CHAPTER 8

CORRELATES OF PUPILS' SENSE OF FUTILITY IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN FLANDERS

The Role of the Teacher

Mieke Van Houtte, Dimitri Van Maele, and Orhan Agirdag

ABSTRACT

Pupils' sense of futility with respect to school is an important predictor of lower achievement, lower study involvement, and school misconduct. Feelings of futility regarding school are particularly prevalent among pupils from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. The present study examines which school and pupil features are associated with pupils' sense of futility. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the role teachers might play in either enhancing or buffering these feelings of futility, especially in low SES pupils, by taking into account the effect of faculty trust and pupils' perceived teacher support. By means of multilevel analysis of data collected during the 2008-2009 school year from 2,845 pupils and 706 teachers across a sample of 68 primary schools in Flanders (Belgium), this study confirms that higher feelings of futility associate with pupils' low SES background, low ability, and low perceived parental support. These associations...
result in higher levels of sense of futility in low SES and low ability schools. The findings also indicate the crucial role teachers might play. Although neither faculty trust nor perceived teacher support seem able to buffer the development of feelings of futility in low SES and low ability pupils, having trusting and supportive teachers lowers the risk of strong feelings of futility. An important policy implication of this study is therefore that it might be rewarding to improve faculty trust in pupils in order to fight pupils' feelings of futility. Other strategies are, however, advisable in order to buffer the higher feelings of futility in low SES pupils in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Although the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a massive influx of pupils in secondary and higher education (Hage, Garnier, & Fuller, 1988), this did not involve the hoped-for democratization of education (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Even today, the social background of pupils remains a large determinant of educational performance and attainment (Groenez, 2010). In explanations for this educational social inequality. It is said that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are not directly encouraged to achieve, because the parents' educational involvement is low (Cox, 1983; Lareau, 1989) or because the parents had negative experiences in school themselves (Eid, 1993; Lucey & Walkerline, 2000). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) put forward that the educational under-achievement of working class pupils is (partly) linked to their class habitus, more specifically, negative dispositions toward schooling and expectations of school failure. These dispositions have an effect because they mentally limit pupils' possibilities to those that are considered feasible for the social group to which pupils belong. For instance, working class pupils are incited to consider educational success as "not for people like us." Importantly, the former should not be understood as a deficit theory. Middle-class pupils do not have intrinsically better dispositions than working class pupils, but working class pupils are inclined to consider educational success as not feasible for "people like them" because the standards and the demands of the educational system or field are primarily oriented toward the habitus of the (higher) middle-class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Recent research pointed out that feelings of futility with respect to school, which are more prevalent in pupils with less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and which can be seen as specific group based dispositions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), are associated with lower achievement (Agirdag, Van Houtte & Van Avermaet, in press), school misconduct (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2008; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011), and lower study involvement (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010). Moreover, it is shown that this sense of futility is shared by pupils attending the same school, giving rise to cultures of futility in certain schools, for example in schools with a lower socioeconomic context (Agirdag et al., in press).

In order to overcome these feelings of futility, it is important to know which school and pupil features associate with a pupil's sense of futility, and more specifically which role teachers might play in buffering or enhancing these feelings of futility in pupils with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Since sense of futility refers to group based feelings (people like me) of having no control over educational success and feelings that the school system is working against "students like me" (Brookover et al., 1975, 1978, 1979), it might be expected that teachers' trust in pupils or pupils' perceptions of being supported by teachers can overcome these feelings of futility. On the other hand, teachers' failure to trust pupils or pupils' perceptions of not being supported by teachers might enhance these feelings of futility.

Sense of Futility and its Consequences and Determinants

The concept of sense of futility was launched by Brookover and Schneider (1975) as an aspect of school climate. Brookover and colleagues (1975, 1978, 1979) attempted to identify factors that might explain the differences in level of achievement among schools. Starting from the classic research of Coleman and colleagues (1966) on school effects and from McDill, Meyers, and Rigsby's (1967) research on school climate, they asked what, if any, difference in school-level achievement could derive from cultural or normative social-psychological variables—that is, school climate (Brookover et al., 1978). As such, they generated four pupil factors representing climate variables, among them is pupil-reported sense of futility (Brookover & Schneider, 1975). The most important items of this factor encompass a similar dimension as Coleman's (Coleman et al., 1966) sense of control variable, but explicitly address the school. Accordingly, the sense of futility measure reflects the pupils' feelings about the possibility of functioning adequately in the school system. A high sense of futility indicates a feeling of having no control over success or failure in the school system (Brookover & Schneider, 1975; Brookover et al., 1978, 1979). Academic futility reflects a high degree of hopelessness in the school situation. High futility means that pupils experience strong feelings that the school system is working against them and that they have to be lucky to succeed (Miller, 1980).

