



Connecting you(th). Overcoming divisions in society.

FOUNDATION P&V

*emancipation participation
citizenship solidarity*

1. Educational gap

People with higher and lower levels of education often do not meet each other. They do not live in the same neighbourhoods, they do not go to the same sports club or school, they do not meet in the same (digital) spaces and they no longer meet in the church or the army. "Where in the past there used to be a *pillarization* (segregation of society) according to political and religious convictions, educational level is the new *pillarization*," says CBS chief economist [Peter Hein van Mulligen](#)¹. Education is this society's major playmaker. Moreover, within the great inequality between the highly and the less educated, there also seem to be other inequalities, according to ethnic background, according to place of residence, etc. that may have a reinforcing effect.

Not only do people with higher and lower levels of education rarely see each other, they are also concerned about different issues. People with higher levels of education (including young people), for example, are concerned about the environment, (higher) education and health care. People with lower levels of education are particularly concerned about crime, migration and unemployment. "This is not surprising, because current developments such as automation and globalisation are mainly benefiting the higher educated, while the less educated are losing jobs as a result. ", says [Maarten Wolbers](#), professor of educational research at Radboud University (see also [Visscher, 2017](#)).

The observation that in our society there are large differences in life opportunities, opinions and attitudes, perceptions and experiences, ... between people with higher and lower levels of education is not new (see Elchardus, Kavadias et al., 2012; Bovens, Dekker & Tiemeijer, 2014; de Lange, Tolsma & Wolbers, 2015). Some, however, suggest that this gap has deepened or worsened in recent years (ibid.). There is also a growing awareness of the consequences of the educational gap on social cohesion and the possibility of building a society with which everyone can identify.

CBS chief demographer, [Jan Latten](#) paints a gloomy picture of the future with a "(peri)urban area where socially successful people live, with great confidence in each other and in politics. And a periphery with laggards: loners, poorly educated, vulnerable. It is difficult for them to make their way in society".

¹ Some authors dispute this because there is currently no explicit social organisation development along educational levels as in the old ideological or socio-economic pillar (Dekker, Tiemeijer & Bovens, 2016).

According to Latten: "All changes go in that direction. Social and income uncertainty are becoming structural and we are facing automation. I don't see how that tide will be turned."

Referring to children and young people, Putnam also describes two Americas in his latest book *Our Kids* (2015), which are both separated from each other literally and figuratively. [Casper Thomas](#) (2016) comments: "In one America, children grow up in a safe environment of stable families, schools with good teachers and a stimulating social life. In the other America, young people are living on the reverse of this: absent parents, poor schools and free time which must be filled by the parents themselves. Whatever subject Putnam raises, be it poverty, health or the frequency with which people read at home, the boundary between young *haves* and *have nots* coincides exactly with parents' level of education". Highly educated people have children who eventually become just like them. The chance that the children of the less-educated will get out of their 'world' (upward social mobility) is said to have decreased in recent decades. Only the "whizzkids from rich, well-educated families who can afford private schools and the universities' huge tuition fees " still have a chance of succeeding in the US (Bovens, 2016).

Annette Lareau (2003 & 2011) talks about different parenting styles that influence the future lives of children and young people: *concerted cultivation* and *accomplishment of natural growth*. When bringing up their children, middle class parents with higher levels of education put in a great deal of effort in actively developing their children's talents and skills (also in their free time), while lower educated parents allow a natural development and growth for their children who therefore fill in their leisure time without too much interference from adults. Although Lareau says both styles of education have their own positive elements and advantages, the skills acquired through concerted cultivation (such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, interactions with adults, self-confidence, etc.), are more valued in our current society, especially in the field of education and work, which has a lasting impact on children's later life and the gap between people with higher and lower levels of education.

Closer to home, a similar observation is made in the report by Sacco and colleagues (2016) when they raise the strong dualization of the living conditions of Brussels' youth. "There seem to be two types of young people living in Brussels who lead 'parallel' lives and never meet, neither at school nor during leisure time. They do not have the same type of mobility, the same level of education or the same job opportunities" (see also Vansteenkiste, Vandevoort et al., 2018). [Cecile Van de Velde](#) also encounters two groups of young people in her comparative studies: a university-educated, mobile, (digitally) connected group that feels part of the world, and a more invisible, diffuse, less educated group that has been severely affected by the crisis to the depths of their self-confidence. "This rupture happens at a global level. The fringe with higher education feels part of a younger global generation and has the resources to criticise the effect of the crisis on their careers. Young people who drop out display a form of internalisation of failure and individual responsabilisation, which has been highlighted in many studies."

