governing agencies after benefiting from such additional resources. Such criticism builds on and supports Campbell's (1976) classic law which hypothesises that the more any quantitative social indicator is used by educational policymakers, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.

While the system of evaluating schools and students in the UK is similar to that of the US, Flanders has an evaluation system in which schools and teachers have considerable more power and autonomy in evaluating their students (see below). Hence, this study builds on this recent area of research by investigating how Flemish

and English teachers' definitions of educational success, their explanations of educational failure and allocation of scarce educational resources to disadvantaged students are influenced by nationally specific evaluation systems.

In highlighting the importance of particular institutional characteristics that are situated on different levels of analysis, these bodies of literature suggest the usefulness of employing an “embedded context” (McLaughlin & Talbert 2001) or “ecological” approach (Feinstein et al. 2004) in studying teachers' adaptations to students. This approach has its origins in developmental psychology (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and classifies environmental context measures according to the level at which they are situated. In line with such an approach, the different institutional characteristics that are considered in the literature can be classified as political or socioeconomic institutional contexts (national or local government school policies and economic processes), characteristics of institutions (a school culture and applied streaming practices), proximal school processes (face-to-face interactions among students, their parents or caregivers, and the school staff) and *individual characteristics* (students' ability and classroom behavior and their membership to social groups). On the basis of the research literature, we developed a conceptual scheme for studying teachers' adaptations to students (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

This article builds on this rich body of educational research by using ethnographic data to explore how differences between Flanders and England in how schools and students are evaluated influence teachers' adaptations to students in terms of their

allocation of scarce educational resources and responsibility for educational failure and success.

3. Methods

This article employs data collected as part of an ethnographic study between 2001 and 2003 on racism and discrimination in English and Flemish multicultural secondary school classrooms. In particular, this study relies on the analysis of ethnographic school observations and semi-structured interviews conducted from a group of teachers in one English (*Park Lane*) and one Flemish (*Riverside*) secondary, multicultural school [2].

While comparing settings in case-study research is difficult as researchers often cannot control for relevant characteristics (Le Compte & Goetz 1982), special care was taken to ensure that the Flemish and English schools selected for this study were similar in important ways to better explore the possible importance of a national context in developing teachers' adaptations to disadvantaged students. Both schools are similar in that they attract a substantial number of working class and ethnic minority students, including a large group of Turkish speaking minority students. Furthermore, both schools are situated in a highly urbanized environment and shared a relatively poor reputation in their neighborhood. The latter is related to the problems experienced by *Riverside* and *Park Lane* in terms of behavioral and academic standards, the high proportion of students with special educational needs, a decline in the number of students on roll and a high turn-over of both student and staff population. Finally, both schools experienced a change in management at the start of

the fieldwork, in part because higher educational authorities were not satisfied with the way in which the head teachers managed their school.

However, *Park Lane* counted 1142 students and only an estimated 15% of the student population was of ‘white English’ descent. In contrast, *Riverside* counted only 355 students and native Flemish students made up 72% of the student population. Furthermore, while *Park Lane* was a co-educational school (40% girls), *Riverside* counted very few female students because it offered programs (such as mechanics, electricity and computer science) that appealed more to boys than girls [3]. Finally, while the teaching staff in *Riverside* counted only one part-time teacher of Turkish ethnic minority background, *Park Lane* teaching staff was ethnically very diverse and included many teachers from Turkish, Kurdish, African Caribbean and Somali background.

The researcher conducted ethnographic observations as a “participant as an observer” (Gold 1969) in the two schools during one school year (4-5 months in each school), observing lessons of students from three different tutor groups in each school. Each selected tutor group was observed for a period of 6 weeks. The tutor groups were selected because they all welcomed a substantial number of Turkish minority students and reflected a variety of ability groups. Students and staff were told the true identity of the researcher who followed students and staff during lesson and break-time, usually sitting at the back of the classroom, taking notes of ‘everything that happens’ in order to ‘write a book about differences between Belgian and English schools’. In so doing the researcher kept the focus of the research (racism and discrimination) deliberately vague, in order to obtain more reliable information on sensitive issues such as racism and discrimination. The researcher spent break-times

with students or staff, engaging in informal conversations aimed primarily at building rapport with respondents.

