

Child Poverty and ancient Greek: a case study from Belgium

Key Information

Abstract: Child poverty levels in the Flemish Region (the northern, Dutch-speaking political region in Belgium) are at an all-time high, with ethnic minorities and urban children disproportionately at risk of growing up in socio-cultural deprivation. Studies have demonstrated that these same children also lack the educational opportunities of their affluent peers. Access to classical languages is particularly problematic, with Greek more exclusive than Latin, since pupils must have studied Latin before they are allowed to study Greek. I therefore started up a project called *Ancient Greeks – Young Heroes* at the University of Ghent to start addressing this particular issue and increase the social inclusivity of Classics in Flanders. The project focuses primarily on widening access and raising aspirations by engaging pupils with a supposedly elitist and difficult subject through a pedagogical approach which is adapted to their needs. The project had a successful one-year pilot and has continued for a second year, with primary and secondary schools in Flanders already using our resources.



This summary presents key information about child poverty in the Flemish Region and sets out the practical details of the project. In my presentation, I will discuss the pedagogical approach and explore the difficulties one encounters while working with child poverty.

A (Dutch-language) video about the project made by *Karrewiet*, the children's news on national TV, can be viewed [here](#).

1. Child poverty

a. Definition:

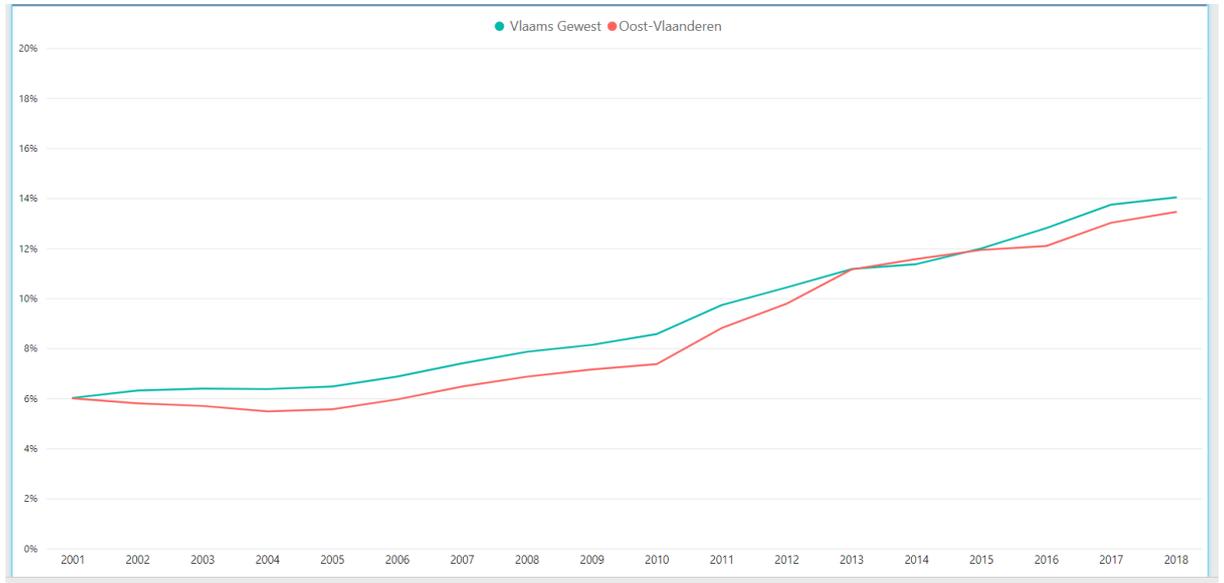
'A situation in which people are deprived of opportunities to participate fully in socially valued goods, such as education, work, and housing. This situation is not a one-off event, but constitutes a long-term plight at both the material and intangible level' (e.g. financially and cognitively).

In the Flemish Region, child poverty is determined on the basis of parents' monthly wages, their educational level and work situation, as well as housing, health, and mental health. When a family scores low on three or more criteria, this is considered child poverty.¹

¹ Definition by the Flemish Government service for support of children and families, see <https://www.kindengezin.be/cijfers-en-rapporten/cijfers/kansarmoede/>. (My translation)

b. Child poverty in Flanders

- Child poverty in Flanders has long been an invisible issue. However, since it has risen each year since 2001 (see graph, which shows both the Flemish Region average [blue] and East-Flanders [red], the province where UGent is situated),² it has been acknowledged as a problem.³



- In 2019, the child poverty figure in the Flemish Region was 14.01%. The general figure skews the issue, however, since child poverty is particularly situated in cities (where a staggering 47% of children live in poverty, in comparison with 7% in the countryside) and among children with a non-Belgian mother, i.e. ethnic minorities (33.5% in comparison with 6% among children with a Belgian mother, a shocking difference).

c. Consequences of child poverty

Among other things, child poverty:

- increases the risk of chronic stress which increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and obesity.⁴
- leads to fewer educational opportunities, a stunted cognitive and psychosocial development, and decreased political participation. It also increases the risk of abuse, criminality, and bad health in adult life.⁵
- 'may be *cause* and *effect* in a vicious circle of underperforming labour markets and education systems.'⁶

² For a clearer view of the graph, click [here](#).

