

# **The educational trajectory of Newly Arrived Migrant Students: insights from a structural analysis of cultural capital.**

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# Abstract

**Background:** The recent influx of Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS) in Western-European societies poses important educational questions about how best to support migrant students within the education system.

**Purpose:** We sought to study how elements that are associated with cultural capital - namely a sense of entitlement and strategic knowledge - have relevance to NAMS' educational trajectories. In studying the process of how cultural capital relates to educational careers, this study argues for a general shift from a resource focused approach towards a strategy focused approach to cultural capital.

**Sample:** We collected data from 33 NAMS from six secondary schools in a city in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). A maximum difference approach was used: this allowed comparison of NAMS who followed the most academic track (general track) and the least academic track (vocational track) in secondary education in Flanders.

**Design and methods:** We undertook 33 in-depth biographical interviews during which the NAMS reconstructed their educational trajectories. Data were analysed qualitatively. We used structural approach analysis to identify each narrative's core structure. These structured fragments were then thematically coded.

**Results:** Within the categories 'a sense of entitlement' and 'strategic knowledge of the education system', the analysis detected differences in strategies of action between pupils in the general track and in the vocational track.

**Conclusion:** The findings offer insights that could support the development of better strategies to guide and support NAMS in education. As NAMS' integration in the educational system appears to be a stretched and slow process of orientation, studying their trajectory has the potential to deepen our understanding of known mechanisms of the reproduction of inequalities in education.

**Keywords:** equity, migrant students, cultural capital, sense of entitlement, strategic knowledge, attainment

# Introduction

Extensive research demonstrates persistent social inequalities in education in general (Holsinger and Jacob, 2008) and especially among pupils with a migration background (Dustmann and Glitz, 2011; Lüdemann and Schwerdt, 2013; Vervae, D'hondt, Van Houtte and Stevens, 2016). Within this context, contemporary Western-European societies are nowadays confronted with growing challenges resulting from the increased influx of young people who emigrate during adolescence. These students, known as 'Newly Arrived Migrant Students' (NAMS), enter a new educational system during their educational career. In Flanders (Belgium), this is organized by providing separate reception education classes to learn the language of education (Dutch) and to orientate students to an educational 'track' and study option in regular education (Van Avermaet, et al., 2017).

Between June 2015 and June 2016, the number of NAMS in reception education classes for non-Dutch speaking newcomers in secondary education increased by 60% (Agentschap voor onderwijsdiensten, 2018). So far, research on the educational position of this group remains scarce, but it is clear that their educational trajectories often indicate underperformance. Specifically, (1) many NAMS are one or two school years behind compared to their age cohort when they enter secondary education; (2) NAMS have a higher chance of having to repeat a year; (3) NAMS are greatly over-represented in the vocational track; and, (4) they are more likely to leave secondary education early and unqualified (Van Avermaet, et al., 2017).

This picture contrasts with research on immigrant optimism (Kao and Tienda, 1998; Van Droogenbroeck, 2013) which shows that immigrants are (1) a positively selected group (as they were willing and able to leave their home countries to settle in another country) characterized by (2) high educational aspirations and a desire of upward status mobility (Salikutluk, 2016). Such observations suggest that structural barriers are playing a significant role in the educational outcomes of migrant students.

Despite these barriers to educational success, however, there is still some variation in educational attainment within the group of NAMS (Van Avermaet, et al., 2017). This raises the question: Why do some NAMS succeed in the academic track in the education system and others do not? A better understanding of the educational attainment of this growing group of pupils is important in itself. Moreover, as NAMS' integration in the educational system could be described as a stretched and slow process of orientation, studying their trajectory has the potential to deepen our understanding of known mechanisms of the reproduction of inequalities

in education. More specifically, we focus on the process of *how* elements that are typically associated with cultural capital affect their educational career, namely *a sense of entitlement* and *strategic knowledge*.

In an educational context, a sense of entitlement is the feeling of having the right to claim a position within the educational field (Calarco, 2018; Reay, 2004). A strong sense of entitlement leads students to actively seek for help, ask questions, resist negative advice, etc. A vast amount of literature shows that the attitudes, competencies and relational skills associated with a sense of entitlement are transferred from parents to children and enable pupils to manoeuvre through formal institutions (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2003; Weininger and Lareau, 2009). Strategic knowledge of the education system is practical, as well as formal, information on the system and knowledge of how to use these insights best to accommodate an educational position. Several scholars consider this type of cultural knowledge (i.e. facts, information, skills, and familiarity with the social processes in education) as an aspect of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2015; Reay, 2004; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013). A sense of entitlement and strategic knowledge are crucial components of people's more general strategies of action (Swidler, 1986).

