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Contrasting approaches to educational equality: An intersectional perspective on educational policies in Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 20th century, fostering equal educational opportunities has been one of the driving forces of the development of education policies in many European countries. While at first this mainly comprised the fight against socio-economic inequality, over time other types of inequality in education have been challenged. This paper uses an intersectional lens to cast light on the representations of complex inequalities in educational policies in the two main educational systems in Belgium. Our analysis demonstrates that both the Flemish and Francophone education policies in Belgium have adopted a fragmented and deficit-based approach to inequalities and pay limited attention to complex and intersectional inequalities. Yet, we also observe a trend towards diverging approaches to equality in the two main Belgian education systems. While in Francophone policy we find an evolution towards the recognition of the role of the school system in creating structural and accumulative inequalities, in Flemish policy we detect an opposite trend towards a reinforcement of the deficit-centered approach. By connecting these policy trends to the political context, we show how the case of Belgium can provide a new perspective on policy discourses around educational (in)equality in the European context.

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Since the beginning of the 20th century, the promotion of equal opportunities in education has been one of the driving forces behind the development of education policies in many European countries. Initially, the main aim was to combat socio-economic inequalities through policies aimed at democratizing the access to secondary education after the Second World War (Grootaers 1998). Gradually, inequalities related to other social categories than class were placed at the center of political agendas (Albisetti, Goodman, and Rogers 2010; Richard and Alessandrin 2019). Simultaneously, under the influence of international organizations and European institutions, various policy frameworks have emerged for promoting equality in European

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education systems. Whereas scholars have extensively analyzed the varying conceptions of equality underpinning education policies (Schuster, Jörgens, and Kolleck 2021; Van Zanten 2017) and research has increasingly pointed at multiple and complex inequalities in educational systems (McMaster and Cook 2019), little has been done so far to explore whether and how complex inequalities are addressed in educational policies. Additionally, only few studies exist that use an intersectional framework to analyze equality policies in the field of education.

This paper uses an intersectional and Bourdieusian-inspired theoretical approach to analyze the representations of multiple and complex inequalities within education policy documents. Thereby, we aim to cast light on the ways in which inequalities across multiple, and possibly intersecting, axes are represented within policy discourses. Our paper provides an analysis of compulsory (that is, primary and secondary) education policies in the case of Belgium. Belgium is an interesting case-study because it comprises three separate systems of education within one country, namely a Dutch, French and German-speaking system. In this paper, we focus on the Dutch-speaking and Francophone system, which educates the majority of the country's pupils and represents different political traditions on topics related to diversity and equality within the wider European context.

After providing a brief state of the art of the study of public policies on educational (in)equality, we will present our theoretical and methodological approach. By conducting a comparative and contextualized examination of different social categories and their interrelations within policy documents of the two main educational systems of Belgium, we show that both the Flemish and Francophone education policies in Belgium predominantly adopt a fragmented and deficit-based approach to inequalities. The analyzed policy discourses tend to individualize educational difficulties and offer little understanding of the complex and intersectional nature of inequalities. We also observe subtle differences between the Flemish and Francophone policy discourses when it comes to addressing inequality along multiple axes at once. In Francophone policy discourse, we find a recent evolution towards the recognition of the role of the school system in creating structural and accumulative inequalities. By contrast, in Flemish policy discourse, we detect an opposite trend towards a reinforcement of the deficit-centered approach in recent years. By connecting these policy trends to the political context, we show how the diverging conceptions of equality that underlie education policies in Belgium can be understood.

Educational (in)equality and policymaking

In parallel with the promotion of equal educational opportunities throughout the 20th century, a vast field of research on school inequality has gradually developed (Coleman 1968; Evetts 1970). In Europe, school (in)equality appeared on the political agenda after the Second World War with the implementation of school democratization policies, which primarily combatted socio-economic inequalities in education (Grootaers 1998). Despite the political objective of democratizing access to compulsory schooling for the entire population, sociological studies in this field have mainly focused on the reproduction of processes of social stratification within the education system. Influenced by sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who became leading figures in the analysis of

educational inequalities, they emphasized the role of cultural capital in determining educational outcomes and showed how certain institutional arrangements, such as early tracking, market mechanisms and parental choice, reinforced segregation and inequality in educational opportunities (Teese et al. 2007).

Over the years, scholars have also made considerable progress in conceptualizing and analyzing educational inequalities in relation to social categories beyond class. First, sociologists have highlighted gender-based educational inequalities and examined how they can be tackled through education policies (Albisetti, Goodman, and Rogers 2010). Over time, research on ethno-racial disparities in education has also developed in the European context. This research has highlighted the multiple educational inequalities faced by ethnic minorities and focused on the structural elements at the root of these inequalities at macro (national narratives), intermediary (institutional segregation and discrimination in the education system) and micro (individual school policies) levels (Verhoeven 2011). In addition, research has progressively investigated access to education for students with disabilities, in particular special educational needs and the right to reasonable adjustments and non-discrimination (Chevallier-Rodrigues, Courtinat-Camps, and de Léonardis 2016). Finally, there is a growing literature on LGBTIQ+ rights in education and their representation in public discourse, school policies (including, for example, the creation of alliances for gender and sexuality in schools) and curricula (including sex education) (Richard and Alessandrin 2019).

