ULB

A Social Scientist's Perspective on School Inspections

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GERME
Group for research
on Ethnic Relations,
Migration & Equality

FACULTÉ DES SCIENCES SOCIALES & POLITIQUES **ULB**

Solvay Brussels School
Economics & Management

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DUTCH LANGUAGE AREA

BILINGUAL LANGUAGE AREA
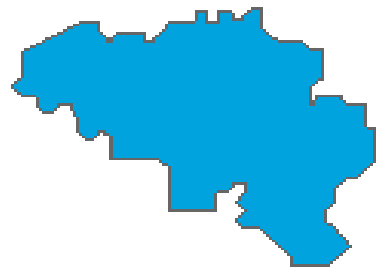
FRENCH LANGUAGE AREA

GERMAN LANGUAGE AREA

WELCOME TO BELGIUM
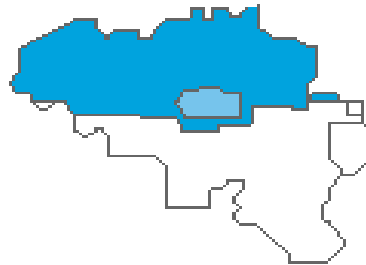
LANGUAGE FACILITIES (special allowances)

- to Francophones in Dutch language area
- to Dutch speaking in French language area
- to Germanophones in French language area
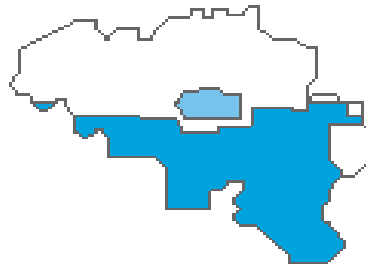- to Francophones in German language area

COMMUNITIES

REGIONS

Federal Belgium

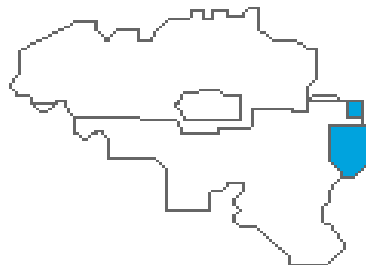Belgium has an exceptional system combining both territorial and non-territorial federalism !
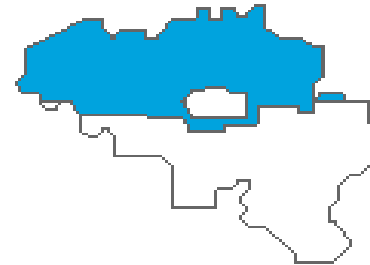
Flemish community

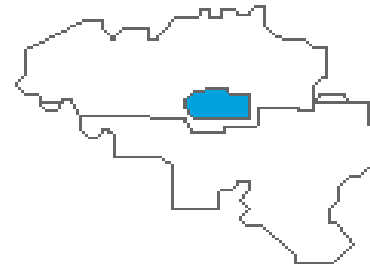**Flemish region**

French community

Brussels region

German community
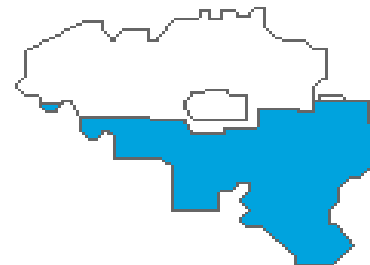
Walloon region

REGIONS

There are the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital Region.

Regions have competencies in so called "place related matters".

These fields are: economy, employment, agriculture, water policy, housing, public works, energy, transport (except Belgian Railways), the environment, town and country planning, modernisation of agriculture, nature conservation, (some aspects of) foreign trade, supervision of the provinces, communes and intercommunal utility companies.

