

Open Forum

An Investigation of Belgian-Descent University Students' Perceived Barriers to Establishing Contact with Muslim Students

by F. ZEHRA COLAK (KU Leuven), LORE VAN PRAAG (University of Antwerp)
and IDES NICAISE (KU Leuven)

Abstract

This study investigates Belgian-descent university students' perceptions of contact with Belgian–Muslim ethnic minorities and the ways they reflect on their own intergroup contact experiences. The results of the study demonstrate that many Belgian-descent students appear to perceive barriers when contacting Muslim students. Their accounts of contact with their Muslim peers suggest that those experiences were often constrained, even when participants framed them as enriching. Such constrained interactions with Muslim students were linked to the perceived barriers in contact. Firstly, students of Belgian descent experienced behavioural insecurities in approaching and interacting with Muslim peers. Secondly, participants seemed to perceive a lack of interest from Muslim students, which formed a barrier in approaching them. Finally, students of Belgian descent described Belgian culture as being reserved and introverted, thus hindering realization of contact with Muslims. While the university offers a context that provides all students with intergroup contact opportunities, these were rarely taken up, partly due to ethnic-majority students' perceptions of barriers in establishing or deepening contact with Muslim students.

Introduction

Ethnic and religious minorities in Belgium are still perceived to be 'allochthons' ('allochtoon' in Dutch, i.e., 'not from here') regardless of an individual's birthplace or nationality. More concretely, Muslim ethnic minorities are viewed as people who originate from and belong within a non-European cultural background (Billiet et al. 2012; Heath and Brinbaum 2014). They are expected to demonstrate knowledge of ethnic-majority culture in their behaviour and to be proficient in the Dutch language even though most of them learn it in schools (Clycq and Levrau 2017; Van de Pol 2018). In the same vein, Muslim ethnic-minority students are often held responsible for establishing contact with ethnic-majority group-members as a means of facilitating their so-called integration into the mainstream community (Van Praag et al. 2016). However, both groups—the Muslim

ethnic minority and the ethnic majority—need to be willing to engage in interaction in order to realize intergroup contact in educational settings. Nonetheless, the prevailing prejudice and negativity against Muslims in Europe hamper the development of contact between ethnic majority and Muslim ethnic minority students (Hutchinson and Rosenthal 2011; Vedder et al. 2017). Still, our knowledge of how ethnic-majority group-members experience and perceive contact with Muslims in higher education settings remains limited. Therefore, in this study, we focus on perceptions of intergroup contact from the perspective of ethnic-majority students and investigate the ways they make sense of their interactions with Muslim students born and raised in Belgium.

Research has shown that intergroup contact in educational settings leads to positive changes

in students' attitudes towards members of other (minority) groups (Fischer 2011) with particularly strong beneficial implications for ethnic majority groups (Binder et al., 2009). Nevertheless, ethnic-majority group members report fewer intergroup friendships than ethnic-minority members (Baerveldt et al. 2007; Vedder et al. 2017; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2006). The ethnic composition of the educational setting may result in fewer opportunities for ethnic-majority students to meet and interact with peers from ethnic and religious minorities (Van Houtte and Stevens, 2009). Still, the quality and quantity of intergroup contact have important implications for individuals' intergroup attitudes (Kanas et al. 2015; Van Acker and Vanbeseleare 2011). For instance, when non-Muslim students have frequent, high-quality contact with Muslims, their outgroup attitudes are more positive, they perceive greater outgroup variability, and exhibit more positive behavioural intentions (Hutchison and Rosenthal 2011; Vedder et al. 2017).

The factors influencing the development of intergroup contact have been documented by the well-known social – psychological theory of prejudice reduction known as 'intergroup contact theory' (Allport 1954). According to Allport (1954), contact with outgroup members produces a positive change in social relations and leads to more favourable outgroup evaluations. He outlined certain contact conditions—such as equal status, shared goals and the support of authorities—that enable the positive contact effect to occur. A large-scale meta-analytic study by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) has shown that even when those optimal conditions are not met, contact between groups can help to decrease prejudice. Nonetheless, the ideal and successful contact situation is described as one that exhibits understanding and affection, thus having high friendship potential (Pettigrew 1998). Cross-ethnic friendship is especially crucial in developing positive outgroup attitudes and reducing ingroup bias and prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). Previous research has also highlighted the role of positive contact in reducing intergroup

anxiety (Stephan et al. 1999). Due to their concerns about adverse outcomes for the self, like being rejected, people can feel anxious during intergroup interactions (Stephan and Stephan 2000). The feeling of uneasiness in the presence of members of other ethnic groups can cause anxiety, due to uncertainty about how to behave toward them (Stephan and Stephan 1985). However, cross-group friendships reduce intergroup anxiety and facilitate self-disclosure, intimacy, and open dialogue among individuals of different ethnic backgrounds (Barlow et al. 2009).

Building upon the premises of contact theory (Allport, 1954), it is expected that in educational settings where the student body is diverse, status among students from different groups will be more equal, and more support will come from authorities to build intergroup contact and benefit from repeated contact opportunities. Nevertheless, the existence of these factors does not automatically imply greater friendship or contact potential (See Colak et al. 2019; Van Praag et al. 2015). Students of different ethnic or racial origins are found to lead separate lives on the university campus and seldom engage in deep interactions (Jackson et al. 2014; Morrison 2010). However, lack of interaction among different student groups can negatively affect academic success and socio-psychological adaptation, and lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes and inequality (Jackson et al. 2014). The present study thus aims to understand individual perceptions of intergroup contact among ethnic-majority students in a high-achieving intergroup setting (i.e., university campus). Understanding explanations of why contact opportunities are not taken up helps identify strategies to promote meaningful interaction across ethno-religious groups. In the study, we focus on the intergroup contact perceptions of Belgian (i.e., ethnic-majority) students in a Flemish university setting. The university years constitute a crucial phase of the transition of young people into adulthood and for the development of contact and friendships (Marsh et al. 2006; Nelson et al. 2011). Also, some ethnic-majority students