It should be noted that the concept of sense of futility is distinct from the social-psychological concepts of self-esteem and educational aspirations. To illustrate this, compare a typical item from the sense of futility scale (Brookover et al., 1978): "It is no use trying to do well in school, because my parents have little interest in school and would not support me if I did well."
measurement “People like me will never do well in school even though we try hard” with an item from the widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem questionnaire “In general, I am content with myself,” (see Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). The most important difference is that while sense of futility refers to group based beliefs, that is “students like me,” whereas, the self-esteem measurement refers only to the individual, as in “I am ... ” As such, the sense of futility is a more appropriate way to conceptualize group based dispositions as described in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Moreover, variables such as self-esteem and educational aspirations are unable to account for the negative effects of schools with a higher concentration of ethnic and working-class pupils, as there is firm empirical evidence that in such schools pupils’ self-esteem and educational aspirations are even higher than in schools with a higher share of ethnic majority and middle-class pupils (Frost, 2007; Gray-Little & Haffdah, 2000; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2004).

As said, Brookover and colleagues (1975, 1978, 1979) put forward the concept of sense of futility as an aspect of school climate. Their research concentrated on the elementary school, and they did not consider sense of futility as an individual pupil feature, although they measured this climate variable by calculating the mean of pupils’ sense of futility. As a consequence, little or no research focused on pupils’ sense of futility as an individual pupil feature, so little is known about the determinants and consequences of pupils’ sense of futility.

As for the consequences, recent research has shown that in secondary education, pupils with stronger feelings of futility were more likely to misbehave in school. Moreover, pupils’ sense of futility explains the higher prevalence of school misconduct in technical/vocational schools compared to academic schools (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2008), and in ethnically mixed schools compared to ethnic concentration schools (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011). Similarly, pupils with a higher sense of futility are less academically involved, although this alone cannot explain the lower prevalence of academic involvement in technical/vocational schools (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010). It has been demonstrated that this sense of futility is shared by pupils attending the same school, giving rise to cultures of futility in technical/vocational schools. These cultures of futility in turn explain why pupils in these schools in general display lower levels of academic involvement (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010). For primary education, it has been shown that native as well as immigrant pupils’ math achievement is associated with sense of futility. This sense of futility is shared by pupils attending the same school, giving rise to cultures of futility in schools with higher proportions of working class pupils, which explains the lower math scores in these schools (Agirdag et al., in press).

As for the determinants of sense of futility, a multilevel analysis in secondary education revealed higher levels of sense of futility in technical/vocational schools compared to academic schools and lower levels in schools with a higher proportion of immigrant pupils—due to native students having less sense of futility in schools with higher proportions of immigrant students (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010). Furthermore, higher levels of sense of futility were found for boys in comparison with girls, for younger pupils, for lower SES pupils, for lower achieving pupils and for pupils who reported lower parental involvement, with parental involvement as the strongest predictor of sense of futility (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010). Apparently, feelings of futility with respect to school are more prevalent in pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, the demonstrated impact of parental involvement might indicate the importance of support by adults with respect to sense of futility, and prompts the question: “What role might teachers play in buffering or enhancing feelings of futility in pupils?”