In this field of research, educational policies are generally conceived as providers of solutions to educational inequalities according to different social categories (Teese et al. 2007). Although studies on social stratification have advocated for a more complex comprehending of educational inequalities (Chaudhuri, Thimm, and Mahler 2019), there is little research on how education policies might respond to different axes of inequality simultaneously. This might be due to the predominance of quantitative sociological research on educational inequality, which often relies on proxy variables to measure the effect of varying categories of differentiation on educational performance. Over the past decade, researchers have begun to examine the intersections between race, class and gender in structuring educational inequalities (Núñez 2014). Such works no longer view these categories as ‘essentialized properties of individuals’ but rather as ‘intersectional and fluid social classifications’ (Chaudhuri, Thimm, and Mahler 2019, 367). However, few studies reflect on the implications of these qualitative sociological analyses of inequality for educational policies.

Another body of literature rooted in political science and political sociology offers a more critical perspective on the potential of educational policies to solve educational inequalities, sometimes even suggesting that they can exacerbate these inequalities. Such studies have emphasized how the conceptions of equality underpinning education policies have diverged over time under the influence of international organizations and how such frameworks and the accompanying policies are implemented differently across educational contexts (Schuster, Jörgens, and Kolleck 2021; Van Zanten 2017). Notably, scholars have demonstrated that the OECD has promoted a conception of educational equality as the capacity of education systems to reach equal results among students (Grek 2009). Its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has shifted the focus from equality in opportunity towards equality in outcome (Verhoeven and Dupriez 2008). Additionally, research has highlighted the growing influence of the concept of

inclusion in education policymaking. In the 1990s, UNESCO primarily promoted ‘inclusive education’ to address inequalities related to disabilities. In recent years, this concept has been expanded to encompass multiple types of educational inequality and fostered by other international actors as well (Ainscow 2020). For example, the European Commission has incorporated equality and the fight against multiple kinds of discrimination into its strategic framework thereby promoting inclusive education through legal channels (Alexiadou 2017).

In a similar way, studies have shown that education policies are increasingly influenced by a global neoliberal paradigm, which is reflected into managerial discourses emphasizing quality and efficiency over equality in education (Olssen 2017). In this vein, recent research has focused on how educational policies are implemented differently across various contexts, shaping different policy frameworks for promoting equality (Maguire 2019). Many of these studies use Foucauldian-inspired theory in which the concept of discourse is important. Recent work has also shown that disciplines such as neuroscience play a growing role in the field of education and have contributed to a discursive emphasis on ‘self-responsibility’ and ‘self-regulation’ (Gulson and Webb 2017). Other studies take a more constructivist perspective, influenced by (post)feminists and/or critical race theories, to examine how different types of social categories and related inequalities are framed within policy discourses (Moreau 2011). Using critical race theory, Westerveen (2020), for example, shows how ‘colour-blind’ policy frames view ethno-racial inequalities through a socio-economic rather than an ethnic lens, while ‘deficit’ frames attribute the ‘ethnic gap’ in educational performance to individual language deficits among students with a ‘migration background’.

Yet, much of this literature is characterized by a single-axis approach, with few studies analyzing the construction of different social categories in education policies in conjunction with diverging conceptions of educational equality (Verhoeven 2011, 200). At the same time, there is a growing body of literature offering an intersectional critique of education policy (e.g. Manuel 2006). Studies using an intersectional approach criticize policy practices that aim to tackle exclusion based on ‘a single form of social division and associated identities’, without considering the complex and intertwined dynamics of exclusion related to the network of relationships between different variables (McMaster and Cook 2019; Unterhalter, Robinson, and Ron Balsera 2020). According to this intersectional critique, policy discourses often present a simplified conception of educational inequality, and public policies tend to target single categories, while rarely addressing multiple categories of social division together (Chaudhuri, Thimm, and Mahler 2019; Hancock 2007).

Analyzing multi-dimensional inequalities in education: An intersectional and Bourdieusian-inspired framework

Intersectionality offers a valuable addition to the study of educational inequality which can complement Bourdieu’s framework. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and the ideology of meritocracy are essential tools for understanding how education systems reproduce social class inequalities. Bourdieu’s theory not only highlights the structural mechanisms that sustain these inequalities but also reveals the processes by which social class positions and relations are legitimized (Bourdieu 1972). Through its

robust theoretical framework, classical Bourdieusian analysis explains how institutional structures (the field) and individual dispositions (habitus) interact, thereby consolidating or transforming social structures. However, this approach has limitations when it comes to exploring the dynamics of educational inequalities in relation to structures of domination and classification beyond social class.

Intersectionality, a concept emerging from Black feminist research in the United States (Crenshaw 1989), addresses these limitations by viewing inequalities to be multi-faceted and co-constituted by different intersecting and socially constructed categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and age (Hill Collins 2015, 2). Intersectionality emphasizes the interlinkage of different systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity and ableism. Thereby it provides a more complex perspective on inequality, understanding them in an interdependent rather than a fragmented way (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187). Intersectionality can thus be considered complementary to the Bourdieusian perspective, offering an analytical framework for an interdependent understanding of social inequalities. While Bourdieu's work remains a valuable tool for analyzing class-based inequalities in education, combining it with an intersectional approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how multiple systems of domination and classification operate both within and beyond the realm of social class.