As researchers' social characteristics inform interactions with respondents (Delamont 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995), it is important to briefly reflect on how the researcher tried to minimise the importance of his gender (male), ethnicity (Flemish), colour (Caucasian), age (25) and status (university student) on the process of collecting and analysing data. One of the researcher's primary goals throughout the research was to build familiarity and trust with respondents. In order to do this, the researcher always took a non-judgemental, confidential and interested attitude to their viewpoints and attached himself a more 'neutral' or 'eclectic' ethnic status (for a similar approach, see: Mac an Ghaill 1988). The researcher's success in building a strong relationship with respondents based on mutual trust is illustrated by the observation that respondents addressed the researcher with his first name, appeared unconstrained in expressing their views (often expressing deviant views and/or behaviour), understood that the researcher could not always share his opinion with respondents ('because I am not sure how I feel and I am not a good researcher if I allow my opinions to influence yours') and allowed the researcher access to in- and out of school settings in which they were socially active.

Qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted from 18 teachers in *Riverside* and *Park Lane*. Teachers were only asked for interviews after the researcher spent nearly five weeks observing their lessons. In general, all teachers asked to participate with an interview appeared eager and unrestrained in responding to the questions. Due to resource constraints, only a small group of teachers were invited for interviews, focusing on those teachers who were most likely to know their students best (as they spent more time teaching those students and/or were responsible

for their students as group or year tutors). The employed, semi-structured interview protocol was exactly the same for all teachers interviewed in both national settings and focused on teachers' role performance, perceptions of students, employed systems of evaluation and allocation of educational resources. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis and included a variety of teachers in terms of educational setting, program taught, gender and national descent, including 10 teachers from *Riverside* and 8 from *Park Lane* (see Appendix: table 1). As can be expected from the sampling procedures employed, senior teachers were over-represented in our sample. In line with the characteristics of the school staff populations the sample includes a higher proportion of male and Flemish teachers in *Riverside* and female and ethnic minority teachers in *Park Lane*. Although the small sample of teachers selected for interviews does not allow generalization of the findings to the two educational settings the analysis will triangulate interview-data with observations and informal conversations with staff to make (careful) inferences about the whole schools.

The data analysis used a grounded theory approach, in which a substantive theory, related to a particular setting, is developed through (mainly) inductive analyses of qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Because the ethnographic research underlying the data analysis did not focus initially on the importance of particular institutional pressures in explaining teachers' attitudes and behavior, the initial findings emerged from the analysis in line with Glaser's (1992) "open coding" approach to grounded theory. However, in line with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) "coding paradigm," the data were analyzed increasingly more in a systematic way to explore particular types of institutional pressures, their complex interactions, and teachers' strategies in responding to such pressures. Hence, the findings related to the

importance of nationally specific evaluation systems initially emerged unexpectedly from the initial data-analysis, after which the data was further analyzed to investigate the importance of institutional processes on teachers' adaptations.

4. Teacher adaptations in a Flemish and English secondary school

The following sections analyze ethnographic data to explore the importance of specific school and student evaluation systems in Belgium and England on teachers' adaptations to students in terms of their allocation of scarce educational resources and allocation of responsibility of educational success and failure to disadvantaged students.

4.1. *Riverside*: Adapting to students and students chasing 'success'

The Flemish educational system is particular in that schools cannot be compared in public in terms of quality or output indicators. Furthermore, teachers have considerable power to determine the educational career of their students. In Flemish secondary education, students have to take an examination twice a year (in December and June) for every subject that is taught. Teachers are responsible for designing, administering, and marking the examinations of the students they teach. At the end of the school year in Flanders, teachers come together to discuss the progress of every student and decide whether a student is allowed to pass the year or not, an event called "deliberation." Although the schools are free to decide the criteria for

evaluation and procedures that are used during the deliberations, the results of the students' examinations are generally considered important in deciding whether the students will be allowed to pass the school year. A deliberation meeting is secret by law, and only the head teacher and/or deputy head teacher, the teachers who teach the student, the teachers who are responsible for providing pastoral support, and members of the external social and psychological school-counseling team are allowed to attend this event

Teachers in *Riverside*, particularly those teaching vocational education students perceived their students as less able and motivated to do well in school and adapted their evaluation methods in order to increase the chances of students demonstrating their knowledge and skills successfully:

MR. ALONSO: "I have the impression that some of them are really not interested in the course material, but then there are also students who... cannot process too much information at a time. It's as if their computer crashes. It's finished. You might say: 'Yeah, they will have remembered something' but no: it's 'deleted *totalement*'. But what can you do about it? That's the problem. The only thing I have learned this year is to change the way I ask questions: never ask two questions, you ask one thing at a time, otherwise they will definitely get it wrong."