### ***Purpose***

The aim of this study was to assess to what extent two elements of cultural capital – namely a sense of entitlement and strategic knowledge - are relevant when studying the educational trajectories of NAMS.

### ***Context of the study***

We analysed data from interviews with pupils enrolled in the last year of secondary education, who were invited to reconstruct their educational trajectory narratively. We followed a maximum difference approach by interviewing pupils who strongly differed in terms of their track position. In Belgium, the general and vocational tracks are respectively considered the highest and lowest tracks in the hierarchy of the educational system (Van Praag, 2013). We believe that the choice-driven and hierarchical system in Flanders (Stevens and Vermeersch, 2010), together with the high level of autonomy that schools have, draws up an interesting case for this study because of the increased importance of a sense of entitlement and strategic knowledge within the education system.

The interviews for this study were carried out with pupils who used to be in a reception education class in a city in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). In Flanders, pupils can enter a reception education class when they are between 12 and 18 years old, have not been in Belgium longer than one year and do not master the Dutch language sufficiently to enter regular secondary education. Reception education classes are primarily aimed at (1) learning the language of education (Dutch) and (2) subsequent orientation to regular education. Most NAMS stay in a reception education class for one school year (Van Avermaet, et al., 2017). Reception education classes are organized in regular secondary schools. Schools which organize reception education classes have, on average, 50 NAMS in their school and often divide them into ability groups. Although, in this way, some homogeneity is created, reception education classes are characterized by very large differences in terms of pupils' abilities and socio-economic background (Van Avermaet, et al., 2017).

After reception education class, pupils enter regular education. They must choose a track, a field of study and a year according to their age and abilities. Secondary education in Flanders is characterized by early tracking (see Figure 1). Flemish secondary education consists of three grades each of two school years. In the first grade, pupils are directed to the A- or B-stream (Boone and Van Houtte, 2013). From grade two onwards pupils choose between general, technical, arts or vocational education. Within these tracks, there are several fields of study<sup>1</sup>. The general track is the most academic track and, in practice, it is seen as the most prestigious track, whilst the vocational track is seen as the least prestigious track (Van Praag, 2013). The B-stream almost inevitably leads to the vocational track<sup>2</sup>. According to the difference in prestige between the tracks in practice, the educational system can be considered hierarchical.

[Figure 1 about here]

## Methods

We conducted 33 in-depth interviews with pupils who started their school career in Flanders in reception education classes for non-Dutch speaking newcomers in secondary education. We used a biographical interview design with a topic list consisting of questions that elicited stories about the experiences in and after reception education class and the decisions and actions pupils took during their educational trajectory.

### ***Ethical considerations***

To receive ethical approval for the study, a research plan that detailed all steps of the study and contained an ethical reflection was submitted to the university ethics committee of human sciences of the university of the first author. The ethics committee granted permission for the whole research plan. The principals of the schools that were contacted gave written permission to contact the pupils who had followed a reception education class. An informed consent form was presented to the pupils before the interview. This form included the research topic (study choice of pupils who started their educational career in reception education classes), the themes that the pupils could expect in the questions (recalling of their trajectory and study choice), the contact details of the researchers and the practical organization of the interview (duration of approximately one hour, one-on-one conversation). The pupil was also asked to indicate whether he/she gave permission to audio-record the interview. The informed consent form also indicated that taking part in the research was not mandatory and that the participant could stop the interview at any time, without having to give a reason or explanation. It was also made clear that the participant could ask to delete any data that was collected. Further, it was made explicit that the research would not in any way affect school results or residence permit procedures. Further, the informed consent form guaranteed confidentiality to the participants. It explained that the interview recording would be transcribed, and the transcription would be made anonymous by the researchers. To assure the anonymity of the participants and other people/locations involved in the study, protocols were used including pseudonyms in the transcriptions and the reported data.