find the student body on the university campus relatively more diverse than at the secondary schools they attended, due to prevailing ethnic segregation across schools and the different study tracks in Flemish secondary education (Van Houtte and Stevens, 2009; Van Praag et al. 2019). The greater diversity of the student body implies that such students have a higher chance of meeting Muslim peers compared to secondary education (Jacobs et al. 2009; Thys and Van Houtte 2016). Therefore, the university setting provides an ideal platform to explore how Belgian-descent students make sense of their encounters and develop contact when they enjoy relatively more opportunities to meet Muslim students. We use qualitative methods to thoroughly investigate the nature of ethnic-majority students' intergroup contact perceptions and experiences. This is of added value, as previous research on contact has mainly used quantitative methods that employ predetermined contact measures (e.g., Kanas et al. 2015; Vedder et al. 2017; Zagefka et al. 2017), hindering a more nuanced understanding of contact in real-life settings (Dixon et al. 2005).

Participants and procedure

The study involved twenty ethnic-majority (i.e., Belgian-descent) students—eleven females and nine males—in a higher education setting in Flanders, in the northern part of Belgium. The participants were full-time undergraduate and graduate students, aged between eighteen and twenty-five years old. The majority of those taking part in the study originates from the provinces of Flemish Brabant, Antwerp, and Limburg. Study participants were recruited by several methods, including an online questionnaire sent to the email accounts of all students and contacting student associations on campus. Once an initial sample was drawn, a snowballing procedure was adopted to recruit further.

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews in English with students who agreed to attend an interview. A few participants later declined to take part because they lacked the

confidence to express their thoughts in English. Agreeing to be interviewed in English by a non-Belgian student might already indicate a certain degree of openness towards intergroup contact with Muslim ethnic minorities by the selected students. Nonetheless, the researcher aimed to include ethnic-majority students with diverse intergroup contact experiences and all kinds of political orientations via student associations on campus. Some of these students were interested in participating in the research as they found it important that their views on the subject were included in the study.

The interviewer was open about not being a native Dutch speaker. The outsider status of the interviewer may have encouraged participants to elaborate on explanations, which might otherwise have been condensed due to an assumption of shared knowledge (Mielants and Weiner 2005). Even though the interviewer is an international student in Belgium, her identity as a Muslim (she wears a headscarf) may have affected the participants' responses to the questions. Being interviewed by a discernibly Muslim female interviewer might have encouraged certain kinds of reactions (while limiting others). Reviewing participants' responses to some questions (i.e., those on headscarf-wearing), there is a sense that respondents felt no inhibitions in honestly expressing opinions about Muslim students who cover their heads. Nonetheless, it is likely that some of them framed their responses to avoid the risk of offending the interviewer. However, all attempts were made during the interview to ensure respondents felt comfortable speaking candidly about their own experiences and thoughts.

The participants were informed about the study purpose before the interviews were conducted. They were assured of the confidentiality of the interviews and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their anonymity. The interviews took place between January 2014 and November 2015 and lasted approximately 120-180 minutes. They were taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions firstly aimed at understand-

ing the intergroup contact experiences and perceptions of students. Specifically, intergroup relations with ethnic-minority groups were explored. Participants were asked if they had had any contact experiences with Belgian-Muslim ethnic minorities, whether there were students from other ethno-religious backgrounds in their classrooms, and how they perceived relations with these ethnic or religious outgroups. Most students mainly pointed to intergroup barriers in making sense of the lack of intergroup contact between ethnic-majority and minority groups. Hence, we mainly focused on understanding the underlying factors behind students' perceptions of intergroup barriers and the ways students make sense of their own intergroup interactions.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis method. The initial codes were generated and sorted into potential themes. The coded data extracts were thus combined within the designated themes. Themes were compared with one other and with the original data set to determine their accuracy (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes were later refined for further analysis and to identify the final framework. NVivo11 software (2014) was used to index the themes systematically. We organized the findings under two main themes based on our analyses. The first covers the intergroup contact experiences of ethnic-majority students and elaborates on what students share, and about which issues, with their Muslim peers. The second focuses on perceptions of intergroup contact. We focused on barriers to contact because most ethnic-majority students referred to the difficulties in approaching and interacting with Muslims. Based on student responses, the second section is divided into three themes: 1) behavioural insecurities when approaching Muslim peers and establishing intergroup contact; 2) the perception that Muslim students lack interest in intergroup contact, and; 3) the perception that the reserved Belgian culture acts as a hindrance to contacting Muslims.

Intergroup contact as an enriching yet constrained experience

The findings of the study show that ethnic-majority students mainly reflected on their own experiences of contact with second- or third-generation, Belgian-Muslim ethnic minorities of Turkish and Moroccan background. Participants with positive contact experiences often described those experiences as enriching. Mia (undergraduate, Criminology), for instance, referred to her friendship with a Muslim peer during secondary school:

I had a Muslim friend in high school. I learned a lot from her. She was not judgemental. Our class was mixed...My friend invited us during Ramadan for dinner. It was very nice... We usually talked about school-related things and her perspective on things...we worked well together, sat next to each other all the time...I learned a lot from being friends with her. It was a positive experience.

As her account demonstrates, Mia reported that contact at an intimate level helped to increase her understanding of, and familiarity with, ethnic-minority cultures. Nonetheless, for many students, most of their interactions with Muslim peers were constrained. Although many students had opportunities to meet Muslim students on the university campus and in their classrooms, they had but a few interaction experiences. For instance, Evy (undergraduate, Law) mentioned that she did not have any intergroup contact experiences with peers from different ethnic origins until she started studying at the university:

At the university, I was forced [during group work] to go and talk to people from different ethnicities. [Nevertheless] they became my friends and, in the class, we get along...You learn about new things from other cultures. By interacting with people, you know why it [learning about other cultures] is important.