While intersectionality as a theoretical approach can be considered a central contribution of Women's Studies to the analysis of inequalities, little work has been done to explain how it can be used at the methodological level (Chaudhuri, Thimm, and Mahler 2019, 368; McCall 2005). In developing an intersectional approach to analyze educational inequality, we build on the concept of 'political intersectionality', which refers to how intersectional inequalities are addressed at the political level (Crenshaw 1991). In policy analysis, scholars have used this concept to evaluate whether the multi-dimensionality of group inequalities is reflected in public policy (Lombardo and Verloo 2009). Such analyses investigate the interaction of different social categories, how they are made salient – or are masked – within policy discourse, and what experiences of privilege and disadvantage are thereby created (Anthias 2013, 335).

In an attempt to clarify what an intersectional methodology entails, McCall (2005) distinguishes between different ways of studying social analytical categories to analyze the intersectional dimensions of social life. First, analyzing 'intra-category complexity' involves focusing on the complexity of lived experience within social groups whose identities cut across traditionally constructed group boundaries. Second, analyzing 'anti-categorical complexity' involves rejecting the stability of analytical categories using a methodology that deconstructs them (McCall 2005, 1773). An intersectional perspective emphasizes the fluidity of social categories, viewing them as deriving from processes of categorisation like gender differentiation, racialization and ethnicization, rather than as static attributes of people (Choo and Ferree 2010; Prins 2006). Third, accounting for 'inter-categorical complexity' involves studying existing analytical categories to examine inequality across multiple dimensions of social life by comparing between different social groups (McCall 2005, 1773). Unlike additive approaches to inequality, an intersectional approach stresses the interaction or interlinkage of different categories to capture unique experiences of social differentiation (Hancock 2007). Within an intersectional approach, various kinds of discrimination cannot be

separated from each other, nor can one kind be considered more important than another (Yuval-Davis 2006, 205). Furthermore, intersectionality points to how differential positionings in terms of social categories (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and ability) are context-dependent and can change over time and across spaces (Hulko 2009).

Our use of intersectionality at the methodological level is inspired by the analysis of both ‘anti- categorical complexity’ and ‘inter-categorical complexity’ (McCall 2005). To capture the ways in which educational inequalities related to different socially constructed categories are represented in policy discourses, we deconstruct the ways in which different social categories are mobilized and study the relationships made between these categories in relation to different conceptions of educational equality. More specifically, we comparatively assess references to the socially constructed categories of class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality and disability in relation to educational inequalities within policy documents. Thereby we pay particular attention to which social categories are mentioned and in what combinations they appear. In cases where different categories are mentioned together, we analyze whether they are seen as separate, additive or intersecting (Lombardo and Rolandsen Augustín 2012). In addition, we take note of the social categories, as well as combinations of these categories that are omitted, misconceived or avoided within policy discourses (Ball 2017, 167).

Data and method: The case of educational policies in Belgium

Our analysis focuses on compulsory education in Belgium. Since 1988 the language Communities (i.e. the Flemish, French, and German-speaking Communities) can formulate their own education policy, which has resulted in three separate systems of education in the federal state of Belgium. In this paper, we analyze the Flemish and Francophone education policy in Belgium governed by respectively the Flemish government and the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (Wallonia-Brussels Federation, or FWB¹), which educate the majority of the country’s pupils, while the number of pupils attending German-speaking schools is limited.

Considering stark political differences on topics related to diversity and equality between the Flemish government and the FWB, resulting in distinct developments of the two education systems, our comparison allows to explore different ways in which complex inequalities are reflected in policymaking within the wider European context.

The corpus on which we have based our intersectional policy analysis consists of policy statements (*beleidsnota’s/déclarations de politique*) from both sides of the country over the period spanning from 1999 to 2022. These policy statements respond to a legal reporting duty of the respective governments in Belgium that requires ministers to present their policy plans to the parliament on a regular basis. The statements aim to set or reflect upon the policy goals and priorities over a certain legislation period. Thereby they provide valuable insights into the ideological leanings of the governments’ education policy agendas and the vision of the responsible minister. Although the policy statements are publicly available, they are mostly oriented towards actors who are involved in the policy process rather than the general public. In this sense, the selected documents reflect the policy discourse. The focus of this study is on the dominant policy discourses and largely leaves out the political processes that precede the formulation of

the texts. Nonetheless, by taking into account the changes in government coalitions over time, certain political differences can still be explored in the analysis.