### ***Participants***

We selected six schools with reception education classes based on the educational network (Flemish community education, the city's education or Catholic education) and the different fields of study and tracks they offered. The schools provided a list of pupils who were enrolled in the last year of secondary education and who had followed reception education class. We contacted the pupils who provided their contact details by phone or e-mail to give more information on the research. Pupils who, after having received information on the objectives and procedures of the interview, indicated that they were willing to participate in our study suggested a time and place for the interview. In this way, 33 pupils were interviewed. Of these pupils, 11 were enrolled in the general track and 22 followed vocational education. Of the 33 participants, around two-thirds (20 of the 33) was female. On average, the participants had lived

in Belgium for 5 years and were 20 years old. All the participants were over 18 years old. On average, the interviews lasted 55 minutes.

Respondents' social background in terms of their country of origin, migration history, employment status of the parents and educational level of the parents was very diverse. To get an indication of their socioeconomic background (and mobility), pupils were asked what their parents' occupation was at the time of the interview and in their country of origin. We also asked for their parents' highest level of education. Based on these elements, we coded 17 respondents' social background as working class, and 16 as middle class (with the vast majority being in the lower or middle of the middle class group) (Boone, Seghers and Van Houtte, 2018). For our current purposes, the specific class label and the number of classes is less important than the respondents' relative socioeconomic position.

### ***Data collection***

The interviews were conducted in Dutch. In the interviews, pupils gave a retrospective view of their school careers. They aimed to reconstruct the circumstances and actions they took during their educational trajectory. We used a biographical interview design, with a topic list consisting of questions that aimed at eliciting narratives about the experiences in and after the migrant students' attendance of reception education class. In a biographical interview, a particular event is explored through ascertaining the steps in the process by which the event came to happen (Bruner, 2004; Keppens and Spruyt, 2017). The particular event in this study concerns the graduation of pupils who went to reception education class, who were either in the general track or the vocational track.

During the interview, pupils were asked to draw a timeline to reconstruct their educational trajectory. For every event marked on the timeline, the researcher asked how the event came about, who the important actors were at that time and what the actual actions of the participants were. The researcher asked specifically what actions led up to the transition to regular education and decisions such as changing school, educational track or study option. Other questions referred to important events or landmarks (e.g. the first week in regular education). Participants were asked about their general experience in school and about helpful and difficult actors and aspects during their educational trajectory. They were also asked what they would recommend to a pupil who had just arrived in Belgium. Pupils were asked about their family background and migration story when they initiated the topic or when the

researcher felt it was most appropriate. Finally, pupils were asked about their aspirations for the future and if their ambitions had changed in the time they were in Belgium.

### *Data analysis*

The data analysis consisted of three steps. First, the interviews were transcribed and closely read multiple times. Second, we used Labov's (1982) structural approach analysis to get an understanding of each narrative's core structure. Labov's methodology dissects narratives into six components. (1) The abstract - that is, a summary of the important elements in the story of the respondent. In our case, this reflects the educational trajectory and important life events. These events often correspond with their migration story. (2) A description of the time, place, characters and situations (the orientation) who/which contributed to the study choices of reception education class pupils. (3) Analysis of the complicating action (in our case, this reflected the build-up of study choices and actions within the study trajectory). (4) The reflections of the pupil on his/her study trajectory. (5) The outcome of the plot (in our case, the current educational track). (6) The participants' reflection about the future.

We used these structured narratives to identify key aspects in the educational trajectories of the NAMS: (1) the ability groups in the reception year, (2) the first encounter with regular education through an internship, (3) the search for a school, a track and field of study, (4) the transition to regular education, (5) having to change tracks and study options, and (6) the accommodation of their needs in regular education. We compared how pupils from the general track and the vocational track handled these key aspects. Our coding of the interviews was thematically guided by the key aspects. Throughout the analysis, the concepts of 'a sense of entitlement' and 'strategic knowledge of the education system' emerged from the data as parent codes. Supported by the literature review, these concepts were used as sensitizing concepts in the rest of the analysis. The concepts were refined and critically assessed, and the researchers retained an open perspective towards other approaches.

At the end of the analysis, the concepts 'a sense of entitlement' and 'strategic knowledge of the education system' came out of the critical assessment and became the two main codes. In the results section we illustrate the difference between general track and vocational track pupils by discussing one elucidative anonymised example pupil from each track. These example cases were chosen because they are most illustrative. We added separate extracts from other interviews to the results section, to demonstrate the ways in which it was broadly representative



of the interviews as a whole. Where relevant, translated, anonymised quotations from the interviews are included; all names are pseudonyms.