The
Flemish Region

The
Walloon Region

The
Brussels-Capital
Region

The
Flemish Community

The
French Community

The
German-speaking
Community
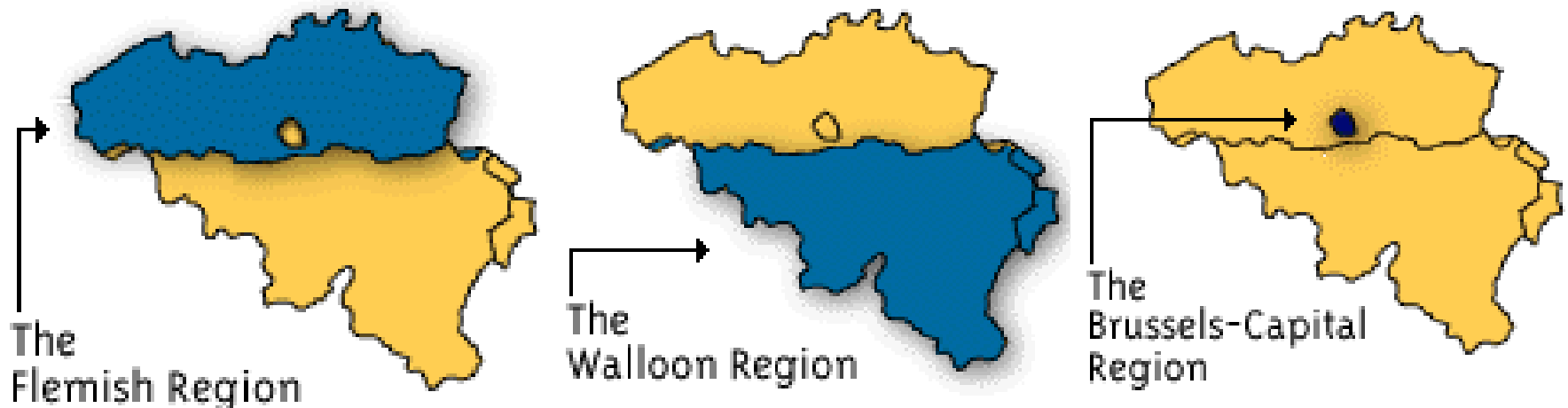
THE COMMUNITIES

The <u>Flemish Community</u> exercises its powers in the Flemish provinces and in Brussels.

The <u>French Community</u> exercises its powers in the Walloon provinces (with the exception of German-speaking communes) and in Brussels.

The <u>German-speaking Community</u> exercises its powers in the communes of the province of Liège that form the German language area.

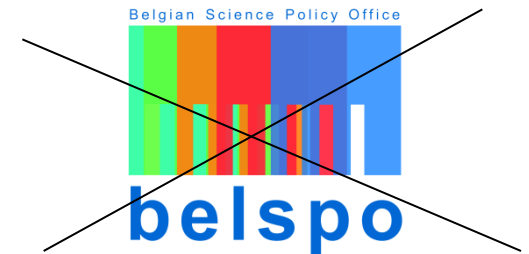## The powers of the Communities

So called "<u>Language and person-related matters</u>"

For instance:
- culture
- education
- language use
- certain aspects of health care
- certain aspects of social policy
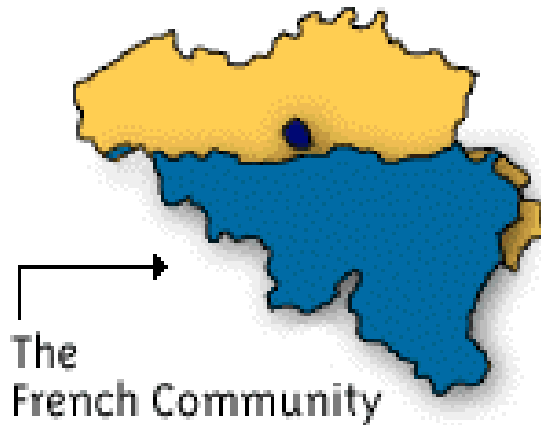
Research funding bodies in Belgium:

Educational systems (and inspectorates) in Belgium:

« Easy » part of the job:

➢ Point of consensus : Quality of Education is important
➢ Point of consensus : Assessment of quality of education is important
➢ Point of consensus : Assessment should be objective (and have an external element)

But then it gets difficult:

1) Is the notion of « quality » clearly defined?
2) Do all stakeholders agree on this definition?
3) Is the concept of quality well operationalised? (made measurable?)
4) Is data-collection possible at reasonable cost and within a reasonable time span?
5) Does data-quality allow for valid and reliable interpretations?
6) Is the external observer sufficiently reliable and independent in the eyes of the stakeholders?

The Elephant in the room

➤ a purely technocratic, procedural exercise?

➤ there is such a thing as 'quality'
➤ it can (and should) be measured
➤ we can do this in an objective, neutral and uncontested way
➤ there is no politics involved
➤ there is no power struggle
➤ it's just measurement

THAT'S A MISTAKE
➤ we can be objective in not distorting data and observations
➤ but we are never involved in a neutral, interest-free and conflict-free exercice

➤ neutrality and consistent conflict-avoidance is impossible
➤ we can be objective, but we can never be neutral

IN DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS WE NEED TO EMBRACE THIS DISTURBING THOUGHT
WE SHOULD NOT AIM FOR NEUTRALITY AND CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE BUT FOR OBJECTIVITY AND STRIVE FOR VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Quality as a contested concept: an example
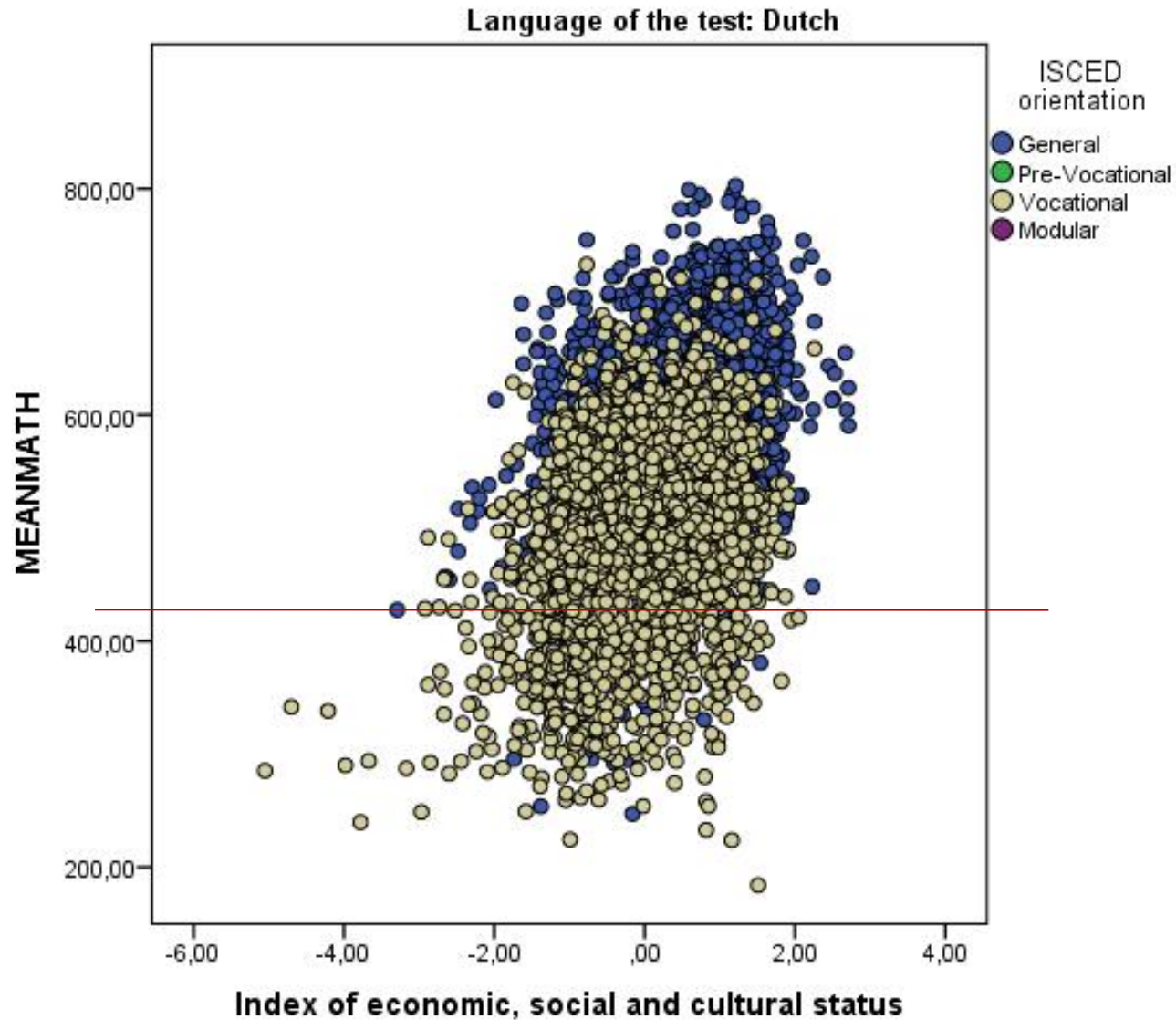
Socio-economic index for Belgian schools (bleu=FL, green=FR) and mean result for reading (PISA 2009)