**Teachers and Sense of Futility**

Research into pupil-teacher relations and interactions has shown that these are not independent from demographic features of both teachers and pupils, and that attributes of pupils (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age) and of teachers (gender, ethnicity, age) correlate (1) with differences in teachers’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Simpson & Erickson, 1985), (2) with the teachers’ perceptions of the pupils’ problem behavior (Borg, 1998; Kokkins, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005), and (3) with the teachers’ perceptions of their relationships with pupils (Saft & Pianta, 2001). It is well documented that pupils’ SES determines in great measure the expectations of teachers (Adams & Cohen, 1976; Baron, Tom, & Cooper, 1985; Cox, 1983; Harvey & Slatin, 1975; Rist, 1970; Solomon, Battistich, & Hom, 1996; Van Maaren, Valente, & Cooper, 2000). Teachers believe that higher SES pupils achieve better, are more talented, and work harder than pupils with a lower SES background (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). Bourdieu (1966) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) stated that teachers insufficiently take into account the existing differences among lower and higher SES pupils, as such perpetuating lower SES pupils’ cultural deprivation. In the same vein, Bowles and Gintis (1976) contended that, since working-class kids are expected to become workers themselves, teachers prepare them for this future by stressing discipline and obedience. Research does in fact demonstrate that schools with a lower SES context pay more attention to control and discipline (Metz, 1993; Solomon, Battistich, & Hom, 1996; Thrupp, 1999; Walker,
Moreover, the cultural differences arising from differences in SES seem hard to overcome in establishing relations of trust, as is shown by Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001), Goddard, Salloum, and Berebitsky (2009), and Van Maele and Van Houtte (2009, 2011). These scholars find that teachers’ trust in pupils is systematically associated with pupils’ socioeconomic status: the larger the proportion of lower SES pupils in the school, the lower the teachers’ trust.

In organizational studies, “confidence that expectations will be met” is in essence how trust is approached (Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998). One of the causes of a lack of trust is the belief that others are not competent enough to do what is required (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Govier, 1992; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Ability or competence is generally viewed as an aspect of trust relations, requiring the consideration of trust as domain and context specific (see Rousseau et al., 1998; Schoorman, Mayer & Davis, 2007). This provides an argument for exploring trust in the specific setting of the school organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). In this light, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) developed an empirical measure for teachers’ trust in other school members. They assessed five sources of teachers’ perceptions of the other school members’ trustworthiness: benevolence, reliability, openness, honesty, and competence. Moreover, trust may not only be considered as an individual teacher feeling but also as a collective feeling among the teachers of a same school, namely, faculty trust (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011; Goddard et al., 2001; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Smith, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2001; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). Within organizations, trust is likely to become a collective phenomenon at the group level due to social information processes (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Shamir & Lapidot, 2003). These operate by structuring a person’s attention processes, resulting in particular aspects of the organizational environment to become more or less salient. When teaching colleagues frequently discuss the learning motivation of the students, individual teachers will be cued to consider students’ motivation. Besides, social influence occurs because the direct or indirect communication of other group members often provides constructed meanings which include evaluations of objects or events. Group members therefore affect each other’s attitudes and beliefs which may become shared at a certain point (Shamir & Lapidot, 2003; Van Houtte, 2004, 2011). When the teaching colleagues not only talk about students’ motivation but also raise issues regarding a lack of learning motivation among the students, a shared interpretation among the teachers may arise about the lack of student motivation present in school. So, due to these social information processes, group members may develop shared interpretations of their environment, such as interpretations about another group’s trustworthiness (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Shamir & Lapidot, 2003). Collective trust is therefore a social construction which emerges out of repeated exchanges among group members (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011). Through verbal and nonverbal interactions, teachers not only share individual expectations for the behaviors by members of another role group, they also share their opinions about how the observed behaviors of the members of another role group align with their expected behaviors. This process will eventually result in a consensus among the teachers about another role group’s trustworthiness, which is described as faculty trust (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011). As such, the educational trust literature indicates that faculty trust in students is fostered in high-SES schools (Goddard et al., 2001, 2009; Smith & Sweetland, 2001; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). In low-SES schools both the student and teacher culture are less academic than in more elite schools. This downplays teachers’ perceptions that their students and colleagues will live up to the expectations, hampering their trustworthiness perceptions in socioeconomic disadvantaged schools.

Obviously, pupils notice whether they are trusted or not and pupils who experience trust from their teachers will be less likely to divert energy into self-protection (Ennis & McGauley, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004), and will more easily engage in supportive relationships with teachers, which in turn expands the level of social capital which pupils can count on in their educational environment (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As such, teachers’ trust is a form of teacher-based social capital available to pupils (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Smyth, 2004) that indicates the presence of a supportive educational pupil environment. As sense of futility refers to feelings that the school system is working against ‘students like me’ (Brookover et al., 1975, 1978, 1979), it is conceivable that teachers’ failure to trust certain groups of pupils, or these pupils’ perceptions of not being supported by teachers, might enhance their feelings of futility. On the other hand, teachers’ trust in these pupils or these pupils’ perceptions of being supported by teachers may overcome these feelings of futility.