## Results

In this section, we firstly present the behaviour and attitudes of general track pupils with reference to strategic knowledge of the education system and a sense of entitlement. Secondly, we present those of pupils in the vocational track. Further, we show how the difference in behaviour of general and vocational pupils are linked with other elements from their narratives (e.g. socioeconomic background, migration story).

### *Pupils in the general track*

The example case of a NAMS that succeeds in the general track is Tania. She followed secondary education in an Eastern European country until she was 15 years old. She then came to Belgium and followed reception education class. After that she enrolled in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the general track. At the time of the interview, she was about to finish the 6<sup>th</sup> year of the general track. She moved to Belgium with her mother because her mother had met a Belgian partner. When we look at *strategic knowledge of the education system*, four observations could be made. First, from the time she was in reception education class onwards, she understood the basic principles of the educational system. She explained, for example, how the ability groups in reception education classes were referred to by colour, instead of by number. She quickly realized that she was in the strongest group.

*‘We were the only group who got French, next to Dutch courses. When you want to go to the general track you need to know French. It’s an important subject.’ (Tania, general track)*

Tania quickly understood that being in the strongest ability group also increased her chances of going on to the general track. She recognized her French courses as preparations for the rest of her educational career. The pupils in regular education were her reference group and she attempted to meet the same standards as them, in order to increase her chances of transition to the general track.

After reception education class, Tania did not stay in the same school. This was because she believed that the ratio between pupils with and without migration background was not good. She was convinced that this hampers the quality of education. So, she deliberately chose what she referred to as a ‘*white school*’, assuming that there was more discipline, a better learning

environment, and more opportunities to interact with other pupils who would go to university. She was aware of the reputations of schools and derived this from the ratio of pupils with and without migration background. She made value judgements about an unbalanced ratio.

Other general track pupils explained that they chose so-called ‘white schools’ because they wanted to learn Dutch quickly and correctly. Pupils were rather straightforward and open about their thoughts on the ratio of pupils with and without migration background affecting their school choice. This is significant for two reasons; first, quality differences between schools remain modest in Flanders (Spruyt, Van Droogenbroeck and Kavadias, 2015). All schools are subsidized and therefore quite accessible for everyone, compared to schools in countries where private schools charge large tuition fees. Second, information on the reputations of schools about migration ratios is considered sensitive and talked about with caution by teachers and policy makers in Flanders. When giving an overview of possible schools, most teachers or other professionals would not mention this information. Despite all this, pupils from the general track showed a tacit awareness of the ‘hidden’ features of the Flemish educational landscape.

General track pupils also showed that they had more formal knowledge of the education system. Alexander wanted to change school after the fourth year in the general track, because the study option he wanted to follow was not available in the school that he was attending during that time. This already shows he had knowledge of study fields that were offered by other schools. He discussed with his teacher whether it was a good idea to change school. The teacher explained to him that the study field with fewer languages and more science subjects would suit him better and helped him to look for schools where they offered the study field he wanted. When he visited one of the schools, he was told that he would be best placed in the technical track.

*‘I wanted to follow ‘economy-sciences’. I went to visit a school who offered this direction and they said I had good results, but that it would be too difficult for me anyway. They proposed to go to the technical track. I was shocked. I had passed, I had an A-certificate<sup>3</sup>. It was legally warranted for me to stay in the general track.’ (Alexander, general track)*

Alexander’s reasoning reveals that he had knowledge of the more complex procedures within the educational system. He was aware of his rights and what study fields were accessible for him.

Tania explained that at the end of reception education class she was already thinking about what track offered the best options for tertiary education. She chose the general track

because this would bring her closer to her ambition of going to university. She explained that her teachers referred her to a website that gave information on all the research fields, the study efficiency of each track in tertiary education and a test that showed the best match of her interests and the study fields.

*'The general track appealed most to me because I know it is impossible to go to university after you were in vocational education. I used a website back then to see the study efficiency for each track.'* (Tania, general track)

While the information Tania gives here is not completely correct – in Flanders everyone who obtains a diploma of secondary education can enrol in any type of tertiary education – in practice, the situation is close to how she describes it. This indicates that she has practical knowledge leading her to make strategic choices.

Most pupils from the general track acquired their strategic knowledge of the education system from their teachers in reception education classes. Pupils indicated that good contact with them provided most of the information needed to make these decisions.