³ See also [this article](#) in *The Brussels Times*. The figure from 2019 increased again, see [this article](#) (in Dutch).

⁴ For the Flemish article, click [here](#).

⁵ Kalthoff, H. 2018. *Opgroeien en Opvoeden in Armoede (Growing up and raising in Poverty)*. Utrecht. Online publication [here](#). Also see Mood, C. & Jonsson, J.O. 2016. The social consequences of poverty: an empirical test on longitudinal data. *Social Indicators Research* 127, 633-652.

⁶ Vandenbroucke, F. & Vinck, J. 2015. Child poverty risks in Belgium, Wallonia and Flanders: accounting for a worrying performance. *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Sociale Zekerheid*, 51. Online article can be read [here](#).

2. Ancient Greeks – Young Heroes

a. What is it?⁷

- ‘Ancient Greeks – Young Heroes’ (*Oude Grieken – Jonge Helden* in Dutch) is a UGent-based project in which Year 5 and 6 pupils (ages 10-12) receive 10 hours of Ancient Greek instruction per year, taught by UGent students starting their teacher training. The project started in 2018-2019 and was taught this school year as well; however, the course was cut short due to the SARS-CoV-2 lockdown.
- Currently, two schools in the province of East-Flanders are taking part, with respectively 67% and 50+% child poverty in classes. In 2018-19, 49 pupils took part; in 2019-20, 60.
- We have also provided teacher training: one primary school has started using the materials on our website (www.oudegriekenjongehelden.ugent.be) to teach Greek to Year 5-6, and two secondary schools are offering Greek to *all* of their first-year secondary school pupils who don’t do Latin (also B-stream, see below).

b. Why Greek?

- To create equal opportunities (‘widening participation’) and pupil support :
 - At secondary school level, Flemish education is separated into A-stream (general education) and B-stream (more technical education). Only pupils from the A-stream can study Latin, and within that group, primarily pupils with strong linguistic skills are encouraged to do Latin (though this perception is changing *slowly*). Only after having studied one year of Latin is it possible to study Greek. Access to Greek among secondary school pupils is much lower than to Latin.
 - Pupils with an ethnic minority background are encouraged less to study Latin.⁸ Hence, their access to Greek is even more impaired.
 - At primary school, no distinction between A- and B-stream yet exists. By offering Greek at this level, all pupils are given the same opportunity.
 - In the school that taught Greek to their B-stream pupils, these pupils reported that they can ‘finally *also* learn something difficult’. The notion of ‘raising aspirations’ is clearly of key importance.



⁷ Between 2011 and 2017, I coordinated the [Literacy through Classics](#) project at Swansea University in the UK. Without this experience I would have never been able to set up *Young Heroes* so quickly in Belgium, nor avoided at least some of its pitfalls. I would therefore like to thank Lorna Robinson of [The Iris Project](#), as well as colleagues at Swansea, for their support of *Literacy through Classics*. I would also like to thank my colleagues at UGent for their support of this new project.

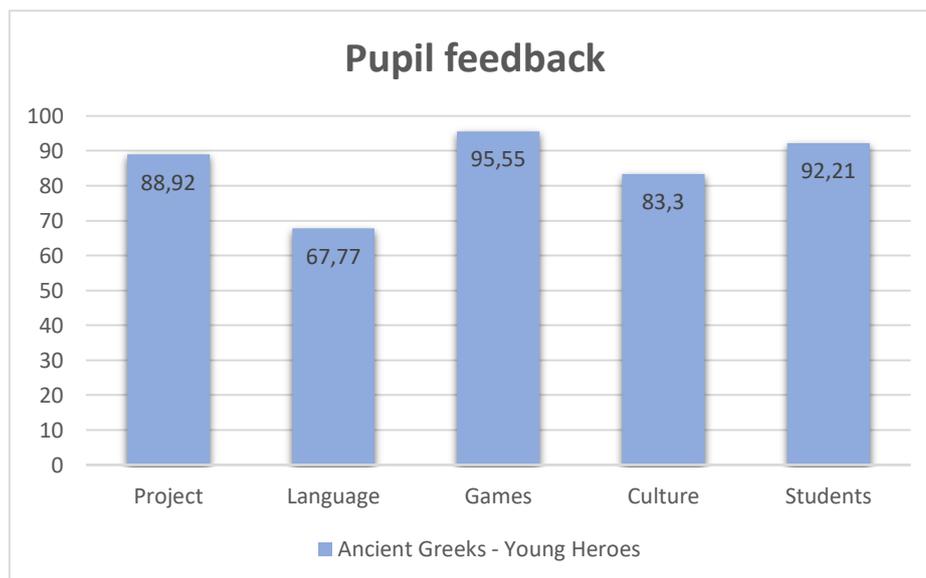
⁸ Goosen, K., Boone, S., Dehertogh, B., Kavadias, D., Mahieu, P., Van Avermaet, P., Van Kerckhove, C. 2017. *Is dat iets voor mij juf? Leerlingen versterken in het keuzeproces van basis naar secundair (Supporting pupils in their option choices moving from primary secondary school)*. Leuven, 112-116.