2. Causes and implications of the educational gap?

According to some researchers, the democratisation of education² and the emergence of the knowledge-based society has led to a (further) precarisation of people with low levels of education through the combination of a poor material situation and an increased emphasis on individual responsibility for that situation. As a result, persons with lower levels of education are turning away from society and the dominant culture, which is reflected in a declining confidence in social institutions and politics, a more negative attitude towards immigration, etc. (see Elchardus, Kavadias et al., 2012).

Others showed through country-comparative research that in societies that are further along in their 'modernisation' (in terms of democratisation of education, secularisation, etc.), the highly educated seem to adopt more progressive attitudes³, while the attitudes of persons with lower levels of education are more or less stable in all countries. The observed pattern suggests that the highly-educated distance themselves from people with lower levels of education through their attitudes rather than being specifically resentment or resistance of people with lower levels of education in such societies (Elchardus, Kavadias et al., 2012).⁴

In this context, [Bovens](#) states that in the Netherlands it is the rise of the highly educated as a large homogeneous group that is the driving force behind the growing differences in the Netherlands. "People with lower levels of education have not changed that much, they do what they have always done and learn what they have always learnt," says Bovens. It is the highly educated who have grown numerically and who are leaving their mark on society (and especially through the over-representation of universities in (political) positions of power (Dekker, Tiemeijer & Bovens, 2016)).

According to [Casper Thomas](#), editor at De Groene Amsterdammer, the irony is that it is precisely the part of the population that has been able to benefit from the democratisation of education and the open society "which now seems to be responsible for its closure. The behaviour of highly educated parents is a significant cause of the growing gap between children in the Netherlands." Behaviour refers, among other things, to appealing to teachers to reverse the possible negative school reports of their children, to finding out where the better schools are, even if they are far from home, to finding timely external help to give tutoring or coaching, to offering additional extracurricular activities, etc.

At the beginning of the last school year, several people in Belgium also pointed out through the media the unintended negative effects of the behaviour of highly-educated parents. The study by Danhier and Jacobs

² In 1947, barely 1% of the Belgian population older than 15 years had a higher education diploma. This share has risen to more than 30% in sixty years. The opposite is true for people with low levels of education. In 1961, more than nine out of ten Belgians still had low levels of education, 50 years later this share was more than halved to one out of three Belgians who have low levels of education. (see Elchardus, Kavadias, et al., 2012). It is expected that by 2030 just over 40 percent of the Belgian labour force will have higher education qualifications. The proportion of those with lower levels of education would fall below 20 percent.

³ In societies that are less 'modernised', the population is less 'progressive' in its attitudes (more distrust in the institutions, greater supporters of harsh repression, etc.). This applies to all educational categories. So even the highly educated in these societies have less democratic attitudes and show more mistrust.

⁴ It should be stated here that longitudinal data is needed to really be able to verify this.

(2017) commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation showed that our education system is among the least equal in the industrialised, democratic countries. The conclusion was that "our educational system does not succeed in bringing pupils from a migrant background to the same level of achievement as other pupils". According to the [authors](#) this is partly due to segregation⁵. In their search for what is best for their child, highly-educated, wealthy parents prefer a more remote school if they think it is better than the community school. This is possible because our country allows parents to freely choose their school. In many countries, a school is assigned to children, and parents have no, or at least less, input in the choice of school. The free choice of school leads to greater segregation of schools according to the background of the pupils, with on the one hand schools with a high concentration of pupils with a high socio-economic status and on the other hand schools with more pupils with a low socio-economic status. Regardless of the pupils' individual situation, this concentration of pupils in certain schools is said to have an additional effect on the pupils' performance and thus their later chances in adult life (see also [Merle](#), 2017).