*'He [teacher] discussed several times with me, what I wanted to do. We could talk... it was even like, like he was my brother. He encouraged me to choose sciences.'* (Romeo, general track)

This quotation indicates how Romeo felt that the teacher was in some senses treating him like an equal: stating that the teacher could be his brother suggests he feels they had common ground. Most general track pupils appeared to have a good understanding with the teachers from reception education class.

A second source of information for Tania was her stepfather. He helped her to choose a school both when she first arrived in Belgium and when she had to enter regular education. This form of social capital can be an important source of strategic knowledge about the education system; this was also the case for other pupils who had an aunt, uncle or brother who had been living in Belgium for several years already.

Thus, the social network of pupils sometimes provided them with knowledge of the formal and informal rules, strategies for gaining individual accommodation, and the timing and requirements for implementing any requests for accommodation. It also provided the parents of the pupils with this information so that they could take on an active role in the study choice of their children. Pupils from the general track reported they discussed the different study options they were considering with their parents.

*'At the end of the first semester of the fifth year I was doubting if I should continue or switch to another study field in the general track. I discussed it with my parents and we also went to talk to the principal.'* (Alexander, general track)

Being able to involve their parents in the decision process gave the pupils more input on what they should consider while making these choices. When enough information was available, parents could translate their own educational experiences to those of their children. In the case of higher-educated parents, this had a greater impact because they had more experiences to share. In the case of Alexander, who changed school and study field twice, this was an important element. His mother was highly educated and often gave him advice on how to direct his educational career. Discussing the transfer with the principal was also the initiative of the parents. From this experience, Alexander learned how to communicate with educational gatekeepers such as the principal.

Looking at a *sense of entitlement* in the story of Tania and other general track pupils leads to three findings. First, as detailed below, a good number of the general track pupils reported that they wanted to try the general track, despite the resistance they often met when announcing their choice. They reasoned that if it was too difficult, they could still change. According to our analysis, this strategy of 'aiming high' was not always well received by teachers. Pupils described how they often met resistance when they announced their intention to enrol in the general track. Narges, for example, did an internship<sup>4</sup> in the fifth year of 'human sciences' in the general track when she was in reception education class. She said she found human sciences difficult, but she was very interested in the content matter. After reception education class, she wanted to pursue this study, but the teachers tried to convince her to choose the technical track, because the internship was so hard. Eventually, she persisted in her choice and passed the fifth year in the general track. She said her father taught her to advocate for herself. He was highly educated but struggled with learning Dutch. In response to this, he often had conversations with his daughter about not giving up.

In the case of Narges, we also see the role of her migration history. She fled a war-torn Asian country and sought asylum in Belgium. She perceived Flanders as a context with more opportunities than the country she left. She wanted to claim her educational position, because she knew it was not self-evident. This stimulated her assertiveness and resourcefulness, which are components of her sense of entitlement.

We also found this mechanism among pupils who were not privileged in the classic vision of cultural capital. Some pupils in the general track with a working-class background

also showed features of entitlement. In these cases, the link with migration history was often significant. Their persistence was notable and based on the hope for upward mobility.

*'I had a good education here. I have a better life than in [Eastern European country]. The natural next step is to go to university. When people tell me it is going to be hard, I tell them I'm still going to do it!'* (Petru, general track)

Second, because these pupils were new in the education system, they received advice from many people, even from people who were less informed or unaware of what the different options were. Being able to filter out these remarks from good advice and being assertive enough to disregard them was an important component of a successful way to seek accommodations. Alexander, for example, explained that after his year in reception education class he visited a school that he would have liked to go to, but a teacher told him he would never pass in a regular school. Alexander identified the information the teacher gave him as wrong and was assertive enough to act against it. The support from his social network enabled him to look beyond this experience. Instead of restraining him, it encouraged him to look for another school that could assist him in claiming his educational position.

Third, pupils from the general track were not only more inclined to ask for assistance, they were also more successful in receiving it. Receiving attention, accommodations and assistance is a result of action strategies that people acquire through social interaction. Tania explained that, in her family, asking for help was seen as a smart thing to do. Her mother and stepfather encouraged her to ask for help with anything and she felt comfortable doing so.