In this statement, Evy recognizes the value of learning about other cultures and intergroup communication. Despite recognizing this value, she told that her interactions with Muslim peers were limited to class context and the courses. Similar to Evy, Linda (undergraduate, Social Sci-

ences) spoke about the presence of Muslim students in her university class. However, as she continued, their interactions were mainly restricted to their group work and assignments:

Here, at the university, there are some [ethnic-minority] students, and we do group work. They are mostly from Islamic cultures, [and there is] not that much interaction...I grew up in a small village. I go out [i.e., socialize] with people who are more like us. [However] my cousins grew up in Antwerp. They are more social [there]; they would go out with anyone.

According to Linda, the place where she grew up determined with whom she hung around at the university. Growing up in a place with low diversity, she mainly sought out people she perceived as more like herself.

The perceived lack of familiarity with Muslim students seemed to open up space for friendships to go awry. Students were often very concerned about the topics discussed during their interactions and refrained from talking about specific issues—such as abortion, alcohol, sex (including homosexuality), religion, and drugs—in the presence of Muslim students. Thus, as mentioned by Evy, most intergroup interactions seemed restricted primarily to the curricula and university-related issues:

With my Belgian friends, I talk more about my personal life, while with Muslim friends it is [about] coursework. The only Muslim friends I have are at university; I have none outside school. They have no experience of certain things, such as drinking and partying, so I feel I can't share these things... Muslims are very conservative about sex, drugs, drinking alcohol, etc. I would never talk about these things with Muslim friends. I can put my personal opinions aside.

Evy noted that she resisted bringing up 'contentious topics' when interacting with her Muslim peers at the university, due to a fear of causing offence or sounding disrespectful. Interestingly, Evy added that she had a friend of Turkish descent, who did not follow Islamic religion anymore, and therefore she met her outside school, as well. Thus, Belgian-descent students often seem to attribute the lack of deep intergroup

interactions mainly to the religious affiliation of their Muslim peers.

This perceived lack of familiarity with a Muslim peer was particularly powerful when the student in question had a visible identity-marker, such as a headscarf. Many students perceived Muslim female students wearing headscarves to be unfamiliar and uninterested in interactions with them. They also noted feeling insecure about whether they would be received well by those Muslim students. Mieke (undergraduate, Social Sciences) shared her views about the challenges of approaching her female Muslim classmates at the university:

Girls who wear the headscarf, they hang around together. I would love to go and talk [with them] ... But you don't know if they want to be approached. My Belgian friends also don't know how to approach [them]. They [Muslim girls] think that we have a bad image about them ...

To conclude, students with positive contact experiences described them mainly in favourable terms, stressing the positive sides of learning about the culture of Muslims and the exchange of knowledge (Brown and Hewstone 2005; Pettigrew 1998). Nonetheless, most contact opportunities at university were often constrained due to Belgian-descent students' perceptions of a lack of familiarity with Muslim peers. Despite having relatively more opportunities to meet and interact with Muslim students at university, most students of Belgian descent interviewed in this study had no Muslim friends. In the following sections, we will delve deeper into possible explanations to understand the lack of contact between ethnic-majority and Muslim students in the higher education setting.

Perceived barriers to intergroup contact

Behavioural insecurities

Many ethnic-majority students appear to perceive a wide variety of barriers when attempting to establish contact with Muslim students—or when thinking of doing so. Most students seem to perceive Muslims as people without European descent and reported feeling uncertain about the

norms and behavioural guidelines during intergroup contact. They are particularly concerned about the idea of offending the 'other'. This is, for example, noticeable in the case of Rose (undergraduate, Sinology). Even though she is clearly interested in the Chinese culture and language, she reported finding it more challenging to interact with someone of a Turkish or Chinese descent than someone of European origin:

I always have these questions in mind. I do not know how you do it; is it okay to do it this way, can I do this or not? If it is someone from England, I would not have such questions, but with someone from China or Turkey, it would be more difficult. Very different from my culture ... Most Belgians do not know how to communicate with migrants. I have never had a real conversation with a migrant, just in the shop. For most Belgians, the problem is that we have no opinion about religion. And they have a strong opinion about it. That is the most difficult to understand. (Rose, undergraduate, Sinology)

Rose underlined her lack of knowledge about what is acceptable when she is around people of non-European ethnic backgrounds. She attributed this lack of knowledge about how to contact members of these groups to not having engaged in any in-depth relationships with them. Similar to Rose, Evy (undergraduate, Law) relishes the opportunity to contact ethnic and religious minority students in her class, yet underlined that a general lack of knowledge about behavioural guidelines and a fear of causing offence forms a barrier in approaching and contacting them: *How do we do the right thing, what do we say and not say? And how to approach and act? You don't know [and] you don't want to offend people. We also think that they don't want to open up.* Evy's quote suggests that she feels apprehensive when thinking about interacting with a Muslim classmate. These feelings of uncertainty about approaching and having an open conversation with Muslim peers appears to be based on a focus on the stereotypical differences between the worldviews of their own and the perspectives of Muslims. Also, Samuel (postgraduate, Political Sciences) referred to

being on guard against undesirable situations and avoided discussing specific topics with Muslims: *I can't discuss homosexuality with 'ethnic friends'; you can't say something like 'all religion is bullshit' [to them]. Our society has put religion aside. With a Muslim, I would be careful when I talk about religion.* According to Samuel, his culture has actively dismissed religion from a position of centrality and he views this as a key difference that is driving his fear of offending or feelings of guardedness. Thus, uncertainty and unpredictability about how ethnic-minority students might behave and respond to particular issues seems to deter students of Belgian descent from starting conversations about these topics. This does not automatically prevent the development of intergroup contact among students. Nonetheless, the potential for open interaction and knowledge exchange seems to be constrained due to a 'sense of guardedness' that ethnic-majority students adopted around their Muslim peers (Fozdar 2011). As a consequence, the depth of their interactions is often restricted by 'issue avoidance' (Paolini et al. 2004).