The selection of similar types of documents within the same time frame facilitated the comparison between the policy discourse of the Flemish government and the FWB over time. It must be noted that there were less policy statements of the FWB during the analyzed period and that these statements tended to be shorter than those from the Flemish government. This discrepancy might be explained by the sub-state nationalist tendency of the Flemish government, which promotes policy interventionism, particularly in fields closely related to language and identity, such as education (Westerveen 2020). Next to the policy statements, we also included policy documents related to the two major educational reforms that occurred in the Francophone education system in Belgium during the analyzed period – the ‘*Contrat stratégique pour l’école*’, adopted in 2005, and the ‘*Pacte pour un enseignement d’excellence*’, adopted in 2017 – as they represent significant reforms that were not exhaustively discussed in the policy statements of the respective legislation periods. The long length of these two documents might explain the higher frequency of occurrence of certain codes during the periods 2004 to 2009 and 2015 to 2019 (see Annex 1). For the Flemish case, similar documents exist within the chosen time frame, although they arguably constitute less significant reforms of the education system and generally outline policy plans for specific topics such as action plans to address truancy or to promote preschool participation. Considering that the Flemish policy statements discuss policy plans and goals in their respective legislation periods in great detail and to maintain a balanced comparison in terms of the volume of text between the two cases, these additional documents for the Flemish case were only included in the analysis if they were referenced within the policy statements that were already part of the sample. The full list of documents included in the analysis can be found in Annex 2.

We used qualitative content analysis to analyze how educational inequality is framed as a problem in the selected documents. Rather than treating policy problems as objective realities, frame theory views them as socially constructed or ‘framed’ (Schön and Rein 1994). Looking at ‘what the problem is represented to be’ in policy discourses, this perspective analyzes problem definitions or ‘problematizations’ (Bacchi 2009). According to frame theory, policy responses cannot be studied in isolation from the construction of the policy problem because proposed policy measures rest on a particular representation of what the policy problem is. Both the understanding of the problem at hand and the corresponding solution are inherently part of the problem’s framing (Verloo and Lombardo 2007). Our focus is on framing as a dynamic process that takes place within specific institutional and political contexts. This approach differs from the concept of policy frames, where the diagnosis and prognosis of the problem are more clearly distinguished (Van Hulst and Yanow 2016). Instead, we emphasize how discursive practices represent educational inequality as a policy problem and explore the underlying conceptions of equality embedded in these representations (Bacchi 2009). Our analysis thus focuses on the discursive construction of educational inequality, rather than on the specific policies proposed to address educational inequalities or their implementation.

The analysis proceeded in two steps. First, we inductively coded different representations of class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality and disability within the documents to

Table 1. Coding scheme.

1. Single-axis inequalities	2. Multiple inequalities	3. Intersectional inequalities	4. Conceptions of equality
1.1. Class	2.1 Class and race/ethnicity	3.1 Class intersecting with race/ethnicity	4.1 Equality in opportunity
1.2 Disability	2.2 Class and disability	3.2 Class intersecting with disability (and race/ethnicity)	4.2 Equality in outcome
1.3 Race/ethnicity	2.3 Class and gender	3.3 Gender intersecting with class and/or race/ethnicity	4.3 Inclusive education
1.4 Gender	2.4 Class, gender and disability		
1.5 Sexual orientation	2.5 Gender and race/ethnicity		
	2.6 Gender, sexual orientation and disability		
	2.7 All categories		

deconstruct these analytical categories and account for anti-categorical complexity. Second, in line with studying inter-categorical complexity, we deductively coded the relationships that are constructed in the documents between these categories regarding different conceptions of educational equality. Based on these two steps, we have developed a coding scheme based on four overarching codes: (1) *single-axis educational inequalities*, that is, educational inequalities relating to a single social category; (2) *multiple educational inequalities*, that is, involving several social categories, but without commenting on the relationships between them; (3) *intersectional educational inequalities*, that is, involving several social categories and their intersections; (4) *conceptions of equality*, that is, the different types of educational equality that policies aim for. Regarding these conceptions of equality, we distinguish between *equality in opportunity*, which strives for equality opportunities for all pupils to succeed in education regardless of their gender, socio-economic background, ability, etc.; *equality in outcome*, which aims for equal achievements in education between different social groups; *inclusive education*, which focuses on equally accommodating pupils' educational needs within the education system.

The full coding scheme can be found in Table 1. Beyond the number of (co-) occurrences of different codes, we show in what way Flemish and Francophone policy discourses conceive different social categories and the relationship between them, and demonstrate how they connect these (interrelated) categories to diverging conceptions of educational equality. Thereby we trace the different ways in which (in)equality is constructed in relation to social categories over time, across two policy contexts.

Anti-categorical complexity in Flemish and Francophone education policies

Class

In both the Flemish and French-speaking cases, class is the most frequently cited social category in relation to educational inequality. In both educational contexts, social class is attributed to pupils based on quantitative variables, approximating socio-economic status. In this sense, social class and its relation to educational inequality becomes a quantitative comparative measurement between pupils, similar to how it is constructed in the PISA survey. The policy discourses represent a depoliticized understanding of class belonging composed of an aggregate of attributes or the lack thereof. These attributes include financial resources in the first place, but also cultural and linguistic resources.

Contrary to the Bourdieusian understanding of class belonging, social origin is not perceived as the result of a relational process between different groups, but as the result of individual possession or lack of attributes. This conception of social class is accompanied by a deficit approach to educational inequalities. In both regions of the country, disadvantaged families are considered to lack the social, cultural, or financial resources needed to succeed in school.