(Male Flemish teacher, *Riverside*, Car Mechanics)

This illustrates that teachers adapt their curriculum and pedagogy to the perceived ability of their students (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968; 2000 (1968)), something that was expected by the students in both *Riverside* and *Park Lane* school (Stevens 2009). Similarly, some teachers employed multiple-choice questioning to help students who

were very poor in writing Dutch. Many teachers offered students a ‘second chance’ to submit certain assignments after failing to meet the initial deadline. However, although observations suggest that such changes were employed on a large scale in *Riverside* by teachers teaching vocational education students, teachers’ adaptations in employed evaluation criteria appeared even more dramatic. Teachers in vocational education not only lowered standards in terms of the taught curriculum, or the kind of skills and knowledge students had to develop, but also seemed to place less priority on such goals and instead valued the importance of showing pro-school orientated attitudes and behavior:

MR. DUDEK: “When is a student successful? Well, for me it doesn’t always have to be outstanding, they are in vocational education so that’s not necessary. But I want them to demonstrate a positive motivation, they have to be polite, show respect, be on time and have their school material with them. I don’t expect them to obtain good marks every time, but they have to show a positive motivation, they have to show that they want to do something.”

(...)

RESEARCHER: “What kind of criteria are taken into account during the deliberations? How important is it that a student is considered motivated?”

MR. DUDEK: “300%! That student is almost certain to obtain a A-certificate and allowed to pass the year, even if his marks are poor!”

(Male Flemish teacher *Riverside*, practice and theory car-mechanics)

This extract illustrates a widely applied practice in *Riverside* school and mentioned by all (10/10) teachers interviewed: that students’ motivation to learn is often considered

more important than their actual success in demonstrating particular types of knowledge or skills. The strong tendency amongst especially vocational education teachers to put a higher value on school-related attitudes and behavior than students' acquired forms of knowledge or skills as forms of capital shows that these teachers had not abandoned educational standards and related evaluation criteria. In so doing, teachers effectively emphasized qualities of students that are valued in a low-skills marketplace, in which employers are seeking trainees with work-appropriate attitudes who reliably show up for their jobs on time every day, so the employers can train them to do specific tasks required by the job (see also: Freeman 2006).

Although these teachers felt obliged to lower the curriculum and evaluation standards to fit their evaluation of students' ability and interests, and the pressures from their social environment, their students had to demonstrate certain characteristics considered essential in meeting some of the teacher's personal interests. If ability and school-related attitudes and behavior are considered continuous factors, we could draw the following scheme:

[Figure 2 about here]

Most of the teachers in vocational education considered their students as *stragglers*, or students who cannot live up to teacher expectations because of the influence of social factors (such as negative influence of peer group, lack of family support or recent immigration) [4]. These four categories represent four broad types of *stragglers* who are all perceived to potentially fail reaching minimum standards of acquired knowledge and skills; mainly because of the alleged influence of social circumstances. For instance, when the tutor of 5VC (5th year of Vocational Car Mechanics, a group that obtained the lowest average exam results in school) was

asked during an interview to evaluate all his students of 5VC, he considered only two (Flemish) students as ‘normal’, in that they were expected to reach the minimum standards and therefore pass the year, irrespective of their school related attitudes and behavior. He expected the remaining students to be (what we call) *chasers*, or students who showed not only the ability to reach the (lowered) classroom expectations (on a long term), but also positive school-related attitudes and behavior. Almost all the other teachers interviewed in *Riverside* (8/10) and teachers whom discussed their students with the researcher through informal conversations (for example in the staff room) used very similar categories to describe students.