In sum, students indicated that when they contacted members of ethnic-minority groups, they were often unable to build contact at an intimate level. They explained this by referring to the uncertainty over the appropriate way to make contact and over the outcomes of intergroup contact. Many ethnic-majority students expressed feelings of uncertainty about the interactional norms when having contact with ethnic and religious minorities (Stephan 2014; Zagefka et al. 2017).

The perception that Muslims lack interest in intergroup contact

A second barrier reported by ethnic-majority students relates to their perception of Muslim ethnic-minority groups as not being interested in interacting with them. Specifically, female Muslim students wearing a headscarf and those perceived to be forming ethnic cliques among themselves are presumed to lack interest in interacting with ethnic-majority groups. This is not sur-

prising given the negative attitude towards the headscarf in Belgian society (Bracke and Fadil 2011). Francis (postgraduate, Engineering) told that, in general, ethnic majorities associate Muslim women wearing headscarves with a lack of interest in having contact with someone from another ethnic group and directed her point to the interviewer (who wears a headscarf):

People see you [as] more pious and conservative if you wear a headscarf. It is also a sign that you belong to a specific group. If you do not wear it, people will talk to you more. Some people will not approach [you], thinking that you belong to your own group and won't talk to them.

Francis said that the headscarf is considered a strong indication of membership in a closed ethnic or religious community. For himself, he argued that having different beliefs and ideas about specific issues is not a barrier to the development of relationships with his Muslim friends. In contrast, Mia (undergraduate, Criminology) explained that she draws back when she meets a woman wearing a headscarf—such a symbol, in her view, automatically implies a lack of mutual understanding between them: *I will hold back if a person is wearing a headscarf. [She is from] a different group [and so] you don't have any common ground. She would be more approachable without a headscarf.* Mia perceives the visible religious marker as negating any other potential points of engagement and common interest. A number of the ethnic-majority students interviewed share this view—namely, the sense that it is easier to approach individuals without a headscarf and that such individuals would be more receptive to this form of contact. However, these views about interacting with Muslim students appear to be based on assumptions rather than concrete real-life experiences. These students agreed that ethnic-majority Belgians generally view women wearing headscarves as being oppressed by men. A few students noted that they do not share this mainstream negative perception, even if they also appear to perceive challenges in interacting with discernibly Muslim women. Possibly in an attempt to avoid offend-

ing the interviewer, a few students told her that she was easy to approach and talk to, despite wearing a headscarf.

The views of ethnic-majority students imply that this group frames ethnic-minority students wearing the headscarf as a barrier standing in the way of contacting them. For instance, Mieke (undergraduate, Social Sciences) recounted that:

When they are wearing a headscarf, there is already something that would make you feel [like] an outsider. It makes it harder to approach. [I think that] the one without headscarf would feel more open about me approaching them; a person with a headscarf would not like me to contact her. It is more about how that other person would feel.

By referring to her thoughts about how her ethnic group appears to other ethnic groups, she was looking through the eyes of the other at how she might appear (see also: looking-glass self, Cooley 1956). Remarkably, although it appears students genuinely perceive such barriers in contacting Muslim female students, they did not mention having any negative contact experiences with them.

Belgian-descent students also mentioned the belief that Muslim students, in choosing to hang around peers of the same ethnic or religious origin, lack the motivation and the interest to initiate contact or deepen outgroup relationships. They asserted that Muslim students of different ethnic origins form cliques among themselves and interpret this as a lack of interest in becoming friends with ethnic-majority groups (McPherson et al. 2001). While they feel excluded by the grouping of ethno-religious minorities, Belgian-descent students expect that it is these students who will seek contact with them should they desire it, not necessarily the other way around. They think that intergroup contact is necessary for Muslim students to facilitate their so-called integration in Belgium and achieve upward social mobility. For example, Lien (undergraduate, Criminology) referred to the Flemish culture and stressed that it is often ethnic minorities who are expected to take the first step in making contact (see also Van Praag et al. 2016):

The typical Flemish culture is very closed; they [native Belgians] are tight, a little bit more defensive... It is a bit scary that we are closed, and everything stays in the family, and you [are told you] should not trust anyone else [outside the family]. First contact is much harder—more open people when they come to Belgium and [come across] new people ... are disappointed [with the difficulty of connecting]...It is a mix of these—we are closed and [we are] a bit defensive—and expect them [new-comers] to be open...A lot of people in Flemish culture expect others to [take the initiative and] come and say 'hi'.

Other comments such as *you should be open to meeting new people to be integrated*, and *integration is to have friends from here (Belgium) and not only from your own community* indicate that the onus of initiating contact was often on ethnic-minority groups. Only a few students underlined the mutual responsibility in intergroup contact and argued that the lack of motivation and interest in establishing contact is reciprocal. This was expressed by Linda (undergraduate, Social Sciences) as follows: *I think it comes from two sides—we don't go and talk to them either. It is not because we don't want to, but there is no motivation—with everyone, not just Muslims. My friends are also like that [with strangers]*. Linda underlined the lack of motivation on both sides to explain why there was little intergroup interaction, adding that they do not specifically avoid their Muslim peers but treat everyone they do not know this way.

Overall, ethnic-minority women with a visible identity-marker—namely, a headscarf—are usually perceived by ethnic-majority students as lacking interest in intergroup contact. Additionally, the accounts of ethnic-majority students show that they still appear to perceive responsibility for the acculturation processes to lie mainly with the ethnic-minority students (Van Praag et al. 2016). These two facts likely inform their interpretation of minority-group behaviour as indicating a lack of motivation (cf. other potential explanations for reticent contact behaviour). It also likely informs their sense that it is the responsibility of Muslim students to manifest such a motivation by initiating contact with

ethnic-majority groups to fulfil their perceived acculturation duties.