This is particularly evident on the Flemish side, and especially as the end of the study period approaches. The Flemish documents mainly state that the social environment in which pupils grow up is still very much linked to their school results, and that the main problem is illiteracy in low-income families. In addition, Flemish policy statements speak of the fight against poverty and the creation of social cohesion as an essential task of education. On the French-speaking side, both in the *Contrat stratégique pour l'école* and in the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence*, working-class families are perceived as being characterized by a certain deficit, or lack, of school culture, which prevents them from having confidence in the institution. In addition, documents suggest that there is a lack of mastery of the norms and expectations of the school, and therefore a lack of cultural and informational capital.

Yet, beyond these common trends, the documents of the Flemish government and the FWB have evolved differently over time in how they construct social class in relation to educational inequality. On the Francophone side, we detect a recent focus, especially in the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence* (2017), on how the organization of the education system is an important factor in explaining educational inequalities according to class status. The mechanisms of inequality in the organization of the school system referred to include competition between secondary schools to attract certain student populations and the system of early tracking, i.e. the often discriminatory guidance of pupils towards academic or vocational streams on the basis of the perception of their academic abilities by the school. Policy documents of the FWB increasingly recognize that these practices disadvantage pupils from socio-economically vulnerable families and exacerbate inequalities. By contrast, in the Flemish documents we observe a recent move (as of 2019) away from discourse that considers the organization of the education system to be a contributing factor to educational inequality based on class differences. Whereas in earlier Flemish documents (2014–2019), there is a limited focus on how the organization of the education system, particularly the system of early tracking, disadvantages pupils from families with a lower socio-economic status, in the more recent documents (2019–2022) this focus has faded.

Disability

After class, both the documents of the Flemish government and the FWB mention disability most frequently in relation to educational inequality. The main debates concern the inclusion of pupils with a disability into 'ordinary education' or 'special education' in both the Flemish and Francophone policy texts.

In the Flemish documents, it is mostly the so-called M-decree (*M-decreet*) adopted in 2015 that is being discussed. This decree aimed to integrate students with a disability into the regular education track as much as possible. It was based on the principle of inclusive education for students with a disability and the right of these students to reasonable

accommodations in the classroom. Yet, ‘disability’ mostly appears as a category used to distinguish between students who are in need of special or extra services to be able to succeed in ordinary education and students who are not, presenting a rather deterministic and individualized view on ability and its link with academic performance. Similar to social class, (dis)ability seems to be constructed as an aggregate of attributes that individual students possess or not, rather than a category that results from the interaction between students’ abilities and school structures. Moreover, after fierce criticism from teachers and schools, the M-decree was soon abolished and replaced by 2019 ‘*Begeleidingsdecreet*’. The new decree still has the objective of inclusive education, but wants to realize this more gradually to create more support from schools and teachers. We thus find a somewhat declining focus on providing inclusive education for all students in the Flemish documents.

In the Francophone documents, the majority of the references to disability-related inequality appear in the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence* of 2017, which gives special attention to students with ‘special needs’ and to the significant number of students who have been wrongfully placed into ‘special education’. Moreover, the *Pacte* advocates for the integration of pupils with special needs into the ‘ordinary educational system’ rather than ‘special education’. There is thus a focus on students who have been misdirected by the school system and a desire to improve educational structures to achieve equality in opportunity. Other than in the Flemish documents, in the *Pacte* disability appears more as a socially constructed category, in particular through the structures relating to school guidance. There is therefore a distinct evolution between the two parts of the country regarding disability.

Race/ethnicity

The category of race/ethnicity is the third most mentioned in relation to educational inequality in both the Flemish and Francophone documents, albeit much more frequently in the documents of the Flemish government than in the documents of the FWB. This is in line with existing research showing that Francophone education policy discourses adopt a ‘colour-blind’ approach, which refrains from using racial and ethnic categorizations in policymaking to avoid the reproduction of racialized groups (Westerveen 2020).

In the Flemish documents, educational inequalities related to race/ethnicity are largely problematized as a matter of ‘integration’ of students with a ‘migration background’. The term ‘migration background’ is a statistical category used to distinguish parts of the population that are of foreign birth or ancestry. The Flemish policy documents explicitly recognize the effect of pupils’ ‘migration background’ on school performance. They therefore propose the development of measures to reduce the ‘gap’ in academic performance between students with and without a ‘migration background’. Furthermore, rather than an understanding of the structural nature of educational inequalities, either at the level of the school system or society at large, Flemish documents focus on an individual-centered understanding of the problem. The emphasis is placed on supposed language deficits of students with a ‘migration background’ or who do not speak Dutch at home. Based on the results of the PISA studies, among others, the documents argue that students with a ‘migration

background’ do not speak proper Dutch and, therefore, have lower educational outcomes. The documents also cite the lower participation rate of non-Belgian pupils (particularly of non-EU nationality) in preschooling and how this creates a language deficit. This focus on the Dutch language has increased over time, with the last two ministers of education putting even more emphasis on it than their predecessors (2014–2019 and 2019–2022). For example, minister Ben Weyts (from the Flemish nationalist party N-VA), declares: ‘*You can’t talk about equal opportunities without talking about Dutch. Because Dutch is the subject that makes all other subjects possible. It is the indispensable key to all other knowledge, the chassis of everything else*’ (Vlaams Parlement 2019, 7).