However, most of the students in 5VC were defined by their tutor and teachers as *losers*; a label literary used by several teachers interviewed to refer to students who did not show the necessary attitudes or behavior to become successful. Many sub-categories of *losers* emerged from the interviews, which we labeled as the *quitter*, who gave up passing the year, the *amateur*, who was not serious about achieving in school, the *play-disrupter* who regularly tried to disturb classroom-order and the *dreamer*, who was criticized for having unrealistically high aspirations, usually of non school-related goals (such as becoming a professional football player or boxer). Only two (Turkish) students were defined by the teachers in 5VC as either *misfits* or *unfits* or students who lacked ability to reach the expected standards. These teachers appeared to lower their standards to such a level that they felt that students’ inability to reach such standards was merely a result of their lack of willingness or determination to reach these standards. Students who managed to demonstrate a minimal ability and pro-school related values and behavior, were not only perceived as successful, but were also given more educational resources than those who failed to meet these two criteria:

RESEARCHER: “And Shakur (Moroccan boy from 5VC)?”

MR. GERRARD: “Look, you know I don’t have any favorites, but there is one... even if he had his setbacks during the second term (...). But he isolates himself completely from the others [...] he wants to achieve, he wants to achieve. He doesn’t join the others, he calls them ‘drivellers’. And for students like him I have a lot more respect than for the others. I will also tolerate more from those students than from others. Tolerate in the sense of repeating something, not in that they would receive better marks, that’s something I don’t do: you earn marks. But when they ask for explanations, you are more likely to give it to them, because they are interested, they want to know, they don’t just ask you to butter you up, or to make you explain it again so that they don’t have to study the material. No, Shakur is not like that.”

(Male Flemish teacher *Riverside*, practice and theory car-mechanics)

RESEARCHER: “Like Aldo?”

MR. BABEL: “Yes, now that’s an example, that boy, it takes time, but I remember when he came in and he didn’t know almost anything, but now he’s doing much better, especially his verbal skills... but writing, no, he can’t. (...).”

RESEARCHER: “So on the basis of what will you evaluate such a student?”

MR. BABEL: “On progress, progress, even if his marks are not very good. So progress... and effort! Aldo shows enormous effort, enormous! He always pays attention, is never distracted! He wants to move up! No, progress and

effort, absolutely. And they can still fail their exams, they can pass to the next year for me.”

(Male Flemish teacher *Riverside*, Dutch language)

Both Shakur and Aldo are considered as *stragglers*, or students who experience social barriers in realizing educational expectations. However, these students are given a preferential treatment in terms of standards of assessment and allocation of scarce educational resources because they also appear to be *chasers*, or students who show a strong willingness to reach such standards. In all the interviews in *Riverside* in which teachers discussed explicitly how they treated particular students (6/10) teachers described how they meted out a more preferential (conditional) treatment to *stragglers*, a policy shared by many other teachers who discussed their pupils with the researcher through more informal conversations.

In sum, these vocational education teachers defined success in terms of students' progress in achievement and lowered their expectations and standards of assessment to a point where students' merely had to show a strong motivation to do well in school. As a result, students' were held responsible for their success and motivated students were more likely to receive scarce educational resources. Hence, the analysis suggests the usefulness of an ecological approach in studying teachers' adaptations as teachers' adaptations are influenced by both individual characteristics of students (such as perceived ability) and characteristics situated at a higher level of analysis (such as the particular evaluation system employed). The following sections explore how teachers' adaptations to students in an English school are informed by students' personal characteristics and how schools and students are evaluated in the English educational system.

4.2. *Park Lane*: Adapting to the system and students rooted to ‘failure’

At the end of compulsory secondary education in England, students can sit General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams for each subject taught (usually at the age of 15-16). Most of these exams are standardized and centrally administered and are taken in a variety of subjects, which are usually decided by the students themselves in Year 9 (age 13–14). Although grades can vary from A*-G, the ‘A*-C economy’ sets the benchmark for educational success for all secondary school institutions and students at 5 GCSEs grade-level A*-C. Receiving five or more A*–C grades, including GCSEs in English and Maths, is often a requirement for taking Advanced-levels (A-levels) in the school sixth form, at a sixth form college or at a further education college after leaving secondary school. However, regardless of a student's performance in their A-level, most universities typically require students to obtain 5 GCSEs of level C or better, including English and Mathematics. Every year popular media in England publish league tables of secondary schools, based on the percentage of students in secondary schools obtaining at least 5 GCSE grade-level A*C. Hence, students’ entrance to colleges and universities and the perceived performance and status of schools depends on students’ success in meeting the standard of 5 GCSEs grade-level A*-C (Gillborn & Youdell 2000).