Estimation of fixed effects in multilevel regression model for reading in Flemish and Francophone community (PISA 2009)
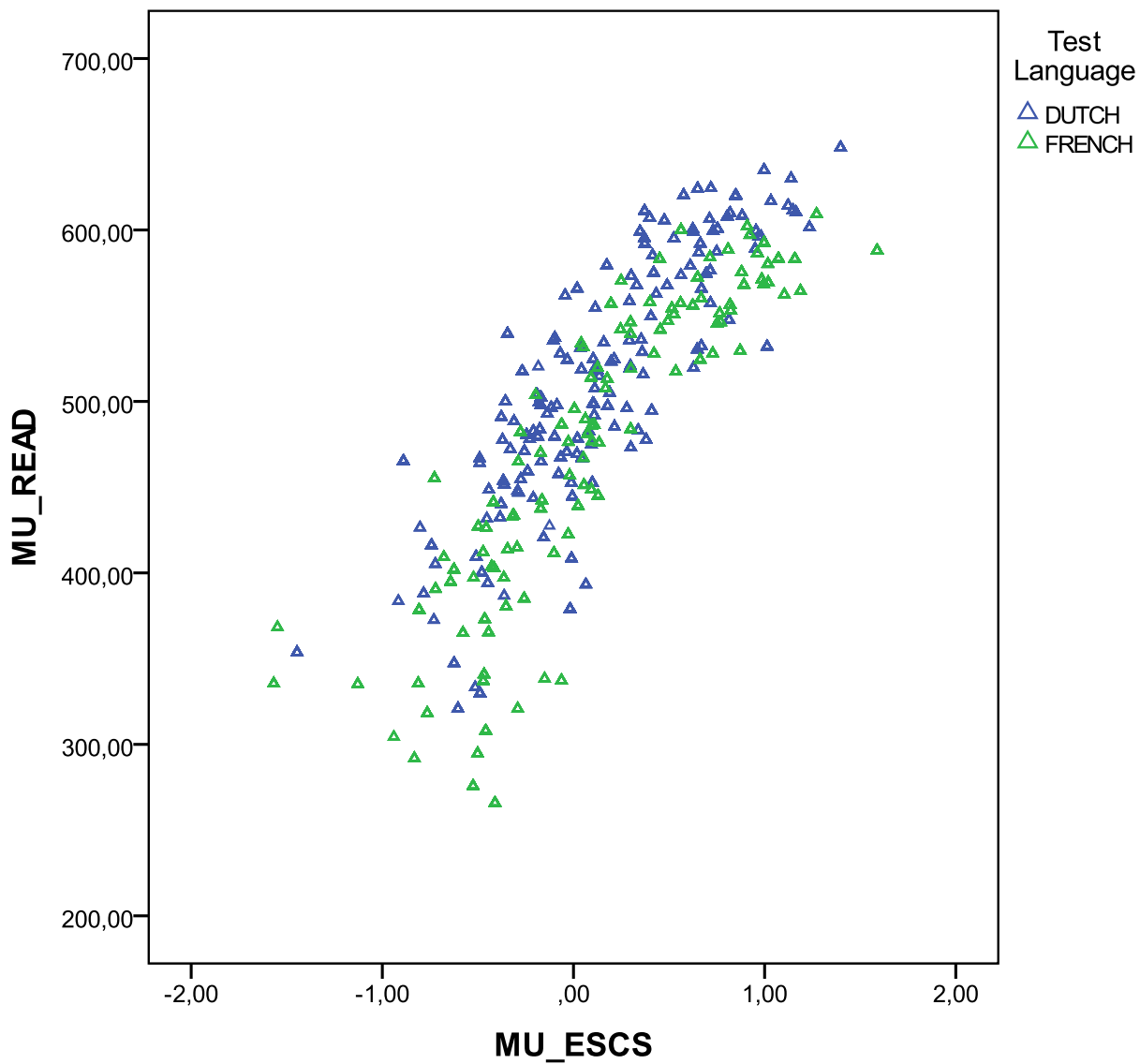
	Flanders	Fed. Wallonie Bruxelles	**Flanders**	Fed. Wallonie Bruxelles
Constant	513,58 (SE=0,7)	477,21 (SE=1,2)	**520,56** (SE 0,6)	**491,97** (SE 0,8)
CESCS (socio-economic index pupils, centered)			**11,15** (SE 1,3)	**16,96** (SE 2,3)
XECSC (socio-economic index schools, centered)			**108,03** (SE 1,5)	**105,83** (SE 2,9)
Variance on the individual level	4155,004 (SE=168)	5681,66 (SE=256)	4077,791 (SE=160)	5517,02 (SE=238)
Variance on the school level	5002,823 (SE=140)	7073,349 (SE=322)	1328,297 (SE=88)	1209,264 (SE=129)