[Pedro De Bruyckere](#) said, "If you ask me if there is a connection between 'wanting the best for your child' and the inequality in our society, the answer is yes. The well-intentioned wish creates differences." Children of middle-class parents are overwhelmed by opportunities, widening the gap with children who do not have so many opportunities. During the last school year, the newspaper *Libération* wondered in various [articles](#) how the positive attitude of the highly educated towards social equality can be reconciled with their actual behaviour in the choice of school for their children. "Social diversity will not be achieved at my daughter's expense", a [journalist](#) caricatures the opinion of the higher educated parent. [François Dubet](#) says: "We" have chosen not to play the school equality card. The term "we" should be understood to mean both governments and each of us. We want to live with those who resemble us, we want our children to pursue the best courses of study, we fiercely defend our social position. From truckers to notaries to farmers, even if we show our support for equality, we put into practice preferences for inequality."

Without outrightly blaming one group or the other, one of the major risks of these systematic differences and inequalities is the growing polarisation in society and the disruptive forces that can be released thereby. Research has shown that the higher educated have a more negative perception of people with lower levels of education than of their own educational group, and consider them partly responsible for their low level of education and the possible problems associated with it ([Kuppens & Spruyt, 2017](#)). Part of the (less educated) population does not feel at home in this society, is losing its grounding, feels insecure or unsafe, is withdrawing from public life and/or perhaps is seeking refuge more easily in populist parties that attribute a positive role and social identity to them⁶ (c.f. Brexit and Trump) (see also Daenekindt, de Koster & van der Waal, 2017).

NRC columnist [Tom-Jan Meeus](#) concludes that: "And the peculiar thing is: we discuss its identity-sensitive effects endlessly (*editor's note: of the education gap*): Zwarte Piet [Black Pete], the countryside, gap this

⁵ In addition, the early selection of pupils into various forms of education and the culture of repeating school years in our country is also strongly related to the strong performance differences of pupils according to background.

⁶ According to Spruyt (2014), the use of conflict thinking (us versus them) fulfils an important psychological function for people who are vulnerable. Not only does it create a sense of community, it also depersonalises one's own experiences.

and gap that - but nobody, not even a politician, still sees real possibilities of addressing this injustice (*editor's note*: educational inequalities)." The attempts to fight these inequalities seem to have borne little fruit so far, Sacco and colleagues also state. "In this respect, educational inequality is the same as economic inequality: it will automatically grow bigger if you don't actively fight it," Thomas (2016) concludes his review article.

3. Connecting you(th). Overcoming divisions in society.

In the public debate, we are increasingly seeing a polarisation around the opposition of the 'higher educated elite' to 'we, the people', but also between 'we the natives' and 'those who come from the outside'. These contradictions are often expressed together through the (social) media and are given identity characters who are sometimes portrayed as victims and scapegoats. [Femke Halsema](#) says: 'In public and political debates, the 'angry white man' and the 'black woman' are competing with each other in vulnerability, and the 'looking away elite', 'the more reactive', 'the angry nigger', 'the cargo bike mother' or 'white trash' are blamed for all the misery. Someone who feels hurt as white, black, man, woman, Dutchman or Muslim, finds the justification to treat the opponent to mirror-image and humiliating characterisations. It appears that a scramble is emerging for hurt identities and public-wide victimhood that is displacing views on social developments. For example, some people with lower levels of education are invoking a form of national identity, ecology and cosmopolitanism are becoming the identity of some of the higher educated, Islam is increasingly becoming an identity of Muslims who do not feel welcome in our society, etc.... It seems difficult to find a larger 'us' here. And the more the image of polarisation and conflicting identities is addressed in the media and public opinion, the more difficult it is to believe even more in the larger 'us'.

From the point of view of digital practices, if we look in depth at the research undertaken, the Belgian, young or old, is more and more connected, beyond social circles and levels of education. Belgian broadband infrastructure is one of the best in Europe. Even in Wallonia, eight out of ten households are connected. Obviously, for the remaining 20% who are not connected, the segregation level is high, but these figures alone do not explain the dualisation dynamics mentioned above. Indeed, given the research above, access to information and digital exchange is not necessarily a guarantee of reducing inequalities in terms of knowledge for all. The young people exchange, discuss, think collectively in a "entre-nous" cleverly maintained by the algorithms of applications. In short, young people reinforce each other in their convictions and build themselves a culture at the scale of their generation or their social group. Far from emancipating, the web contributes to amplifying social and educational inequalities. Research among young people has indeed shown that the social networks of young people (in this case Facebook) are highly segregated and thus reproduce the offline 'bubbles' in which they live (Hofstra et al., 2017).