Compared to their colleagues in Belgium, Teachers in England have relatively little power in the process of evaluating their students. Exams are standardized and administered nationally to all students and teachers are not involved in designing, administering, and marking the examinations of the students they teach. Furthermore,

students in England pass the school year automatically and unlike their peers in Belgium they are not subject to a deliberation process in which their teachers decide whether they should be allowed to pass the year.

Teachers interviewed at *Park Lane* appear to have mixed feelings about the meaning and importance of GCSE outcomes. On the one hand they seemed to accept the social significance of GCSEs as important selection and evaluation tools employed in society, but on the other hand they questioned the validity of these tools as adequate measures of student or school ‘success’:

MS. RIISE: “They ACHIEVE well, even though their attainment is well below national standards. They achieve well from where they are. They do better –lots of them- than their SATS from Key Stage 3 would suggest they were going to do. But some of these students don’t even get an F or a G grade. If they come here with no English at all, and if they end up with an F or G at GCSE, that IS an achievement. (...). [Well, I think] it is not fair. And I think it’s now beginning to be recognized that a school like this might be MUCH more successful than a school which has not an intake of children who cannot read and write, or speak English and so on. And they end up with –what shall we say- with 70% 5 A’s to C’s. Well, you should ask them: why is it not 90%? But on paper, it looks as if we aren’t successful, but we gradually move on.”

(Female English teacher *Park Lane*, Religious Education)

Teachers interviewed at *Park Lane* school appeared to acknowledge that the benchmark of 5 GCSE level A*-C constituted an important evaluation standard for students and schools. However, at the same time they did not seem to find it feasible

for them and their students to reach this goal, and defined students' success more in terms of progress or added value rather than outcome. Several teachers explain a change in or lowering of their expectations by referring to the nature of their student-population, in particular the large proportion of students who recently arrived in the UK and as a consequence lack proficiency in English. Hence, just like in *Riverside* school, and in line with the research literature on teachers' adaptations (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968; 2000 (1968)) teachers appeared to re-define success and lower their student-expectations in the light of the perceived interests and especially the ability of their students.

However, while teachers in vocational education at *Riverside* school lowered their standards to such a level that underachieving was considered mainly a result of 'unwillingness' on the students' part, teachers interviewed in *Park Lane* school could not lower the standards to a level which they thought attainable by most students, as the standards are fixed nationally at 5 GCSE's level A*-C. As a result, they felt that many students were simply 'unable' to reach such standardized goals. At the same time, the English educational system is characterized by a culture of ability testing, in which decisions regarding students' educational careers are strongly informed by their performance on standardized ability tests (Gillborn & Youdell 2000). This suggests the influence of a nationally specific evaluation system on teachers' perception of students' failure: while teachers from vocational streams in *Riverside* mainly pointed to students' lack of motivation or willingness in explaining underachievement (attitude), teachers in *Park Lane* mainly stressed the unrealistic nature of the expectations imposed on certain students by the educational system. While the former blame the students, the latter blame the educational system and the specific social

situation from which these students arrive. As a result, the teachers interviewed in *Park Lane* tend to consider their students in general as legitimate *stragglers*:

RESEARCHER: “Ehm, do you feel that, it’s a school with a lot of different kids from a lot of different backgrounds, and do you feel that you have to be a different teacher, a different kind of teacher for different groups, different students?”

MS. MELLOR: “(...) I feel in a sense that, you have to be quite nurturing, and quite, sort of motherly to a lot of the kids, I mean, they've just been yanked out of the country, brought into a foreign country, they don't know the language -a lot of the time-, feel very alienated, they feel very, sort of, alone and isolated, you know, it's not a system that they're used to, so in a sense, although I am quite firm, I try and be as nurturing as possible and as understanding with their behavior, because there is so much baggage that they bring with them, so that's sort of pressure I think, that if perhaps I was in a different school, then I might be a bit different, I would expect more of them I think, but here, any little thing that they do, I, you know, reward them, I, I point out their success because I feel that's so important, you know.”