*'If you want help, you need to ask for it. Ask questions if you do not understand, even though everyone else understands the question. It can only help you, so why wouldn't you do it? [...] The school has a quiet room for pupils who have difficulties with reading or understanding the language. There you can ask as many questions as you want. They also gave you more time. I always applied to sit there.'* (Tania, general track)

Feeling confident in asking for help and assistance during the educational career is an important advantage. In Flanders, most regular secondary schools do not take special measures to facilitate the learning of NAMS. To succeed, however, they often need extra assistance. General track pupils reported it made a difference when they asked the teacher to repeat the explanation, write words on the blackboard or when they could use a translation dictionary.

### ***Pupils in the vocational track***

The example case of a vocational track pupil was Hafsa. She followed primary education in the Eastern African country where she was born. When she was twelve years old, she moved with

her four brothers and sister to another East African country. There she stayed and went to school for two years. Her mother and youngest brother had already come to Belgium as refugees and tried to obtain residence permits for herself and her other siblings. When she arrived in Belgium, she and her siblings followed reception education class for one school year. Hafsa then enrolled in the fourth year of the technical track in the study option 'social and technical science'. After that, she failed the year and was advised to enrol in vocational education. She went to the fourth year of studying 'food and care'.

Concerning the *strategic knowledge of the education system*, the narratives of Hafsa and other vocational track pupils led to three observations. Firstly, they had less insight in to the division of ability groups in reception education classes. She explained that she and her siblings were divided over different groups but did not attach any significance to the existence of these groups. She explained it was '*difficult to understand what her options were after reception education class*'. During the interview, she displayed little insight into her own educational position at that time. The vocational track pupils reported that they did not realize during the reception education class how important it was to learn Dutch and to show the teachers what their abilities were. They mainly trusted the teachers in reception education class to guide them to a study choice that suited them: '*I thought that if they chose that for me, it could be something for me.*' Secondly, it seemed that due to the lack of information, Hafsa and other vocational track pupils made uninformed choices. For example, choosing a school and a study option was often determined by where their friends went or what school was closest to their house. Choices were often based on coincidental factors. Analysis of her narrative suggested that she followed advice from acquaintances and suggestions of social workers without knowing all the options.

Thirdly, when Hafsa felt she was not in the right study option, she did not change until she was forced to because of her failing grades. Lack of information appeared to be a key element to understand her passivity in this respect. The vocational track pupils explained that they did not know how to change and where to change to. Most of the vocational track pupils felt that they could not consult their parents, because they were themselves poorly educated, did not understand the education system, and had no people in their social network who could help. Vocational track pupils explained there was no-one with relevant experience to guide them in their educational decisions. As a result, the teachers in reception education class often were their first and only source of information.

*'I didn't know what to do, so I went back to my teacher in reception education class. She told me to do 'care and food'. I went home to consult my parents and they said that*

*if that was what I wanted that they were ok with it. I used to play with my nephews and nieces a lot, so I thought it might be a good study option for me.*’ (Hafsa, vocational track)

When looking for traces of *sense of entitlement* in the story of Hafsa and other vocational track pupils, we observed three things. First, the internships that pupils can do in regular education while they are in reception education class was often experienced by vocational track pupils as discouraging. They were overwhelmed by the gap in language proficiency with the other pupils in regular education, felt helpless, and saw no way in which they would be able to follow regular education. In this way, for students with these experiences, these internships could be regarded as accomplishing the exact opposite of what they are aiming to do.

Moreover, instead of seeing a range of resources and a support system that could help them overcome the educational challenges, pupils often had a range of responsibilities outside school. In the narratives of vocational track pupils, the ‘sense of necessity’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 372) was bigger than the ‘sense of entitlement’.

*‘The vocational track is the best for me. I will have a job right away. It [education] has already taken too long. I must support my family.’* (Alan, vocational track)

The second observation concerned refraining from asking for help. Hafsa said she often ‘held back from asking questions’ throughout her educational career because she did not have the courage to speak up or because she did not want to bother the teacher and other students. Other pupils also said they did not raise their hand in class that much. They felt ashamed and thought they were going to be seen as stupid when they asked something that was already explained in class. Hafsa also felt that if she asked too many questions, she would hold back the entire class. This uncertainty prevented her from asking for help. Because these pupils did not learn to negotiate their position or resist people with a superior position, they tended to clam up when they met resistance.