After having confirmed that sense of futility is more prevalent in pupils with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the main objective of this study is to examine whether and how faculty trust in pupils is related to the pupils’ sense of futility, and whether faculty trust mediates the relation between socioeconomic status and sense of futility. Next, we examine whether and how the pupils’ perceived teacher support is related to their sense of futility, and whether this perception mediates the relation between socioeconomic status and sense of futility.
between socioeconomic status and futility. Given that we are dealing with a clustered sample of pupils nested within schools and with data at different levels (pupil-level and school-level), the use of hierarchical linear modeling (multilevel modeling) is most appropriate (SAS PROC MIXED, Singer, 1998).

As is common in multilevel analysis, we first estimated an unconditional model to determine the proportion of the variance in sense of futility situated between schools. We proceeded stepwise, by adding compositional and structural school features at the school level (Model 1), and grade, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, migrant background and parental support at the pupil level (Model 2) to examine which of these associate with sense of futility, paying attention to socioeconomic background in particular. In Model 3, we entered faculty trust in pupils, and in a final model we entered the pupils' perceived teacher support. Next to the associations between respectively faculty trust and perceived teacher support and sense of futility, it is important to examine whether either of these two variables mediates the relation between pupil's socioeconomic status and sense of futility. If the relation between SES and sense of futility vanishes when taking into control trust or support, this means that a lack of trust in or support of low SES pupils might be responsible for their higher levels of sense of futility. If, on the other hand, faculty trust or perceived teacher support appears to suppress a relation between pupil's socioeconomic status and sense of futility, this might indicate that trusting and supporting teachers manage to buffer a negative effect of low socioeconomic status.

**DATA**

We use data gathered as part of the Segregation in Primary Education in Flanders (SIPEF) project. This data was collected during the academic year 2008–2009 from 2,845 pupils and 706 teachers in a sample of 68 primary schools in Flanders. Multistage sampling was conducted. In the first instance, in order to encompass the entire range of ethnic composition, we selected three cities in Flanders that had relatively ethnically diverse populations. Second, using data gathered from the Flemish Educational Department, we chose 116 primary schools within these selected cities and asked them to participate: 54% of them agreed to. Because the nonresponse rate was not related to the ethnic composition of schools, the schools in the dataset represent the entire range of ethnic composition, from those with almost no nonnative pupils to some composed entirely of nonnatives. In schools that agreed to participate, our research team surveyed all the fifth grade pupils present during our visit. Additionally, all teachers in these schools were asked to fill in a questionnaire. If there were fewer than 30 fifth grade pupils present, we surveyed all the sixth grade pupils as well.

The pupils' questionnaire consisted of two parts and lasted 2 hours. In the first hour, we gathered information on the background variables and noncognitive variables (e.g., parental support, sense of futility, etc....). In the second hour, an academic achievement test was conducted. We focused on math achievement, because a large proportion of the respondents are not native speakers of Dutch and math tests are less linguistically biased than more linguistically challenging subjects such as reading (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004). To assure that the questions were curriculum-based, the school principals were asked to approve the test. Two schools were removed from the analysis because these schools could not confirm that the test was curriculum-based. This reduced the number of schools in our data set to 66 and the number of pupils to 2,787.

Although the focus of this data gathering was on ethnic segregation and ethnic school composition, the present study does not deal with ethnic composition, but considers the SES-context of the school instead, as this was previously related to sense of futility. Given the massive correlation between ethnic and SES composition of the school ($r = 0.89$), both cannot be considered together in the same analysis due to multicollinearity problems. At the individual pupil level, we do take into account migrant background.