(Female Turkish teacher *Park Lane*, Mathematics)

While this teacher claims to be more ‘nurturing’ and ‘understanding with their behavior’ to students she regards as victims of their social situation. Most of the teachers who participated with the interviews (6/8) and many teachers who informally discussed their students with the researcher described their students at some point as ‘victims’, a description that was almost never expressed by teachers in *Riverside*.

However, unlike their Flemish colleagues in *Riverside*, teachers in *Park Lane* could not lower the standards of evaluation in order to increase the chances of these students succeeding. As a result, these students can only hope to achieve inferior educational qualifications:

MS. ANNA: “Well, obviously, the biggest success for a child is to actually leave the school with some qualifications, weather that is GCSC, certificate of achievement, you know, as long as they come out with something, and they can use that later on in their lives, and I would say that they've been successful.”

RESEARCHER: “Right, and do you think they can use, all those qualifications, for something?”

MS. ANNA: "Yes, of course, I mean a certificate of achievement, that's about it for kids, ehm, who have just recently come into the country. But they're like saying year 10, they're not allowed to do a GCSC when they're just learning the language, so obviously that way they don't feel useless, you know (...). But it's just a way of actually getting them to achieve something really, and that's the reason why we do it. Obviously, they wouldn't be able to cope with GCSC, it'd be too difficult for them."

(Female African Caribbean teacher *Park Lane*, Maths)

Like M. Babbel in *Riverside* (see extract with Aldo), this teacher in *Park Lane* teaches secondary school students who only recently arrived in England and have very little knowledge of the English language. However, unlike Mr. Babel, this teacher cannot lower her standards of expectations to help such students obtain valued educational

qualifications. Instead, such students are expected to achieve lower levels of educational qualifications ('certificates of achievement') which according to many teachers in *Park Lane* seem to have relatively little value in the labor market (compared to General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and especially GCSEs) and sometimes merely function as a consolation prize for those who are not allowed to participate or fail the qualifying race for access to high status education and employment.

Furthermore, teachers in *Riverside* did not only lower the standards of assessment to 'chasers', they also allocated such students scarce educational resources. However, the 'A*-C economy' appeared to stimulate *Park Lane* school to adopt specific policies to increase their GCSE output. In line with Gillborn and Youdell's research (2000), it seems that the school devised specific initiatives to allocate scarce educational resources to a limited number of students who were expected to benefit most from support in terms of reaching the benchmark of 5 GCSEs level A*-C.

For example, a project called 'GAP' aimed to boost the GCSE output of *Park Lane* school by allocating extra support to students that were considered 'intermediate', or students who were expected to obtain a level C-D on their GCSE exams. The students selected for this program received additional help during the two years prior to their GCSE exams. First, they were given 'in class support' in year 10 and 11, which meant that a support-teacher offered individual help in their main subjects such as English, Maths, Sciences, ICT, History and Geography during regular lesson-time. Secondly, GAP students were also assigned a 'mentor teacher' in year 11 who helped these students improve their GCSE results by developing their organization and study-skills. The support staff viewed the positive increase in GCSE

output over time as proof that the program ‘paid off’. By excluding those students who were not expected to have the ability to obtain 5 GCSEs level A*-C (even with additional support), the support team was effectively implementing a system of ‘educational triage’ that disadvantaged students regarded as ‘*misfits*’ or ‘*unfits*’. Although the support staff recognized this unfairness, they felt pressured to implement such measures in the light of the school’s poor GCSE output:

MR. FOY: “It is unfair to the lower achieving students but the school has to show that it can get rid of its special status, where it’s considered as a school that needs special measures, it has to show that it can get the GCSE results. (...). Unfortunately, it is impossible for us to give support to every individual student”.

(Male Somali teacher *Park Lane*, support teacher)

Mr. Foy was in charge of student support in *Park Lane* and therefore well positioned to discuss the nature of the system and its rationale. In *Riverside*, allocation of scarce educational resources (such as additional support in explaining course material) was not informed by students’ chances to pass exams but by their willingness to do well in school and reach (lowered) standards of achievement. All this suggests that a particular evaluation system can have important consequences for how teachers treat their students. In both educational settings, teachers explained students’ failing to reach educational standards by pointing to the alleged influence of social factors (such as the influence of a negative peer group, lack of family support or immigration). However, because teachers in *Riverside* perceived their students as ‘unwilling’ to adapt (to lowered standards of assessment), most of the students were perceived as

illegitimate *stragglers* and treated as *deviants*. In contrast, teachers in *Park Lane* school treated their students more as legitimate *stragglers*, or students who were in part victim of their social situation in which they had to reach impossible standards imposed from above.