*‘One time I raised my hand and the teacher said she couldn’t explain everything again. She said because of the two days of internship we did a week, there was less time for the courses, and she had to continue with the rest of the content matter. [...] I try to figure out things by myself now.’* (Hafsa, vocational track)

The third observation is that pupils’ migration history was sometimes in itself a barrier. In particular, refugees or young people who were forced by their parents to leave their country showed a strong feeling of loss and downward social mobility. Leaving their home country did

not only mean leaving their natural habitat, home, friends and family, but also losing their focus and motivation.

*'We had to leave [Western Asian country]. I lost my mother and my siblings along the way. My father and I were united with them after two years in Belgium. It caused a lot of stress. We are here now, but we keep on thinking on how it was. [...] We were a rich family in [Western Asian country]. Here we are at the bottom.'* (Munin, vocational track)

Moreover, these pupils had the strong impression that their new life started at the lowest social position. Some of them went from a middle- or high-class position in their home country to a family of refugees who left all their belongings behind and were stranded in a country where they did not speak the language, did not know the culture and had no social network. Their discourse was primarily characterized by a strong feeling of powerlessness.

## Discussion

Against the background of, on the one hand, a growing population of NAMS and, on the other hand, the observation that these young people often encounter difficulties in their educational career and are overrepresented in the vocational education track, this paper tackled the question: why do some NAMS succeed in the academic education track and others do not? In the choice-driven education system in Flanders, the most academic track (general track), in practice, enjoys the highest prestige, while the least academic track (vocational track) enjoys the least prestige (Stevens and Vermeersch, 2010). Based on the 33 biographical interviews with NAMS, some of whom were in the most prestigious track and others in the least, we looked for factors that contributed to the production of educational inequalities. Our findings connect to literature that considers cultural capital not as a static resource, but rather as a resource with an interactional component that materializes in the strategies of action people develop and rely on (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 1987, 1999, 2015; Mayo and Siraj, 2015; Reay, 2004).

In studying the process of *how* cultural capital affects educational careers, this literature promotes a general shift from a *resource-focused approach* to cultural capital, towards a *strategy-focused approach*. Against that background, we considered that strategic knowledge of the education system and a sense of entitlement were aspects that could make a difference in the action strategies of pupils enrolled in the general or vocational track. Pupils from the general track on the one hand and vocational track on the other differed in three aspects related to strategic knowledge of the education system. First, during reception education class general track pupils reported they were more aware of (1) their own educational position and (2) the



importance of showing their abilities to teachers and gathering information on the education system. Second, general track pupils had informal and formal information on the differences in discipline, achievements and opportunities between secondary schools and the various study options, and therefore made decisions based on this information when choosing a school after reception education class. The choices of vocational track pupils were more based on coincidental factors, such as personal opinions shared by teachers or proximity of the school to their house. Third, general track pupils used other resources to gather information on schools and study options. They had more formal information on schools, as well as 'practical' information, that is, strategic knowledge concerning dynamics in education that is often downplayed in the 'official' discourse on education. Ball and Vincent (2006) refer to this as 'hot' knowledge. Vocational track pupils reported they lacked information and often stayed in a study option that did not suit them for too long, potentially jeopardizing their options.

We also found clear differences between pupils following the different tracks with respect to a sense of entitlement - the feeling that one deserves to be helped - which results in assertiveness and resourcefulness (Calarco, 2018) and enables pupils to manoeuvre successfully through formal institutions. Feelings of entitlement result in seeking attention, assistance and accommodations, critically assessing the stance of people in positions of authority and countering opposing viewpoints (Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2004). With regard to a sense of entitlement, general track and vocational track pupils differed in three aspects. First, general track pupils 'aimed high'. The hierarchical and stringent tracks, in combination with free track choice, leads to ambitious choices. This strategy requires a sense of entitlement – i.e. it is up to the individual to make a high-risk, high-gain choice – as well as practical knowledge of how to understand the system. In pupils' concrete strategies of action, these two aspects of cultural capital often reinforced each other. Second, general track students reported that they tried to reach their educational goal by gaining individual accommodations, while vocational track pupils eliminated study options based on practical considerations and other responsibilities they felt they had. Thus, the vocational track pupils were displaying a higher 'sense of necessity' – understood as *'a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary'* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 372) – than a 'sense of entitlement'. This manifested itself in the time frame pupils relied on. Vocational track pupils thought more in the short term, compared to the general track pupils, who chose their track in line with their plans for tertiary education. Third, general track pupils stood up to higher

positioned individuals who questioned their study choice or choice of school, while for vocational track pupils, the opinions of these educational gatekeepers were decisive.