**VARIABLES**

**Individual Pupil-Level Variables**

**Sense of Futility**

Pupils' feelings of academic futility were measured using the sense of futility scale (Brookover et al., 1978). The four items were: “People like me will not have much of a chance to do what we want to in life,” “People like me will never do well in school, even though we try hard,” “At school, students like me seem to be unlucky,” and “Achievement at school is just a matter of luck.” Each item had five possible responses ranging from absolutely disagree (scored 1) to completely agree (scored 5). While this scale yielded a relatively low Cronbach's alpha (0.62), an exploratory factor analysis revealed that there was one underlying dimension for this scale, explaining 47.46% of the variance. In our data pupils scored 1.99 on average ($SD = 0.70$; Table 1).
Grade
Our research concentrated on fifth and sixth grade pupils. Therefore, in 2009, most of the respondents were aged 11 (about 49%) or 12 (about 36%). Given the high correlation between age and grade (Cramer's $V = 0.64; p < 0.001$), we had to choose one of these two variables for the model. Because the sample was unbalanced in terms of grade, we opted for the grade (Table 8.1).

Gender
The pupils' sample was divided equally with respect to gender, with about 51% female respondents (boy = 0, girl = 1; Table 8.1).

SES
We measured the family SES of the pupils by assessing the occupational prestige of the father and mother (Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Portocarero, 1979). The highest prestige occupation of the parents was used as an indicator for the SES of the family. The pupils have a mean SES of 4.19 ($SD = 2.37$) (Table 8.1).

Ability
To grasp the pupils' ability, we considered their math achievement, measured using a test developed by Dudal and Deloof (2004), which is based on standardized educational attainment levels for Flemish students in the fifth grade of their primary education. The test consists of 60 items, covering elementary arithmetic, problem solving, fractions, decimals and long division. The test yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. In our data pupils achieved on average $41.43$ ($SD = 10.65$), in a theoretical range from 0 to 60 (Table 8.1).

Migrant Background
Regarding pupils' migrant background, we distinguished between native Belgians and migrants, or nonnatives. In line with the official Flemish definition of nonnative groups (in Dutch: “allochtonen”), the principal criterion was the birthplace of pupils' grandparents. If these data were missing, we used parents' birthplaces instead, as most nonnative pupils in Flanders are second- or third-generation immigrants. As is common practice, and in line with the official Flemish definition of nonnative groups, students of Western European origins were considered to be of native descent. As such, we created a dichotomous variable (0 = native, 1 = nonnative). Table 8.1 shows that 49% of our respondents are categorized as nonnatives.

Parental Support
The pupils' perceived parental support was measured using a 7-item scale with 5 answer categories, ranging from absolutely do not agree (scored 1) to completely agree (scored 5) (Brutsaert, 2001). Two sample items were: “My parents accept me as I am” and “I have the feeling that my parents are caring little about me” (reversed). This scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73. In our data, pupils scored 4.49 on average ($SD = 0.56$; Table 8.1).

Teacher Support
Teacher support was measured by a scale consisting of 10 items, inspired by Brutsaert (2001) and Goodenow (1993), with five possible answers ranging from absolutely disagree (Score 1) to totally agree (Score 5). A multilevel confirmatory factor analysis revealed satisfactory fit for a one factor model. (Root Mean Square Error Of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.028; Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.032; Cronbach's alpha = 0.847). In our analysis we used the mean score, which ranged from 1.10 to 5.0. Mean score for pupils' sample was 4.02 ($SD = 0.65$; Table 8.1).

School-Level Variables

SES Composition
The socioeconomic composition of the school was measured conventionally by calculating the mean socioeconomic status of the pupils at the school; namely, the mean SES of the pupils' parents. The schools considered here had a mean SES context of 3.93 ($SD = 1.49$; see Table 8.1).

Ability Composition
The ability composition of a school was measured by calculating the mean math achievement of the pupils (see above). The schools considered here had a mean ability composition of 41.01 ($SD = 5.83$; see Table 8.1).

School Denomination
The school denomination variable was split between 34 publicly run schools and 32 privately run Catholic schools. This reflects the educational situation in Flanders where around half of the schools are Catholic schools. It should be noted that in the Flemish educational system no distinction is made between publicly run schools and privately run (Catholic) schools with respect to state support.

School Size
We determined school size from the total number of pupils, using data gathered from the Flemish Educational Department. The number of
pupils varied from 91 in the smallest school to 526 in the largest. The schools had an average of 225 pupils (SD=104.53; Table 8.1).