On the French-speaking side, we can observe an evolution from ‘colour-blind’ discourses to discourses that address more explicitly the connections between race/ethnicity and the structural and systemic forms of inequality faced by students and families in the education system. In older Francophone documents race- and ethnicity-related issues are mostly neutralized through an assimilationist ideology. Indeed, the *Contrat stratégique pour l’école* of 2005 mentions race/ethnicity only twice. The *Contrat*’s preferred vocabulary is related to either the socio-economic index of students’ neighborhoods of residence via the generic adjective *défavorisé* (‘disadvantaged’), or to migration via the term *primo-arrivant* (‘newly arrived’) coupled with a concern for learning French as the school language. We observe an increase, albeit a limited one, in frequency of references to ethno-racial background of pupils over time. From 2014 onwards, some excerpts, though sporadically and timidly, address more explicitly the connection between ethno-racial background and the structural and systemic dimensions of inequality at school. For example, we find references towards ‘minorities’ and ‘minoritized groups’, paving the way for the recognition of power relations between the majority group and the minority group. Between the lines, one can read a certain recognition of systemic discrimination in later Francophone policy statements (2014–2019). Nevertheless, these documents simultaneously place a strong emphasis on the supposed language deficit of disadvantaged families, presenting a more individual-centered understanding of education inequality in relation to race/ethnicity.

Gender and sexual orientation

Inequalities related to gender and sexual orientation appear least frequent in both the documents of the Flemish government and the FWB, and considerably less than the other axes of inequality. In the Flemish documents, gender appears as a binary category assigned to students on the basis of biological attributes rather than a socially constructed identity. Gender inequality in education is mostly mentioned in relation to the underrepresentation of girls in STEM as well as the overrepresentation of women in the teaching profession, which points to inequalities in orientation towards certain subjects and careers. One document, *Beleidsnota 2004–2009*, also discusses the higher educational opportunities of girls as compared to boys, indicating that boys are at greater risk of being sent to special education and of dropping out of school altogether. Gender-related inequalities are most prominent from 2009 to 2019 in the Flemish documents. In contrast, from 2019 onward, gender is no longer mentioned at all. Furthermore, educational inequalities on the basis of sexual orientation are mentioned the least in the

Flemish documents and only enter the debate recently. Here, the focus is on schools being a safe environment for LGBTQI+ people.

In the Francophone documents, references to inequalities based on gender and sexual orientation are very few, especially at the end of the 1990s and during the first decade of 2000s. Similar as in the Flemish policy discourse, gender is not presented as a socially constructed category but a binary biological category. According to the *Contrat stratégique pour l'école*, discrimination on the basis of gender is not very present in the Belgian educational system. During the second decade of the 2000s, especially from 2014 on, gender inequalities are more often referred to in anti-discrimination measures and programs for gender equality in school choices and orientation, notably towards STEM. Overall, it seems that both gender and sexual orientation are hardly considered in relation to educational inequality in both Flemish and Francophone policy discourse, or at least as single-axis inequalities.

Inter-categorical complexity in Flemish and Francophone education policies

Multiple inequalities

In both the documents of the Flemish government and the FWB, single-axis inequalities related to either class or disability or race/ethnicity, etc. are clearly most commonly represented over the last 20 years. At times, policy documents of both sides of the country also mention different types of single-axis inequalities alongside each other, without clear acknowledgement of the possible relation between them. These multiple inequalities are not only represented significantly less than single-axis inequalities, but references to multiple inequalities are also not evenly distributed over time. In the documents of the FWB, the greatest number of occurrences of multiple inequalities involving more than two categories of social division are found in the most recent documents (from 2017). These go hand-in-hand with the observation that the education system in the FWB is deeply segregated. The segregated nature of the education system concerns the different categories of social division: class, race/ethnicity, disability, gender, etc. As school tracking and guidance are a nexus of different kinds of inequality, references to multiple inequalities tend to show up when a policy document is focusing on this issue specifically.

In both the documents of the FWB and the Flemish government, the most frequently occurring combination is educational inequality based on class and race/ethnicity. In the documents of the FWB, there has been a recent but substantial evolution in the ways of thinking about this combination. Before the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence* of 2017, the conception of equality at stake while juxtaposing class and ethno-racial background was based on the perception that certain students and their families had in common a kind of 'lack' regarding school culture, language, and norms. From this, the idea of strengthening the knowledge of French and school norms follows. Although the *Pacte* supports these representations in its manner of treating class and race-ethnicity side by side, it also expresses a conception of equality as being related to the rights of individuals at stake. This suggests a certain openness toward considering these groups as having been constructed by discrimination and segregation processes: '*As illustrated in our diagnosis, our school system separates – much more than in other countries – pupils according to their psycho-social profiles, their type of intelligence, their social origin and*

their academic results (. . .) In the context of the fight against educational inequalities (. . .) the challenge of recognizing minority groups must also be met (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles 2017, 22–27). Just as single-axis inequalities were partly perceived as socially constructed, multiple inequalities are more recently also viewed as partly created or reinforced by school structures.