There is therefore a need for a new collective narrative, a new 'we' in our society, which brings people together rather than further dividing them, and thus also reaches out to vulnerable people. [Raphaël Glucksmann](#), one of the speakers on our debate on collective action in 2017, wonders what to do with the people who, despite the emancipation possibilities available to the individual in our society, have not been

able to keep up in recent decades. "The challenge for the next five years is therefore how we can ensure that we become one people and one country again." But how do you do that concretely, create an inclusive 'we' feeling? What could that look like in practice? How do you prevent segregation? And does everyone want this?

Some people argue that instead of letting the extremes speak continuously, groups that do not necessarily want a (collective) solution but especially want to convince more people of their own right, the 'middle' should rather be given a voice. There is the silent majority, not black or white, but grey⁷. Not to be understood as the silent and indifferent majority, but as the real, often invisible people involved, such as the residents of a neighbourhood. Entering into dialogue with this middle would provide more opportunities to come to a constructive discussion about how residents want to live together in the neighbourhood, for example, to investigate what the real problems and needs are and what interfaces can be found between the residents themselves. "The cultivation of conflicting identities can then be turned into a dialogue about the real problems and conflicts. For example, by breaking through the frame of the controversial Muslims and non-Muslims and by asking about the real areas of tension in a neighbourhood", says [Bart Brandsma](#). In his view, more is achieved by investing in the middle than by trying to build bridges between the two extreme groups. In deprived neighbourhoods, there would be sufficient concerns that were widely shared and that could provide an opportunity to break the "we-them" thinking (Bellaart, Broekhuizen & van Dongen, 2016; van Wonderen & van Kapel, 2017). Arlie Hochschild talks about breaking through the 'empathy wall', an invisible obstacle to understanding the other. Uniting a divided country, developing a collective narrative and policies are only possible if we understand our opponents. The art, she says, is to engage a conversation with others, to listen carefully and to seek agreements.⁸

[Stijn Oosterlynck](#) also says that new forms of solidarity (can) arise, around the places we share. "A shared citizenship can arise if you share responsibility. You don't have to agree on the headscarf to organise a school party together. A conviviality arises around community gardens, dog meadows, barbecue corners; in these places, people learn to handle diversity. They overcome their fear thanks to those everyday contacts. The most successful multicultural places in the city are the thrift shops and flea markets. Everyone, those with high and low levels of education, newcomers and students, people without money and middle-class people, all come there. However, this is a limited, rather superficial interpretation of the great 'we-feeling'⁹, but it could be a possible start of a new positive wind if the perpetuation of these

⁷ In the Netherlands, a platform and movement has even emerged "[Dare to be grey](#)", that wants to counter polarisation in society by promoting open debate, in which there is room for nuanced opinions, doubts and diversity.

⁸ For "Strangers in their own land" (2016) Arlie Hochschild left California, her progressive left-wing, cosmopolitan enclave full of like-minded people, and spent five years with her right-wing compatriots in Louisiana, one of the poorest and most conservative states in America, in an attempt to better understand them.

⁹ At our debate in 2017 [Paul Dekker](#) warned of the possible volatile nature of such forms of engagement. If we want to change things at national level, we need politics, structures and long-term vision. Sociologist [Halleh Ghorashi](#) also underlines the vulnerability of such volunteer-driven initiatives, but she believes that this is the sustainable answer to polarisation and that it must be given a basis. "You need affiliation for a sustainable future," she says. Others fear a strengthening of inequality if those shared places are only initiated and visited by highly educated people. For example, sociologist [Monique Dagnaud](#) points out the potential dangers of the sub-economy, which was mainly established by highly educated young city dwellers. Grassroots citizens' initiatives are also often based on higher

forms of shared responsibility can be achieved, along with their gradual expansion and gain in importance, certainly in combination with an inclusive, socially supportive (local) policy (see also Sennett, 2018).

In this respect, Volker, Andriessen and Posthumus (2014) state: "If we want to bring the social worlds of the higher and less educated closer together, it would probably be best to start in the residential neighbourhoods: Although often homogeneously composed, neighbourhoods are an important social mixer. Therefore, in order to reduce the dividing lines between the lower and higher educated, mixed housing and common neighbourhood activities should be encouraged. Even if the effects of supply, of contexts, are small, they are there and offer an opportunity for policy." Settings and social contexts are important for making contacts. This is important because the composition of contexts can be influenced. If one wants more social mix, one should ensure that the contexts in which people come into their daily lives are diverse. Contact to a certain extent leads to peacefulness and friendly relations. This can be institutionally strengthened by emphasising common goals and interests, according to Volker (2012). According to Volker (2012) it is even more important to study how people are prepared to contribute to the production of public goods. "Crossing dividing lines have a soothing effect, but at the same time it may be necessary to emphasise the common interests, multiple loyalties. The chance of peaceful conflict resolution is greater when interests and loyalties are shared with different groups. There is a task for future research and policy here as well: making clear the common interests of different social groups.