**Faculty Trust**

Teachers' individual trust in pupils was measured with 10 items derived from the trust scales developed by Hoy & Tschannen-Moran (1999), including items such as "I have to closely supervise the pupils," and "The pupils cheat if they have the chance." A scale for trust in pupils was obtained by calculating the mean score across these 10 items, leading to a possible minimum score of 1 and a possible maximum score of 5. Cronbach's alpha for this scale (N = 706; mean = 3.51; SD = 0.43) is 0.80. To assess the faculty trust in pupils, the aggregation of this trust scale is a necessary next step. A customary aggregation strategy is the calculation of the mean score of individual members of the group (e.g., Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sander, 1990). Yet, one has to be sure that aggregation is justified in terms of individual responses being shared at the group level. To determine this, we opted for an index of mean rater reliability based on the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) from a one-way analysis of variance: ICC \((1, k) = \frac{\text{between mean square} - \text{within mean square}}{\text{between mean square} (\text{within mean square}) / \text{with } k = \text{number of raters in each group} \text{ (Glick, }1985\text{). The ICC must be at minimum 0.60 to permit aggregation to the group level (Glick, }1985\text{). We found that speaking of faculty trust is legitimate (ICC = 0.80). The means for teacher trust in pupils differed significantly from school to school \((p < 0.001)\), indicating that between schools faculty trust varied in its magnitude.

**RESULTS**

The unconditional multilevel analysis revealed that 7% of the variance in sense of futility is situated between schools \((r^2/\sigma^2 = 0.616, r = 0.0469, p < 0.001)\). The negative significant associations between respectively SES context \((p^* = -0.098, p < 0.01)\) and ability composition \((p^* = -0.192, p < 0.01)\); see Model 1) disappeared when taking into account the individual pupil features SES and ability (Model 2): the compositional effects were clearly due to selection. The pupil composition of the school did not affect the pupils' sense of futility over and above the effect of the pupil's individual SES \((p^* = -0.117, p < 0.001)\) and of the pupil's ability \((p^* = -0.299, p < 0.001)\). These results did confirm that lower SES pupils tended to display higher levels of sense of futility, irrespective of their cognitive ability, which was associated with sense of futility as well. Moreover, pupils perceiving more parental support displayed a lower sense of futility \((p^* = -0.219, p < 0.001)\), as did pupils enrolled in sixth grade as compared to pupils enrolled in fifth grade \((p^* = -0.046, p < 0.05)\). Pupil's ability proved to be the most important determinant of sense of futility. Adding faculty trust did not alter this picture (Model 3): faculty trust was negatively associated with sense of futility \((p^* = -0.097, p < 0.01)\), meaning that in schools where teachers in general trust their pupils, pupils were less likely to develop feelings of futility. However, the respective associations between ability and SES and sense of futility did not change when taking into account faculty trust. The pupil's perceived teacher support was associated with sense of futility as well (Model 4: \(p^* = -0.189, p < 0.001)\); the more supported pupils felt by teachers, the less likely they were to have feelings of futility. Adding perceived teacher support did not change the respective associations between pupil's ability and SES and sense of futility. As these associations remained stable when taking into account faculty trust and perceived teacher support, it could be concluded that a lack of teacher support or teacher trust could not be taken responsible for the higher sense of futility in low SES pupils and low ability pupils. But on the other hand, it also