- To support integration:
 - Integration is a major issue in Belgium, and in recent years schools are being divided into what are informally called ‘white’ and ‘black’ schools, with the latter also labelled ‘concentration schools’ (yes, you read that right).⁹ Pupils attending the latter tend to score lower on the international PISA-test.¹⁰
 - For most pupils taking part in our project, Dutch is their second or third language. Home languages vary hugely, from Turkish to Berber, Armenian, Russian, Kurdish, Arabic, or Filipino. Some children already have French as second language.
 - Whether or not pupils should be allowed to use their home languages at school is still controversial, with one of the most influential politicians in Flanders, Bart De Wever, calling it an ‘absurd idea’.¹¹ The reality varies hugely from school to school.
 - By offering Greek at so-called concentration schools, we increase participation. While our classes focus on Greek through Dutch, home languages are constructively integrated and explored too.

c. Feedback

Quantitative pupil feedback is very positive and highlights:

- The important role of students as role models.¹²
- The positive overall impact of the project in spite of a lower score on language (though in the qualitative feedback, the language is mentioned often and positively).

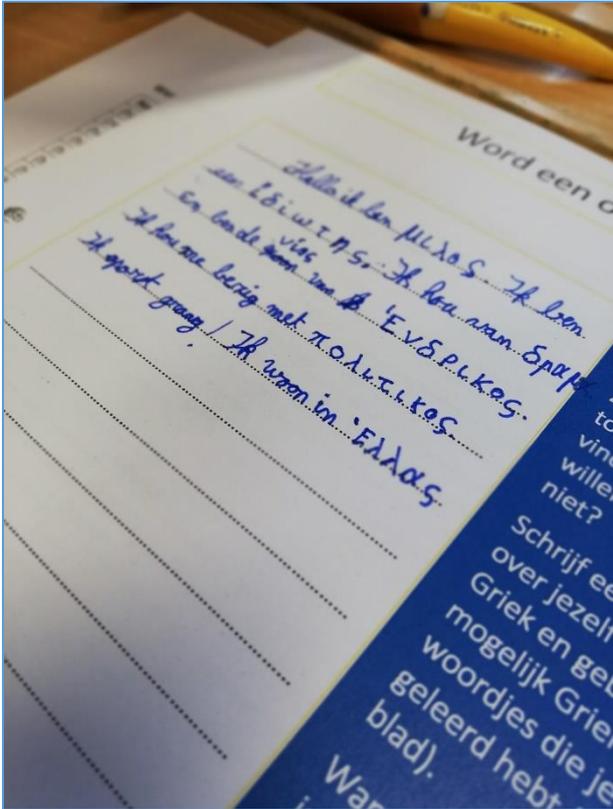


⁹ [Here](#) is a Dutch-language article about the subsidized apartheid of the black-white schools concept.

¹⁰ Franck, E. & Nicaise, I. 2018. *Ongelijkheden in het Vlaamse Onderwijssysteem: verbetering in zicht? Een vergelijking tussen PISA 2003 en 2015*. Leuven & Gent.

¹¹ See [this article](#).

¹² See Bracke, E. 2016. The role of university student teachers in increasing Widening Participation to Classics. *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 18.2, 111-129.



Qualitative feedback confirms the quantitative analysis:

- pupils use terms such as 'fun' and 'enjoyable' to speak about lessons, and although the last class was considered the most enjoyable (by 42% of students, they participated in a banquet), the second most frequently given answer to the question 'which lesson did you like the most' was 'all of them' (30% of the students).
 - Qualitative feedback evaluates the Greek language more positively than the quantitative response suggests: pupils speak of the enjoyment of 'reading Greek words' and 'the song [about the] Greek alphabet' that was 'super fun'.
 - Feedback also emphasizes the success of our goal to raise pupils' intellectual aspirations, as pupils reported at the end of the course: 'we already know something' and 'repetition was fun'.
- Feedback from student-teachers confirms this development in the pupils' linguistic self-confidence:
 - o 'what I will remember most is that the most positive reactions came from pupils whose linguistic skills were supposedly the weakest. Pupil A, who is only in Belgium for the second year, wrote more lines than anyone for one particular exercise. Pupil B, whose teacher said after the first lesson that the Greek alphabet would be too difficult for her, started raising her hand during class discussions in the last lessons.'
 - o 'I thought they would find Greek very difficult, but actually it went really well. At first the children were a bit insecure, but gradually they started practicing their own name in Greek. They were always very proud of their assignment sheets. The assignment whereby the children were allowed to link Greek words related to the family with other languages was a real success. The children who speak a different language at home enjoyed explaining this language to their classmates and linking it to Greek and modern languages.'
 - The impact of the project went beyond the classroom, since pupil feedback mentions that they talk to their family and friends about the classes. Moreover, students who teach the classes were also impacted in their view on inclusivity and classics pedagogy.

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