While legitimate *stragglers* are treated more favorably in terms of space for deviance and/or allocation of scarce educational resources, the ‘GCSE A*-C economy’ in an English educational context stimulated teachers to consider and implement specific measures that allocate scarce educational resources only to those *stragglers* that are most likely to reach the national benchmark of achievement with the help of such additional educational resources. These findings support recent research in the US and UK (Booher-Jennings 2005; Gillborn & Youdell 2000; Jones et al. 2003; Nichols & Berliner 2007) which builds on Campbell’s (1976) law by showing that quantitative measurement indicators, as used in the US and UK school systems as tools to improve the quality of teaching and learning, seem to become a goal in itself to which teaching and learning have to adapt.

The data of this study suggests that such policy initiatives are likely to result in a situation in which the most underachieving students are not necessarily considered responsible for their situation but are less likely to receive educational support. In contrast, Flemish teachers work in a system that gives them much more power and autonomy and as a result appear more likely to offer the lowest achieving students support in obtaining valuable educational qualifications if these students show that they are willing to take their ‘responsibility’ as learners.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study builds on this rich body of educational research by suggesting the usefulness of an ecological approach in studying teachers' adaptations to students. Furthermore, relying on ethnographic research in one Flemish (*Riverside*) and English (*Park Lane*) secondary, multicultural inner-city school, this study explores the importance of students' characteristics and (especially) nationally specific student and school evaluation systems on the way teachers allocate scarce educational resources and responsibility for failure and success in education to their students. By focusing this study on schools in two countries with a very different student and school evaluation system, this study builds on a developing body of research in the US (Nichols & Berliner 2007; Orfield & L. 2001) and to a lesser extent the UK (Gillborn & Youdell 2000; Youdell 2004) which critically investigates how the process of teaching and learning in schools is influenced by policies of standardized testing of students and the public evaluation of schools on outcome related indicators.

Both schools included in this case-study research are multi-cultural inner-city schools with a poor reputation in their neighborhood, low levels of educational achievement and a substantial number of working class and Turkish speaking minority students. While the two schools are similar in important ways; the British and Flemish educational systems differ in terms of how students are evaluated and the role and power of teachers in this process. While students in England have to sit standardized exams, which are organized centrally by the government and administered nationally, teachers in Flanders develop, administer and evaluate their own exams to their students twice a year for each subject taught. Furthermore, unlike their colleagues in Belgium, teachers in England have no power in forcing students to retake their school year. Finally, while the English educational system is characterized

by a culture of public assessment and accountability in which schools are compared in public in terms of achievement, the Belgian educational system does not allow for such comparisons to be made in public.

These differences in the way students and schools are evaluated appear to inform teachers' definitions of 'successful' students, their related expectations of students and their allocation of scarce educational resources and explanations of educational failure. In a Flemish secondary, multicultural inner-city school, teachers perceived many of their students as lacking ability to be successful in education and in response lowered their standards of assessment to such a level that 'success' was largely defined in terms of students' attitudes to learning and teaching, and less in terms of their skills and knowledge they develop. As a result, students' failure to do well in school was explained by students' lack of willingness and teachers' allocation of scarce educational resources was informed by their perception of their students as either 'chasers' (those willing to be successful) or 'losers' (those perceived as unwilling to be successful).

While teachers interviewed in a secondary English, multicultural inner-city school also perceived their students as lacking ability to be successful in school, they could not adapt (or lower) their standards of assessment and defined student 'success' more in terms of added value and students' ability to obtain lower status educational qualifications. As a result, students' failure to be successful in school was not blamed on students' lack of willingness to be successful, but on an educational system that imposed unrealistic expectations of such students. However, scarce educational resources were not mainly directed to those students perceived as 'willing' to be successful, but to those students who were perceived most likely to benefit from such resources in obtaining valued educational qualifications (GCSE level A*-C). Such a

form of 'educational triage' (Booher-Jennings 2005; Gillborn & Youdell 2000) is motivated by the competitive pressures experienced by schools and their teachers in an English educational market to increase the proportion of students reaching 5 GCSEs level A*-C in their school.