•In schools with high proportion of « at-risk » pupils, often more difficult conditions for pedagogical teams (high turover, lower effectiveness, less *teacher efficacy*)
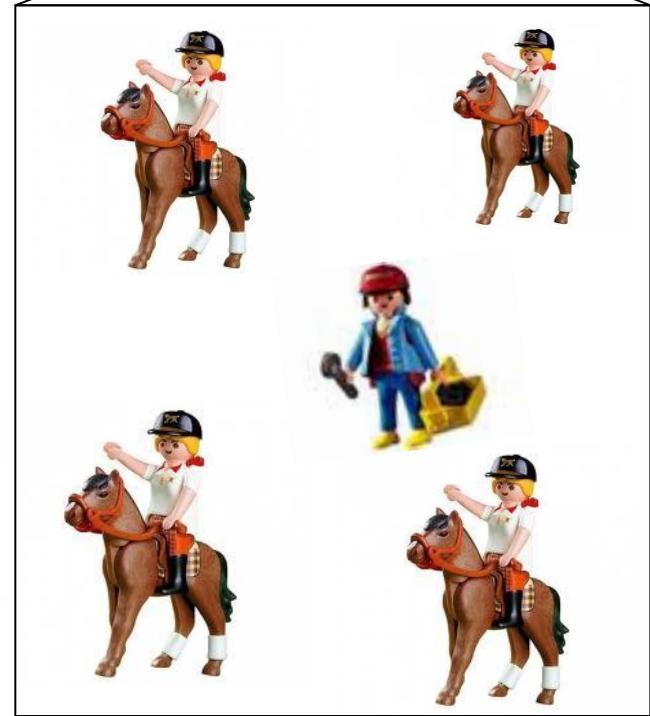
•In schools with low number of « at-risk » pupils, often easier conditions for pedagogical teams (low turnover, higher effectiveness, more *teacher efficacy*)