In contrast, when Flemish documents refer simultaneously to multiple inequalities based on class and race-ethnicity, these two axes of inequality are always explicitly distinct: the documents refer to them as two separate factors that explain differences in educational outcomes between students. It is, for example, often mentioned how both the socio-economic background of students and their cultural or migration background affect students' educational performance, especially with regard to Dutch language-learning: 'major influence on school results. Young people from families with a lower socio-economic status, with a migration background and whose home language is not Dutch, run an increased risk of a problematic school career' (Vlaams Parlement 2019, 26). The possible accumulative effect of these two variables and possible interactions between processes of ethnicization or racialization and those based on class is thus not being acknowledged. While the Flemish policy discourse thus emphasizes supposed individual language deficits as a source of inequalities in the relationship between race/ethnicity and class, the Francophone policy discourse shows limited recognition of the structural dimensions of educational inequality.

The combination of class and disability is also mentioned in several documents of both the Flemish government and the FWB. In the Flemish documents, it is mostly about the fact that students with a lower socio-economic background are more often confronted with learning disorders and more often referred to special education. In addition, documents talk about the higher costs of accommodation for students with disabilities in ordinary education and how that affects families with lower incomes. However, this debate no longer comes up in documents from after 2019. Similarly, in more recent documents of the FWB (2014–2022), and notably in the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence*, the overrepresentation of pupils with a low socio-economic status in special education is discussed. They point to a combination of disability and socio-economic status (and sometimes 'migrant origin') and suggest that students from the working class and ethno-racial minorities can suffer from a certain perception as pathologized subjects in the school sphere. However, a depoliticized analysis of this problem is presented, mainly proposing to provide better information to families from migrant and working-class backgrounds. In addition, harkening back to the issue of discrimination in 'tracking' or the assignment of courses of study, the *Pacte* mentions the overrepresentation of working-class boys in special education relative to girls.

These contrasts can be understood by linking them to distinct evolutions of the conceptions of equality dominant in each political educational landscape. Indeed, we observe a clear shift in the Flemish documents throughout time. Between 2004 and 2009, during the ministership of Frank Vandenbroucke (from the Flemish social democratic party), the focus seems to be on equality in opportunity. Vandenbroucke launched a 'decathlon for equal educational opportunities' while emphasizing '*the inextricable link between equal opportunities and [educational] quality*' (Vlaamse Overheid 2005, 72). After 2009, when the Flemish nationalist party N-VA enters into government and under the ministerships of Pascal Smet (minister for education in the period from 2009 to

2014 for the Flemish social democratic party) and Hilde Crevits (minister for education in the period from 2014 to 2019 for the Flemish Christian democratic party), the focus on equality in opportunity becomes less visible and concerns about a supposed decreasing quality of Flemish education start to appear, whereby striving for equality in opportunity is perceived as risking to ‘lower the bar’ (see: Vlaamse Overheid 2014, 21). The evolution from a focus on equality of opportunity to equality of outcomes in education can be linked to the poor performance of Belgium, both French- and Dutch-speaking, in the international PISA study, first published in the beginning of the 2000s. In both the FWB and Flanders, the results of the PISA study have led to a focus on equality of outcomes as the central objective within the educational field. On the Dutch-speaking side, this conception seems to reinforce the deficit approach. Since 2019, when minister Ben Weyts (from the Flemish nationalist party N-VA) became minister of education, the idea of ‘excellent education’ and the aim for Flanders to have an internationally high-ranked education system seems to have become more important than equality in opportunity (see: Vlaams Parlement 2019, 37).

On the French-speaking side, the title of the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence* indicates that ‘excellence’ is also considered important in Francophone education policy. However, this focus on excellence instead of equality or emancipation in the *Pacte* has been heavily criticized in the Belgian Francophone media. After consultation with schools and other actors involved in the educational field, the text of the *Pacte* has been substantially revised to return to a focus on an equitable education system and social emancipation. The recent references to multiple and accumulative inequalities that we detected in the documents of the FWB rather appear to be influenced by European anti-discrimination legislation and the concept of inclusive education.

Intersectional inequalities

References towards intersectional inequalities occur even less often than references towards multiple inequalities. In fact, intersectional understandings of educational inequality hardly appear in the documents of either the Flemish government or the FWB. Policy discourses on both sides of the language border in Belgium thus seem to adopt an additive approach towards educational inequality according to different social categories.

In the documents of the FWB, references to intersectional inequalities only appear in the most recent documents (2014–2019 and especially from 2017 with the *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence*). In the *Pacte* a limited evolution can be found toward recognition of structural inequality and the accumulative dimension of processes of discrimination. The accumulation of different kinds of discrimination is perceived as creating a specific position of vulnerability for certain students. Although they remain very marginal, some references can be found towards intersectional groups who accumulate different kinds of vulnerabilities. This includes students from single-parent (especially woman-headed) families of lower socio-economic status, as well as women with a ‘migration background’. In the Flemish documents, intersectional inequalities are hardly mentioned at all. When they are, it is in one of two contexts: first, the case of educational inequalities faced by children of single parents (mostly women) with a low income (and sometimes from a ‘migration background’); and second, the case of students

with a ‘migration background’ and lower socio-economic status who face difficult educational careers as a consequence of supposed deficits in learning and language apprehension.

