

School choice and equity (Flemish Community, Belgium)

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The Economist, May 26th, 2007: “This paper has long argued that competition and freedom in education, as elsewhere, are the way to encourage innovation and raise standards for all”

1. Constitutional provision: freedom of education

- To provide education = to start, organise schooling
- To choose a school = choice for parents

Freedom of education = cornerstone for educational policymaking
Quasi market! Schools compete for students

2. Consequences of freedom of education

- Large diversity of providers
Providers targeting specific groups
 - Special educational needs students: separate special education system
 - Students from working class background
 - Disadvantaged students

Ambition of providers: improve the life chances of these young people

- Large diversity of specific courses, specialist schools
f.e. - VET – courses

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Specialist schools

- “Grammar schools”

→ Tracking at the age of 12 - 13

- Pedagogical autonomy
 - Assessment of students by school team
 - No national exams. No standardised tests. No numerical targets.

3. “Comprehensive school” movement in the 70’s and 80’s

- Comprehensive 1st grade
- No tracking until the age of 14

- No streaming within schools

Successful !? Creaming off: by and by the best students went to neighbouring non-comprehensive schools

4. Student performances: PISA 2000 and 2003 results

- Excellent average results for reading literary and mathematical literary
- Very large group of excellent performers in mathematics
- Strong impact of socio-economic background of students
- Wide gap between students who perform very well and those who perform less good
- Large differences between schools with the same profile
- Poor performances of first and second generation immigrant students.

No quality and equity!

Minister: “Excellent results but there is no room for complacency”

5. Policy priorities from 2004 onwards

The PISA 2003 results informed the ministerial strategy: “Today champions in mathematics, tomorrow champions in equal opportunities”

Main elements of strategy to achieve more quality and equity , to improve performances of the low performers.

- Raising the awareness of importance of education and training for employability and social cohesion. Education, education, education!
- “Human capital. How what you know shapes your life.”
- No complacency for anti-social behaviour, e.g. truancy, dropping out
 - Implementation of regulation that improves the social mix in the schools
 - Implementation of equal opportunity policies at institutional level: every school an equal opportunity development plan.
 - Stronger emphasis on the value of work-based learning.
 - Design and implementation of a funding mechanism which is more sensitive to socio-economic background of students (educational attainment of mother, home language, family income, inner city). The socio-economic background of the students will be a driver for more human and financial resources for individual schools.
 - Creation of a knowledge rich environment: development of a rich variety of tests for assessment of student performances. Schools will be held a mirror to benchmark their own performances against schools with a similar profile.

- Initial teacher training : new core curriculum (= basic competencies), better monitoring of practice during initial training, effective induction.
- Strengthening school leadership : earmarked funds for professional development.

No implementation of national exams or setting of numerical targets.