The perception that the reserved Belgian culture is a hindrance to intergroup contact

Being stuck in in- and outgroup thinking, a vast majority of the Belgian-descent students attached particular personality features to their own ethnic group. Traits, such as being reserved and introverted, were seen as a group characteristic of people of Belgian descent. This personality (group) trait was used as an excuse to explain the lack of initiative to establish intergroup interactions. According to participants, the low intergroup interaction levels among ethnic-majority groups are linked to a general group personality characteristic of being reserved that many individuals of Belgian descent share. The students argued that ethnic-majority groups were not enthusiastic about interacting with strangers due to these (group) personality traits. Such personality traits could be viewed as a general characteristic of human beings in the sense that people may not be always open to those they perceive as unfamiliar or foreign. Nonetheless, students of Belgian descent framed these traits as *specifically Belgian* rather than a general attitude common to all people. Some students reported that such traits formed a challenge to interacting with any stranger, including people of Belgian descent. Samuel (postgraduate, Political Sciences) for instance, made an obvious generalization of the ethnic ingroup and assigned personality traits to it:

Belgians are introverts. It took me a year to make friends [at university]; it is difficult to start interactions. If you are not white, it will always be difficult... we don't despise other people but we are focused on our groups, so you will always be an outsider. It is easier for other Europeans [to be insiders], but I still think most Flemish people, due to a history of oppression [i.e., past oppression from other ethnic groups] and so on, they focus on themselves [own ethnic group]. A typical Belgian person is very closed to diversity... not because of the racist elements but [simply because] Belgians do not want to establish interaction [make contact].

Samuel referred to the challenges he experienced when trying to establish connections with students of Belgian descent at the university. He underlined that ethnic-majority people are not willing to establish contact with ethnic minorities, especially those of non-European descent. Jean (undergraduate, History) approaches this from an outsider perspective. By arguing that ethnic-majority groups are defined as 'introverted' by ethnic-minority groups, Jean looked at his own ethnic group through the eyes of the 'foreigners' (see: looking-glass self, Cooley 1956). He noted that it is not necessarily individuals, but rather the general culture that can be described as introverted:

For foreigners we are introverted; we don't consider ourselves as introverts—the culture itself is introverted. We don't like to share; the suicide rate is high [and] we don't like to share our emotions and feelings. It is hard for us to approach just anyone, also Belgians...A lot of people have social anxiety; you can define [i.e., perceive] this only if you live within the culture.

Jean stated that an overall shared culture of social anxiety made it hard to approach any individual, regardless of their ethnic descent. Similarly, Mieke (undergraduate, Social Sciences) also thought that it was a 'Belgian thing' to be uninterested in interactions with ethnically diverse people, even though many European cultures share this attitude. Mieke attributed this attitude of Belgian-descent people to a specific upbringing in Belgium. The somewhat rigid way of raising children – which she claims is part of the Belgian culture – teaches specific ways to act when meeting people of distinct cultures: *You are taught here that you are not allowed to interfere with other cultures. You should not do something culturally wrong. [And so people] don't know how to approach other cultures.* Mieke concludes that the Belgian culture is, in a sense, xenophobic in nature.

To conclude, ethnic-majority students seem to assign a personality trait to their own ethnic ingroup and culture and use it as an explanation for the lack of contact with Muslim students.

Moreover, they seem to represent their reserved behaviour as explicitly non-racist by referring to the trait of not being open to others as a general cultural one that applies to every stranger or foreigner. Attributing this combination of both factors to ethnic in- and outgroup also made it reasonable for ethnic-majority students to not make so much effort in reaching out to Muslim students. These rationalizations were strengthened by views on how 'others' viewed them and how they were taught that others would perceive their initiatives to establish contact with them. It is also important to recall that the participants might have framed their responses in a way that, in their view, would not offend the interviewer.

Discussion

This research aimed to study the intergroup contact perceptions of Belgian descent ethnic-majority university students in Flanders and outline the ways they experience their interactions with Muslim-Belgian ethnic-minority students. This study has approached intergroup contact from an ethnic-majority perspective and probed into the nature of the views of and experiences of this group concerning contact with Muslim students. The university setting provides a unique research context, since Belgian-descent students have relatively more opportunities to establish intergroup contact than in secondary schools but are not bound to do so, due to the very loose contact obligations in most courses. The study has found that even though students do not necessarily frame their contact experiences as negative and have sufficient contact opportunities, they are often disinclined to interact with Muslim students and form ethnically homophilous relationships (McPherson et al. 2001). Thus, mixing ethnic groups and having positive intergroup contact experiences may not necessarily facilitate the development of intimate ties among students, even though they might create an illusion of successful intergroup contact. Independent from their actual contact experiences with Muslim ethnic-minority students, many ethnic-majority students still seem

to perceive many barriers to the establishment and deepening of interethnic contact. The barriers are mainly linked to ethnic-majority students' behavioural insecurities in approaching and interacting with Muslim peers, perceptions of a lack of interest from Muslim students, and perceptions that Belgian culture is reserved and, therefore, forms a barrier to meaningful contact with Muslim students.

The findings indicate that ethnic-majority students' feelings of uncertainty and discomfort about intergroup interactions seems linked to their perceptions of cultural unfamiliarity and perceived cultural differences in ways of thinking and acting (Hewstone and Brown 1986; Wright et al. 1997; Van Acker et al. 2014). This is possibly due to the low quality and quantity of positive and open intergroup interactions. Such positive and open instances reduce expectations of adverse outcomes from intergroup contact by challenging negative beliefs about interacting with a member from another ethno-religious group (Paolini et al. 2004; Pettigrew 2008; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). The conversational and physical avoidance of the Muslim ethnic minorities can be due to the lack of intergroup friendships (Barlow et al. 2009), which provide individuals with insights about the norms and behavioural scripts of other ethnic groups (Stephan and Stephan 1985). This avoidance of Muslim students is also based on ethnic-majority students' perceptions that Muslim students lacked interest in interacting with them. Thus, there is a tendency among Belgian-descent students to blame their Muslim peers for the segregation which occurs on the campus and overlook their own role in perpetuating it. It is important to note that societal discourses requiring ethnic-minority groups to put effort into integrating into the Belgian culture are apparent in the narratives of the ethnic-majority students who participated in the study. Such claims also reduce the responsibility of the ethnic-majority students to put energy in the establishment of contact with their Muslim peers.