These findings suggest the importance of nationally specific regulations on student and school evaluation processes in the development of teachers' perceptions of and behavior to their students. They suggest that teachers' perceptions and behavior to disadvantaged students, many of which are students from a lower socio-economic and ethnic minority background can at least in part be explained by the evaluation systems imposed by the educational system. As a result, policy makers and practitioners who seek to develop amongst teachers more positive views of and relationships with lower achieving (ethnic minority and working) students could consider the importance of particular evaluation systems in developing such adaptations.

While the need to make adaptations is usually motivated by the necessity to tailor curriculum and pedagogy to the different needs of students, and as a result improve the process and outcome of learning (e.g. see: Herring-Harrison et al. 2007; Vaughn et al. 1993), the findings of this study suggest that centralized and standardized student and school evaluation systems, in which schools and students face public scrutiny and competition for status and resources, limits the opportunity of teachers to adapt their pedagogy and curriculum to the needs of their students and stimulates teachers to put the requirements of the larger educational system first, likely at the expense of the lowest achieving students. Hence, the findings of this study build on and support Campbell's (1976) classic law which hypothesises that the more any quantitative social indicator is used by educational policymakers, the more

subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.

However, since the social processes that were identified in this study relate to the experiences of a small group of teachers in one Flemish and one English school, the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the cases studied in this research. Furthermore, although case-study research is particularly strong in exploring, identifying and illustrating complex processes and interactions that appear important to our understanding of teachers' adaptations (and as a result help to develop hypotheses regarding the development of such phenomena), it is less strong in offering hard(er) evidence on the extent to which these findings can be generalized to larger, more representative populations, controlling for various other factors that are theoretically important.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of future nationally comparative studies, conducted in countries that use different types of school and student evaluation systems. Quantitative studies have an important role to play in this field, by testing the effects of various embedded institutional contexts in different national contexts through multilevel modelling, using similar statistical models and measurement instruments. In addition, as this study illustrates, additional small-scale case-studies conducted in theoretically relevant contexts (e.g. different countries, in private versus public schools, rural versus urban schools and schools that differ in terms of ethnic and social class composition) could further enhance our knowledge of how particular educational and school systems inform decision-making processes in specific schools, and how this can in turn affect the opportunities for social mobility for various social groups in society.

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Notes

[1] The data on which this article is based concerns a PhD research focusing on racism and discrimination in two Flemish and one English secondary multi-cultural school with a substantial number of Turkish minority students. The researcher carried out ethnographic fieldwork in these educational settings, including ethnographic and systematic observations in schools, interviews from school staff and students and a student-survey from a representative sample of students of the two Flemish schools (Stevens, 2006).

[2] Pseudonyms are used for schools and respondents to protect the privacy of the participants. Participants were ensured confidentiality by not disclosing any information provided by participants or by doing this only in such a way as not to reveal the identity of the participants.

[3] The gender composition of staff and student population seemed to have an impact on the ethnic stereotypes developed by (mainly) female teachers of male Turkish students but not on teachers' definitions of educational success, their explanations of educational failure and allocation of scarce educational resources to disadvantaged students.

[4] In defining students as 'stragglers' and particular types of stragglers, we tried to develop ideal types of students that are theoretically relevant and at the same time stay as close as possible to the terminology used by teachers in defining their students. The word 'straggler' (*sukkelaar*) was used by one Flemish teacher in *Riverside* in

reference to a Turkish student who, according to the teacher, should be moved to a different (less demanding) type of education because the teacher perceived this student as a very quiet boy with severe language problems who was unable to meet the (lowered) expectations set by the teacher. In our model this student is redefined as an ‘unfit’, or a straggler who cannot reach the (lowered) standards imposed by the teacher. Similarly, teachers referred to our concept of ‘losers’ as *‘leeglopende profiteurs’* (good for nothing free-riders) or *‘jongens zonder karakter’* (guys without character or willpower) and our concept ‘chasers’ as *‘geen superjongen, maar die jongen doet toch zijn inspanningen’* (not a superman but a guy who wants to do an effort) and *‘iemand die het moeilijk heeft maar toch probeert’* (somebody who finds it hard but still tries).

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