Does our conceptualisation of quality make a clear choice?

- **Is our conceptualisation of quality clear?**
- If yes, what (political) choice is embedded in it?
- What counter-reactions might one expect?

- **Is our conceptualisation of quality blurred?**
- If yes, what multitude of visions does one try to combine?
- Is there an implicit priority setting?

What happens in the operationalisation phase?

Validity : do we measure what we wish to measure ?

- is there implicit priority setting?
- do pragmatic constraints and data availability have an impact?

Reliability : in case of 'stable' reality, do different measurement instruments and strategies, lead to the same results ?

–> notion of intercoder reliability / intersubjectivity
–> triangulation of methods

The basis of a solid scientific (or 'objective') approach are the **methodological safeguards** to assure validity and reliability

The task is **reduction of complexity of reality**
(distil the essential by removing all 'noise')

King, Keohane & Verba: the **goal is inference** (making statements valid for unobserved phenomena based on observed phenomena)

The **notion of bias and error is embraced in scientific practice**, but this is more problematic in the case of assessments/evaluation

> -> it's easier to be a (social) scientist than a school inspector ….

THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST'S PERSPECTIVE…

➢ accept you can do an optimal but not a perfect job
➢ good methodology is crucial for valid and reliable assessment but will never take away all controversy or conflict
➢ try to include school actors as stakeholders in the (learning) process

Inspection as a component in a learning process

Inspection should ideally be a learning experience
But there are limits to learning and patience, so there should also be control and sanctioning

A key-issue is legitimacy of the assessment

What we want to avoid :
– bureaucratisation
– window dressing
– a power struggle

Mentality change:
Admitting weakness is not a failure, but a potential strenght
However, resignation and fatalism is not a valid option

Data literacy

Data-collection not a goal in itself, but a means
The aim is consolidation of quality and/or quality improvement
Do not collect data if the use and goal is unclear
For analysis: create partnerships!

Policy strenght and school leadership

Some elements from Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins (2008):

❑ Development of a vision
   - construction of a shared vision
   - enhance acceptance of shared goals
   - show high expectations

❑ Understand and stimulate development of colleagues

❑ Organisational restructuring and external relations
   - create a culture of cooperation
   - remediate internal functioning
   - build productive contacts with parents and environment

❑ management of the learning program
   - knowledgeable team in the right places
   - support with educational tasks
   - analysis and documentation

Critical remarks (Kelchtermans & Piot, 2010):
- There is no magic formula and the director does not control everything

❑ *My non-neutral vision on school strenght:*

- Strong schools are schools with vision (regardless of school composition)
- No policy without analysis (honest view on strenghts and weaknesses)
- Vision and policy are responsibility of direction but should become a collective project of the team
- Break the mentality « king/queen in the own classroom »
- Promote individual and collective *teacher efficacy* (the belief that the educator can make the difference)
-Vision radiates but may be highlighted

❑ *Vision and policy for the own school but with a perspective on the bigger picture*

- Assertive in a context of competition
- Solidarity with schools in environment
- Create partnerships outside of the school, parents are also potential ambassadors
- Care policy and inclusiveness are not signs of weakness but signs of strenght (but one also needs to differentiate for stronger pupils)
- Belief in the own school to be shown in words and deads : pedagogical team should (wish to) send their own children to the own institution