Paper 1 - Flemish Educational Policy Makers: Maintaining a Top Position while Reducing Social Stratification

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Educational policy makers in Flanders (Belgium) can be characterized as early adopters of EU policy targets and recommendations on education and on early school leaving in particular. However, these policy goals and measures raise tensions that mainly revolve around the ‘nature’ and the ‘goal’ of education. Stakeholders and policy makers can be found on both sides of a continuum in which some predominantly stress the economic role of education to prepare youngsters for insertion into the labour market, while others mainly stress the democratic and emancipatory role of education for personal development and in combating social inequality. These tensions are related to the broader discussion of the (non)-necessity of a fundamental reform of Flemish secondary education. Overall Flanders holds a top position in international comparative studies, but it also has the strongest socio-economic and ethnic stratification largely due to the early tracking of pupils in a hierarchical and segregating tracking system. Document analysis and qualitative fieldwork with stakeholders and policy makers illustrate the bind Flanders is in to maintain its top position while at the same time reducing the strong social reproduction of inequality and tackling ESL.