Diverging paths to equality? Deficit vs. structure-centred approaches in Flemish and Francophone education policies

In this paper, we have used intersectionality as an analytical framework to analyze the representations of complex inequalities within education policy discourses in Belgium. Our analysis has shown the diverging ways in which Flemish and Francophone policy discourses in Belgium approach complex inequalities in education and how their approaches have changed over time.

First, a single-axis logic prevails in the policy discourses of Belgium’s two main education systems. Both the discourses of the Flemish and French-speaking communities mainly discuss educational inequality according to different axes of inequality separately. The reported policy goals are either ‘class-targeted’, aimed at raising the academic performance of pupils from low-income families or disadvantaged areas; ‘disability-targeted’, by striving to reduce the segregated structures of special education; ‘race/ethnicity-targeted’, focused on tackling language deficits of students with a ‘migration background’; or ‘gender-targeted’, by pursuing equal representation of girls and boys in STEM tracks. Moreover, in addition to focusing on single axes of inequality, the policy discourses present a relatively static and attributional understanding of different social categories. Furthermore, although there are important differences, policy discourses on both sides of the country seem to lack an understanding of the structural dimensions to educational inequalities. They often view students from disadvantaged groups as having certain lacks that impact their performance in school. This is true whether the social group is conceived in terms of class, disability, race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. In so doing, both Flemish and Francophone authorities seem to have developed a ‘deficit-centered approach’ to policymaking, accompanied by discourses that promote a highly individualistic conception of education.

Second, while both Flemish and Francophone policy discourses on educational inequality tend to follow a single-axis logic, they do address multiple inequalities in juxtaposition, but without thematizing the complex and intertwined dynamics of exclusion related to the relationships between different axes. Instead, both the Flemish and Francophone policy discourses have developed an additive and fragmented approach to educational inequality, in which multiple axes of inequality are kept separate, and do not provide a complex perspective on inequalities linking, for instance, classism and structural racism. The prevalence of a single-axis logic and an additive approach to complex inequalities in the policy discourses might be explained by the intricate relationship between policymaking and scientific research in the field of education, considering that this type of research often relies on quantitative multivariate analyses that by construction present the variables involved as independent.

Third, even though our analysis shows that both Flemish and Francophone education policies in Belgium have only limited attention for intersectional kinds of inequality, there are still important differences between the two cases. In particular, we find a diverging trend over time in the two main Belgian education

systems. On the French-speaking side, we found a recent and limited evolution: since 2014, Francophone policy discourse has shown some recognition of the role of the school system in creating structural, accumulative inequalities. This limited evolution in the Francophone policy discourse is most salient in terms of intersections between race/ethnicity and social class. This is remarkable since the FWB's education policy, and policymaking in French-speaking Belgium more broadly, has long been characterized by its 'colour-blind' character. On the other hand, Flemish policy discourse demonstrates the opposite trend: from an earlier focus (2004–2009) on the reduction of educational inequality based on different kinds of discrimination toward a reinforcement of the deficit-centered approach (from 2009).

Our comparative intersectional analysis demonstrates that despite common global neoliberal influences as well as EU anti-discrimination legislation, there is no consensus on issues of diversity and equality in education. On the contrary, our analysis reveals major discrepancies between the two educational landscapes in Belgium. To explain these divergent approaches, the political affiliation of the parties in government and that of the minister of education seems to be of major influence. As a multinational and federalized state, Belgium is characterized by political polarization between the Flemish and Francophone part of the country. While in Flanders sub-state nationalist and extreme-right parties have become increasingly electorally successful putting social democratic values under pressure, in Francophone Belgium the socialist party retained its position of power (until the last elections in June 2024). In this way, the case of Belgium can offer a new perspective on policy discourses relating to educational (in)equality in the wider European context, and how various transnational influences play out differently at the (sub)national level.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of its time frame and focus on policy discourses rather than policies in practice. Starting our analysis from 2000 means that only more recent shifts in policy discourses on educational (in)equality could be explored, while leaving out important political debates around educational (in)equality in the 20th century. More structural causes of educational inequalities, particularly the reproduction of social class within the education system, were, for instance, more prominent on the policy agenda during the 'trente glorieuses' in Europe and the rise of the welfare state. Studying policy discourses around educational (in)equality over a longer period of time could place our findings in a broader historical perspective. Additionally, our study focused on the framing of complex educational inequalities within policy discourses with only limited attention to the actual policy instruments suggested to overcome educational inequality. Future studies could analyze how the adopted policy solutions are implemented in practice and how their implementation contributes to either fostering equality or (re)producing inequalities in the field of education.

Note

1. The Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB) is the official name of the French Community of Belgium since 2011. It is one of the three federated language communities of Belgium.

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Authors' contributions

Both authors are first authors and have contributed equally to developing the argument of this article and writing the article. Géraldine André has analyzed the documents of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Laura Westerveen has analyzed the documents of the Flemish government.

Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

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