Using cultural traits as a justification for the lack of contact with Muslim peers, most stu-

dents of Belgian descent did not consider their own role in the development of intergroup contact. Furthermore, although the Belgian culture was clearly depicted as an introverted culture, not eager to establish interethnic contact, this was not necessarily problematized by students. Many students, however, tended to explain the lack of intimate relations with Muslim peers on account of the latter's religious background, constructing incompatible representations of them. The stereotypical image of the religious other as 'intolerant', 'conservative', 'not open-minded', and 'easily offended' was often hinted at by participants to legitimize the lack of intimate interactions. The fact that these negative perceptions of Muslim students appear based on assumptions demonstrates the overwhelming influence of societal hostility and prejudice towards Muslims (Clycq 2017; Hutchison and Rosenthal 2011; Savelkoul et al. 2011). At the same time, Belgian-descent students were sometimes reluctant to talk about their own experiences or views and often referred to how other people perceive contact with Muslims. This suggests that students of Belgian descent favour a strategy to maintain a positive representation of the self to avoid the label 'racist', an undesirable social identity (e.g., in the family context. See Clycq 2017). The sensitivity of the issue and the Muslim identity of the interviewer might have also favoured students adopting general opinions rather than offering their personal views and experiences.

While previous research has documented the prevailing hostility and negative attitudes towards Muslims, few have offered nuanced insights into the nature of intergroup contact experiences, from the perspective of those engaged in such contact. The views of ethnic-majority students presented in this article offer a deeper understanding of what prevents students of Belgian origin from building deeper relations with Muslim-Belgian students. The transcripts hint that examining the motivational mindsets of students could offer further insights into why intergroup interactions go awry in ethnically diverse higher education settings (Murphy et al.

2011). For instance, many ethnic-majority students reported a focus on avoiding undesired outcomes such as not appearing biased when they think about interacting with a Muslim peer. However, when ethnic-majority members are motivated to learn about their partner during interactions, their intergroup attitudes are more favourable than those who try to avoid unwanted consequences (Migacheva and Tropp 2014; Plant et al. 2010). Overall, these findings contribute to existing research by highlighting that attempts to ameliorate relations between members of different groups in higher education settings need to consider the role of motivation in shaping intergroup contact dynamics.

Some limitations need to be mentioned as well. This study only focused on students of Belgian descent who were enrolled at one university. A follow-up study could compare student groups in different educational settings and elaborate further on the implications for intergroup contact and friendships of different student characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity. Also, it is interesting to further explore everyday intergroup contexts in educational settings by adopting qualitative methodologies so that we have more insights into how and why potential contact opportunities get overlaid. Finally, future studies on intergroup contact could engage the positionality of interviewers and map out the implications of this researcher positionality for the study results.

Some policy recommendations can be drawn based on the study findings. First, universities can take a more active role in facilitating intergroup contact by encouraging random assignment of roommates from other ethnic groups. This distribution was shown to have a positive influence on friendship patterns and individual intergroup attitudes (Laar et al. 2005). Second, learning about Muslim ethnic minorities could have positive implications for intergroup anxiety (Pettigrew 1998). However, this needs to be put into practice more. Increasing knowledge of and familiarity with Muslim students and their values, norms, attitudes without essentializing could be

helpful to facilitate intergroup interactions as it will provide students with behavioural guidelines and cues (Zagefka et al. 2017). In doing so, it is essential to avoid broad generalizations and delve deeper into concrete actions, fears, and interactions.

References

- ALLPORT, G.W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA, USA: Addison-Wesley.
- BAERVELDT, C., B. ZIJLSTRA, M. DE WOLF, R. VAN ROSSEM, and M. A. J. VAN DUIJN. 2007. "Ethnic Boundaries in High School Students' Networks in Flanders and the Netherlands". *International Sociology* 22 (6): 701-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580907082248>.
- BARLOW, F. K., W.R. LOUIS, and M. HEWSTONE. 2009. "Rejected! Cognitions of Rejection and Intergroup Anxiety as Mediators of the Impact of Cross-Group Friendships on Prejudice". *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (3): 389-405. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466608X387089>.
- BILLIET, J., E. JASPAERT, and M. SWYNGEDOUW. 2012. "Diversity in the Relationship between Perceived Ethnic Threat, Islamophobia, and (Sub)National Identity in Belgium". In: S. Salzborn, E. Davidov, AND J. Reinecke, eds., *Methods, Theories, and Empirical Applications in the Social Sciences*, 279-89. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- BINDER, J., H. ZAGEFKA, R. BROWN, F. FUNKE, T. KESSLER, A. MUMMENDEY, , A. MAQUIL, S. DEMOULIN, and J.P. LEYENS. 2009. "Does Contact Reduce Prejudice or Does Prejudice Reduce Contact? A Longitudinal Test of the Contact Hypothesis among Majority and Minority Groups in Three European Countries". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (4): 843-56. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013470>.
- BRACKE, S., and N. FADIL. 2011. "'Is the Headscarf Oppressive or Emancipatory?' Field Notes from the Multicultural Debate". *Religion and Gender* 2 (1): 36-56. <https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.40>.
- BRAUN, V., and V. CLARKE. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology". *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.
- BROWN, R., and M. HEWSTONE. 2005. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Contact". In: M. Zanna,

- ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 255-343. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- CLYQC, N. 2017. "From 'People Just like Us' to the 'Fundamentally Other' in an Era of Antiracism: The Instrumental Use of Religion to Exclude the Other While Avoiding Stigma". *Current Sociology* 65 (5): 717-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115583679>.
- CLYQC, N., and F. LEVRAU. 2017. "Towards a Comprehensive Integration Policy: A Critical Analysis of How Social Imaginations Underpin Flemish Integration Policies". In *Moroccan Migration in Belgium: More Than 50 Years of Settlement*, edited by Christiane Timmerman, John Lievens, Nadia Fadil, Idesbald Goddeeris, Noel Clycq, Karim Etourki, Sam De Schutter, Albert Martens, Emilien Dupont, and Bart Van De Putte, 149-69. Leuven, BELGIUM: Leuven University Press.
- COLAK, F. Z., L. VAN PRAAG, and I. NICAISE. 2019. "A Qualitative Study of How Exclusion Processes Shape Friendship Development among Turkish-Belgian University Students". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 73 (November): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.08.002>.
- COOLEY, C. H. 1956. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- DIXON, J., K. DURRHEIM, and C. TREDoux. 2005. "Beyond the Optimal Contact Strategy: A Reality Check for the Contact Hypothesis." *The American Psychologist* 60 (7): 697-711. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.7.697>.
- FISCHER, M.J. 2011. "Interracial Contact and Changes in the Racial Attitudes of White College Students". *Social Psychology of Education* 14 (4): 547-74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-011-9161-3>.
- FOZDAR, F. 2011. "'I've Never Looked at Someone and Thought What Colour They Are': Contact Theory and Interracial Friendship in New Zealand". *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 32 (4): 383-405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2011.584616>.
- HEATH, A. F., and Yaël BRINBAUM, eds. 2014. *Unequal Attainments: Ethnic Educational Inequalities in Ten Western Countries*. Proceedings of the British Academy 196. Oxford: Published for the British Academy for Oxford University Press.
- HEWSTONE, M., and R. BROWN. 1986. "Contact Is Not Enough: An Intergroup Perspective on the 'Contact Hypothesis'". In: M. Hewstone and R. Brown, eds., *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*, 1-44. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- HUTCHISON, P., and H. E. S. ROSENTHAL. 2011. "Prejudice against Muslims: Anxiety as a Mediator between Intergroup Contact and Attitudes, Perceived Group Variability and Behavioural Intentions". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (1): 40-61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419871003763312>.
- JACKSON, R., K. SWEENEY, and A. WELCHER. 2014. "It Just Happens: Colorblind Ideology and Undergraduate Explanations of Racial Interaction on Campus". *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 9 (3): 191-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197914542553>.
- JACOBS, D., A. REA, C. TENY, L. CALLIER, and S. LOTHAIRE. 2009. *[The Social Lift Remains Stabbing. The Performance of Immigrant Pupils in the Belgian Origin Community and the French Community] De Sociale Lift Blijft Steken. De Prestaties van Allochtone Leerlingen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap En de Franse Gemeenschap*. Brussels: Koning Boudewijnstichting.
- KANAS, A., P. SCHEEPERS, and C. STERKENS. 2015. "Interreligious Contact, Perceived Group Threat, and Perceived Discrimination: Predicting Negative Attitudes among Religious Minorities and Majorities in Indonesia". *Social Psychology Quarterly* 78 (2): 102-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272514564790>.
- MARSH, P., J.P. ALLEN, M. HO, M. PORTER, and F.C. MCFARLAND. 2006. "The Changing Nature of Adolescent Friendships: Longitudinal Links With Early Adolescent Ego Development". *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 26 (4): 414-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431606291942>.
- MCPHERSON, M., L. SMITH-LOVIN, and J.M. COOK. 2001. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks". *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (1): 415-44. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>.
- MIELANTS, E., and M.F. WEINER. 2015. "Fortress Europe in the Field: Academics, Immigrants, and Methodological Considerations for Educational Studies". *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28 (4): 437-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916010>.
- MIGACHEVA, K., and L.R. TROPP. 2013. "Learning Orientation as a Predictor of Positive Intergroup Contact". *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 16 (4): 426-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430212455854>.