**Table 8.1. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables: Frequencies (%), Means and Standard Deviations (SD)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of futility</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>1.990</td>
<td>0.699</td>
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<td>Grade (1 = sixth)</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>SES</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>4.185</td>
<td>2.366</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = girl)</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>2,754</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.845</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.485</td>
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<td>Parental support</td>
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<td>0.653</td>
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<td>6.71</td>
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<td>SES context</td>
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<td>0.513</td>
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<td>Ability composition</td>
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<td>School sector</td>
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<td>526</td>
<td>225.458</td>
<td>104.328</td>
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<td>Faculty Trust</td>
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<td>2.75</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>3.513</td>
<td>0.290</td>
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Table 8.2. The Correlates of Sense of Futility: Results of Stepwise Multilevel Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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<tr>
<td>SES context</td>
<td>-0.053 (0.019)</td>
<td>-0.019 (0.022)</td>
<td>0.021 (0.027)</td>
<td>0.020 (0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.098**</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.024 (0.003)</td>
<td>0.001 (0.005)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.003)</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.192***</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School sector (1 = private)</td>
<td>0.088 (0.041)</td>
<td>0.056 (0.039)</td>
<td>0.049 (0.039)</td>
<td>0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>0.035*</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School size y (SE)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Trust y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.266 (0.100)</td>
<td>-0.247 (0.095)</td>
<td>-0.227 (0.090)</td>
<td>-0.211 (0.084)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.097**</td>
<td>-0.097**</td>
<td>-0.097**</td>
<td>-0.097**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil level</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade (1 = 6th) y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.081 (0.041)</td>
<td>-0.084 (0.042)</td>
<td>-0.085 (0.041)</td>
<td>-0.086 (0.041)</td>
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<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.046*</td>
<td>-0.048*</td>
<td>-0.048*</td>
<td>-0.048*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = girl) y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.031 (0.032)</td>
<td>-0.027 (0.032)</td>
<td>-0.027 (0.032)</td>
<td>-0.027 (0.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.040 (0.008)</td>
<td>-0.039 (0.008)</td>
<td>-0.039 (0.008)</td>
<td>-0.039 (0.008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.117***</td>
<td>-0.115***</td>
<td>-0.115***</td>
<td>-0.115***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.023 (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.023 (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.023 (0.002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.299***</td>
<td>-0.298***</td>
<td>-0.298***</td>
<td>-0.298***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant background y (SE)</td>
<td>0.043 (0.041)</td>
<td>0.052 (0.041)</td>
<td>0.052 (0.041)</td>
<td>0.052 (0.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.319 (0.026)</td>
<td>-0.321 (0.026)</td>
<td>-0.321 (0.026)</td>
<td>-0.321 (0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.219***</td>
<td>-0.220***</td>
<td>-0.220***</td>
<td>-0.220***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support y (SE)</td>
<td>-0.016 (0.010)</td>
<td>-0.016 (0.010)</td>
<td>-0.016 (0.010)</td>
<td>-0.016 (0.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y*</td>
<td>-0.256 (0.023)</td>
<td>-0.256 (0.023)</td>
<td>-0.256 (0.023)</td>
<td>-0.256 (0.023)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variance components

| Grade (1 = 6th) µ (SE) | 0.017 (0.012) | 0.020 (0.005) | 0.016 (0.012) | 0.016 (0.012) |
| Gender (1 = girl) µ (SE) | 0.014 (0.009) | 0.014 (0.009) | 0.014 (0.009) | 0.014 (0.009) |
| SES µ (SE) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) |
| Ability µ (SE) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |

Note: Table 8.2 continues on next page.

Indicated that a higher level of teacher trust or support was not able to buffer the associations between ability and SES and sense of futility. Perceived teacher support did not mediate the relation between faculty trust and pupils’ sense of futility either, indicating that in a school where teachers in general trust the pupils, pupils were likely to have a lower sense of futility irrespective of whether they personally felt supported by the teachers or not.

DISCUSSION

As previous research demonstrated that pupils' sense of futility with respect to school is an important determinant of lower achievement (Agirdag et al., in press), school misconduct (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2008; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011), and lower study involvement (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010), and is, furthermore, more prevalent in pupils with more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, the present study set as its objective to examine which role teachers might play in either enhancing or buffering these feelings of futility, especially in low SES pupils. Given that sense of futility refers to feelings that the school system is working against “students like me” (Brookover et al., 1975, 1978, 1979), it is possible that teachers' failure to trust low SES pupils, or these pupils' perceptions of not being supported by teachers, might increase their feelings of futility. On the other hand, teachers' trust in low SES pupils or low SES pupils' perceptions of being supported by teachers might overcome feelings of futility.