These differences in behaviour can be explained by different factors. Pupils in reception education classes are very heterogeneous (Van Avermaet, et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important not to reduce these differences to social class differences. Within this heterogeneity, however, we distinguished a dimension related to power relations. As previous research has suggested, young people's access to information, and interpretation of, information is often patterned by socio-economic status (Brooks, 2002). There were more pupils with a middle-class background in the group of general track pupils than in the group of vocational track pupils. In part, the strategies for gaining strategic knowledge and a sense of entitlement are transferred from middle-class parents to their children (Reay, 2005; Lawson, 2014). Middle-class values also resulted in better communication with teachers and, therefore, in more informed decisions (De Keere and Spruyt, 2019).

Related to this difference in social background, we identified a difference in the value of social capital between the general track and vocational track pupils. While vocational track pupils often also had a network of people who had been in Belgium for several years, the members of these network often possessed less strategic knowledge to share. Here, our findings resonate with previous research on the difference in social capital of migrants and minorities (Karssen, van der Veen, and Volman, 2015; Rodrigues, Meeuwisse, Notten, and Severiens, 2018).

Next to social background, migration history appeared to be an important factor in the study choice of NAMS. Some youngsters fled their country to apply for asylum, some received a residence permit in the context of family reunion, and others moved for economic or personal reasons. These different experiences can foster different feelings (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016). It can bring about a feeling of new opportunities or a feeling of downward social mobility. These feelings were reported to have had an important impact on educational aspirations. Increased aspiration from being in a new environment appeared to be an element that boosted pupils' sense of entitlement and innovativeness to work out strategies for success. However, we also noticed that the circumstances of the migration and the psychological damage that it might have caused had a strong impact on the educational trajectory.

Overall, this research offers insights into how cultural capital functions in the educational careers of NAMS. It would be interesting for future research to study how teachers

perceive the differences between pupils and what characteristics they take into account when giving study advice and information on the education system. One of the defining characteristics of the student population of NAMS is that often very little is known about their educational background and that the within-group variation (in terms of background, capabilities, etc.) is large. Both factors imply that the uncertainty typically associated with the orientation processes is even larger. In this way, the study of NAMS could help to deepen our understanding of the general educational gatekeeper function of teachers. Also, further research is needed to look at how the social networks of pupils operate, by looking at social capital not only as a reinforcing aspect of cultural capital, but as an element that has a direct effect on educational choices. This could provide insights into how strategies of action are shared and passed on. For now, we know these strategies have an important impact on the educational trajectories of pupils, especially when they are new to the system and still finding out the rules of the game.

### ***Limitations***

As with all research, it is important to recognise that our study has some limitations, due to its design and scope. First, we had to rely on retrospective accounts and information based upon memory recall, which may undermine the reliability of the data (Lafaille and Wildeboer, 1995). To minimize the impact of this, we restricted the time frame of the memory recall by interviewing young people (aged 18 to 23) (Dahl, 2016; Keppens and Spruyt, 2017) and stimulated memories of a specific time period. Moreover, the questions in the interviews contained reference points to important events or actions (Cohen, Kasen, Bifulco, Andrews and Gordon, 2005; Keppens and Spruyt, 2017). That said, further research could benefit from following pupils over time. In addition, as the strategies of action of the pupils in the general and the vocational track differed, the interaction between the researcher and the two groups of pupils during the interviews differed as well; it was more challenging for vocational track pupils to recall and reflect on their educational trajectory and they appeared less conscious about the reasoning behind their actions and preferences. A longitudinal design would doubtless be beneficial here, too. We hope that the findings of our narrative-based study, which highlights the importance of strategic knowledge of the education system and a feeling of entitlement, will help to further understanding of the educational experiences of migrant students and, in so doing, pave the way for the development of better strategies to guide and support NAMS in education.

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### **Declaration of interest statement**

No conflicts of interest to declare.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of study fields in the second grade within the general track are: economic sciences, social sciences and Greek/Latin. Pupils have to choose one field. The study fields that are available differ between schools.

<sup>2</sup> If pupils want to change their education track, they have to stay in the same year and therefore add a year to their educational trajectory.

<sup>3</sup> If a student receives an A-certificate at the end of a schoolyear, s/he can pass on to the next year in the same track.

<sup>4</sup> During reception education class, pupils have to do an internship in the study field they are most interested in with regard to their transfer to regular education.