- MORRISON, G. Z. 2010. "Two Separate Worlds: Students of Color at a Predominantly White University". *Journal of Black Studies* 40 (5): 987-1015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708325408>.
- MURPHY, M.C., J.A. RICHESON, and D.C. MOLDEN. 2011. "Leveraging Motivational Mindsets to Foster Positive Interracial Interactions". *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 5 (2): 118-31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00338.x>.
- NELSON, P.A., A. THORNE, and L.A. SHAPIRO. 2011. "I'm Outgoing and She's Reserved: The Reciprocal Dynamics of Personality in Close Friendships in Young Adulthood: The Reciprocal Dynamics of Personality". *Journal of Personality* 79 (5): 1113-48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2011.00719.x>.
- NVIVO QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS SOFTWARE. 2014.; QSR International Pty Ltd., Version 12.
- PAOLINI, S., M. HEWSTONE, E. CAIRNS, and A. VOGLI. 2004. "Effects of Direct and Indirect Cross-Group Friendships on Judgments of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland: The Mediating Role of an Anxiety-Reduction Mechanism". *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30 (6): 770-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203262848>.
- PETTIGREW, T.F. 1998. "Intergroup Contact Theory". *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (1): 65-85. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.65>.
- . 2008. "Future Directions for Intergroup Contact Theory and Research." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32 (3): 187-99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2007.12.002>.
- PETTIGREW, T.F., and L.R. TROPP. 2006. "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (5): 751-783. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.
- . 2008. "How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators". *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38 (6): 922-34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.504>.
- . 2011. *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact*. Essays in Social Psychology. New York ; Hove, West Sussex: Psychology Press.
- PLANT, E.A., P.G. DEVINE, and M.B. PERUCHE. 2010. "Routes to Positive Interracial Interactions: Approaching Egalitarianism or Avoiding Prejudice". *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36 (9): 1135-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210378018>.
- SAVELKOUL, M., P. SCHEEPERS, J. TOLSMA, and L. HAGENDOORN. 2011. "Anti-Muslim Attitudes in The Netherlands: Tests of Contradictory Hypotheses Derived from Ethnic Competition Theory and Intergroup Contact Theory." *European Sociological Review* 27 (6): 741-58.
- STEPHAN, W.G. 2008. "Viewing Intergroup Relations in Europe through Allport's Lens Model of Prejudice". *Journal of Social Issues* 64 (2): 417-29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00569.x>.
- . 2014. "Intergroup Anxiety: Theory, Research, and Practice". *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 18 (3): 239-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314530518>.
- STEPHAN, W.G., and C.W. STEPHAN. 1985. "Intergroup Anxiety". *Journal of Social Issues* 41 (3): 157-75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1985.tb01134.x>.
- STEPHAN, W.G., C.W. STEPHAN, and W.B. GUDYKUNST. 1999. "Anxiety in Intergroup Relations: A Comparison of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory and Integrated Threat Theory". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 23 (4): 613-28. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(99\)00012-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00012-7).
- STEPHAN, W.G., and C.W. STEPHAN. 2000. "An Integrated Theory of Prejudice". In: S. Oskamp, ed., *Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination: The Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology*, 23-45. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- THYS, S., and M. VAN HOUTTE. 2016. "Ethnic Composition of the Primary School and Educational Choice: Does the Culture of Teacher Expectations Matter?" *Teaching and Teacher Education* 59 (October): 383-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.06.011>.
- VAN ACKER, K., K. PHALET, J. DELEERSNYDER, and B. MESQUITA. 2014. "Do 'They' Threaten 'Us' or Do 'We' Disrespect 'Them': Majority Perceptions of Intergroup Relations and Everyday Contacts with Immigrant Minorities". *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 17 (5): 617-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430214536062>.
- VAN ACKER, K., and N. VANBESELAERE. 2011. "Bringing Together Acculturation Theory and Intergroup Contact Theory: Predictors of Flemings'

- Expectations of Turks' Acculturation Behavior". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35 (3): 334-345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.06.004>.
- VAN DE POL, S. 2018. "Social Orientation in Belgium and the CURANT Project in the City of Antwerp". In: Lace, ed., *Newcomer Integration in Europe: Best Practices and Innovations since 2015*, 51-60. Brussels: FEPS.
- VAN HOUTTE, M., and P.A.J. STEVENS. 2009. "School Ethnic Composition and Students' Integration Outside and Inside Schools in Belgium". *Sociology of Education* 82 (3): 217-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070908200302>.
- VAN LAAR, C., S. LEVIN, S. SINCLAIR, and J. SIDANIUS. 2005. "The Effect of University Roommate Contact on Ethnic Attitudes and Behavior". *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 41 (4): 329-45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2004.08.002>.
- VAN PRAAG, L., P.A.J. STEVENS, and M. VAN HOUTTE. 2016. "'No More Turkish Music!' The Acculturation Strategies of Teachers and Ethnic Minority Students in Flemish Schools". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42 (8): 1353-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1103171>.
- VAN PRAAG, L., M. VERHOEVEN, P.A.J. STEVENS, and M. VAN HOUTTE. 2019. "Belgium." In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and Ethnic Inequalities in Education*. London: Palgrave.
- VAN PRAAG, L., S. BOONE, P.A.J. STEVENS, and M. VAN HOUTTE. 2015. "How Tracking Structures Attitudes towards Ethnic Out-Groups and Interethnic Interactions in the Classroom: An Ethnographic Study in Belgium". *Social Psychology of Education* 18 (1): 165-84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-014-9273-7>.
- VEDDER, P., E. WENINK, and M. VAN GEEL. 2017. "Intergroup Contact and Prejudice between Dutch Majority and Muslim Minority Youth in the Netherlands". *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 23 (4): 477-85. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000150>.
- VERKUYTEN, M., and B. MARTINOVIC. 2006. "Understanding Multicultural Attitudes: The Role of Group Status, Identification, Friendships, and Justifying Ideologies". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30 (1): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.05.015>.
- WRIGHT, S.C., A. ARON, T. MCLAUGHLIN-VOLPE, and S.A. ROPP. 1997. "The Extended Contact Effect: Knowledge of Cross-Group Friendships and Prejudice". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73 (1): 73-90. <http://dx.doi.org.kuleuven.ezproxy.kuleuven.be/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.73>
- ZAGEFKA, H., R. GONZALEZ, R. BROWN, S. LAY, J. MANZI, and N. DIDIER. 2017. "To Know You Is to Love You: Effects of Intergroup Contact and Knowledge on Intergroup Anxiety and Prejudice among Indigenous Chileans: CONTACT-KNOWLEDGE ANXIETY". *International Journal of Psychology* 52 (4): 308-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12229>.

Note on the Authors

F ZEHRA COLAK is a PhD candidate at KU Leuven in the Department of Educational Sciences. Her research provides insight into the acculturation processes of students with Turkish and Belgian descent in higher education. She specifically investigates the development of intergroup contact/friendships on university campuses as well as institutional and interpersonal discrimination across educational settings.

LORE VAN PRAAG (MA, Ph.D. Sociology, Ghent University) is the head of the Centre of Migration and Intercultural Studies at the University of Antwerp. Her research interests are interethnic relations in schools, tracking, ethnic discrimination, early school leaving, and ethnography, climate change and migration.

IDES NICAISE is professor of 'education and society' at KU Leuven and research manager at HIVA – Research Institute for Work and Society, at the same university. His research mainly focuses on the relationship between education and social inclusion policies.