During our 2017 debate, [Paul Dekker](#) stated that there is a great need for solidarity-generating projects that touch on important problems but that also create links between groups of young people, and especially between people with lower and higher levels of education. One could think of linking problems such as sustainability (which is considered important by people with higher levels of education) to job creation that offers security and a decent salary (concern of people with lower levels of education), according to Dekker.

Issues such as quality of life and safety (in the broad sense), which are considered important by all young people¹⁰, could also be used to address the concerns of people with higher and lower levels of education. After all, liveability and security relate to ecology, mobility and access to services, which are considered more important by young people with a higher level of education, as well as migration/diversity, decent housing and work, areas where young people with lower levels of education are more likely to be concerned¹¹. Architect [Peter Calthorpe](#) points out, for example, that both people who value ecology highly (more often with higher levels of education) and advocates of decent, affordable housing for vulnerable groups, could perfectly identify with multifunctional urban development projects with more smaller, cheaper housing, more local shops and employment, and more space for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

educated urbanites and involve the risk of being exclusive with respect to other groups, according to [William Voorberg](#).

¹⁰ Other fears that young people share are the risk of loneliness and (mental) health problems, which can ultimately also be regarded as part of (un)liveability and (in)security.

¹¹ Sources: Generation What survey, scv survey, Flemish Youth Council, survey etc. (With thanks to Jessy Siongers).

4. Call for contributions

In the context of the search for (solutions for) the dividing lines in society and the greater sense of 'we', the Foundation P&V is launching a far-reaching operation "Connecting You(th). Overcoming divisions in society" covering various stages:

1. The grouping of **scientific knowledge and ideas** on the major dividing lines and inequalities in our society in general, concerning education in particular; the possible solutions to overcome these division lines; the people who could form a "bridge"; new meeting spaces which could bring different people together...
2. Nourish and deepen the reflection, based on this united expertise, on the different knowledge and ideas, with the aim of **identifying and supporting forms of policy and projects** that can contribute concretely to solving the identified problems.
3. The **promotion** of these policies and sharing of the initiatives and projects thus established.

As part of the first stage of the program the P&V Foundation launches a call for contributions that try to elucidate the problem and answer one or more of the following questions:

1. What do we know about the **major dividing lines and inequalities** in our society in general, **concerning education** in particular? Have they increased, decreased, or stayed the same? In what areas (do they express themselves)? What are the main causes? What are the implications/consequences of these gaps? What concrete (political) recommendations can result from it? Have they ever been applied somewhere?
2. Do **new meeting spaces** emerge for young people to enjoy? Previously, institutions such as churches, schools and the military were important meeting spaces between social strata. Are there any equivalents developed today to ensure that the different groups continue to live together and that people know and understand the concerns and interests of each group?
3. Which **people/groups** can play a pivotal role and form a "**bridge**" to overcome the dividing lines? What are the exact conditions and consequences of intersecting lines and overlapping networks between youngsters? What factors lead to more integration and which ones prevent it?
4. What are the **good practices** that try to overcome the divisions among young people (in their neighbourhoods, during their free time, in schools, in places where they look for a job, are at work, etc.)? What are the factors of success? In which specific places are the inequalities reproduced and reinforced?

A maximum of 10 articles shall be selected and rewarded with a prize of EUR 2 000 each. The articles must be submitted before 30 June 2019 to saskia.de.groof@pv.be.

Moreover, the articles will be published in a book with a GPRC label (Guaranteed Peer Reviewed Content) and be presented during a European conference that will be held in Brussels in May 2020. The laureates will be invited to comment their work and debate with field experts, practitioners, fellow researchers and politicians.

The conclusions of this conference will determine the sequel of this multi-annual project.

For more information, as well as the regulations of the competition and the instructions for submitting an article, please visit the website: www.foundationpv.be .

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