By means of multilevel analysis, this study has confirmed the higher levels of sense of futility in pupils with more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. But it should be noted that sense of futility is even more associated with pupils' ability and perceived parental support: low ability pupils and pupils experiencing little parental support are more likely to develop feelings of futility. The stronger feelings of futility in low SES and low ability pupils results in higher levels of sense of futility in low SES pupils.
The present study demonstrated that a lack of teacher trust or perceived teacher support by pupils is not responsible for the higher levels of sense of futility in low SES and low ability pupils. But, at the same time, faculty trust appears to be the only school feature related to sense of futility, which is an important finding regarding the central aim of this study. In schools where teachers in general trust their pupils, pupils are more likely to display lower levels of sense of futility, irrespective of whether they feel personally supported by teachers. This perceived teacher support is in itself associated with sense of futility as well. Although not strong, the association between faculty trust and sense of futility is remarkable as faculty trust appears to be the only school feature related to sense of futility, even when taking into account compositional features as SES context and ability context. This finding shows the crucial role teachers might play with respect to sense of futility: having trusting and supportive teachers lowers the risk of strong feelings of futility. Nevertheless, neither faculty trust nor perceived teacher support seem able to buffer the development of feelings of futility in low SES and low ability pupils.

Given these findings, this study first of all contributes to the knowledge of pupils' sense of futility. Interest in the concept of sense of futility is a very recent development. But as this concept has proved to be fruitful in explaining pupils' school performance (Agirdag et al., 2012), school misconduct (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2008; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011) and academic involvement (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010), knowledge of its determinants seems pivotal. Important to overcome feelings of futility is the finding that sense of futility is associated with faculty trust in pupils.

Moreover, this study contributes to the knowledge of consequences of faculty trust. Whereas previous research stated the relation between faculty trust in pupils and math and reading achievement (Goddard et al., 2001, 2009; Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006), and between faculty trust and pupils' sense of belonging (Van Houtte & Van Maele, in press), research on consequences of faculty trust, and especially pertaining to noncognitive outcomes, is scarce. Not only does the present study add to the knowledge by demonstrating that pupils' sense of futility is equally related to faculty trust, it also demonstrates that in this respect faculty trust and pupils' perceptions of teacher support cannot be seen as two sides of the same coin. As they are independently related to sense of futility, they are clearly measuring something different (Van Houtte & Van Maele, in press). Researchers often disregard the problems associated with perceptual measurement. Individual perceptions are not necessarily accurate, for one, and individuals experiencing the same situation are not necessarily likely to give a similar description of the situation (Jones & James, 1979). In itself, this should not be a problem, because these perceptions can be expected to affect their perceiver, whether they are accurate or not, as stated in the classic theorem "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). But researchers do need to be aware of the fact that perceptions only reflect a specific reality, and that it might be interesting and revealing to consider and relate the perceptions of different actors. As such, it might be enlightening to consider a pupil-reported measures next to a teacher-reported measures and vice versa, and to consider teacher features when dealing with pupils' outcomes (Van Houtte, 2011).

The most important policy implication of this study is the awareness that it might be rewarding to improve the faculty trust in pupils in order to fight feelings of futility in pupils. On the other hand, it needs to be taken in mind that improving the faculty trust might not help to buffer the higher feelings of futility in lower SES pupils. The socioeconomic background of pupils keeps on affecting their sense of futility, irrespective of whether they are trusted by teachers and feel supported by them, or not. This might be an indication of the strength of these socially based dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977). If changing them by means of trust or support seems not feasible, another strategy might be required. Following Bourdieu's writings on reflexivity, which is proposed as a key means for social change (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), reflexive education might probably be helpful. Habitus governs practices in an unreflective and subconscious manner. This means that pupils are not aware that their academic performances are influenced by their individual and shared dispositions, which are in turn formed by socialization conditions (e.g., family SES and school SES). Thus, a reflexive education implies that pupils become aware of these educational processes through schooling. In other words, pupils should be taught about the social determinants of their academic achievement, such as the affects of social class contexts on their dispositions. However, a reflexive education should be encouraging and embrace a nondeterministic approach. This involves teaching that some pupils are in a socially disadvantaged situation, while emphasizing that their efforts can make a difference, that it is possible to beat the system.

REFERENCES


Groeneveld, S. (2010). *Onderwijsexpansie en democratisering in Vlaanderen* [Educational expansion and equality of educational opportunity in Flanders]. In M. Van Houtte & K. De Wit (Eds.), *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie, Speciale editie Sociologische lessen over onderwijs* [Sociological Lessons about Education], 31*(3-4), 199-238.


