Summary

In the scientific and political field, there is a trend to conceptualize humans not as fundamentally interwoven in human groups but as essentially free to follow their own paths without any predetermination or influence from sociality. Scholars have taken the individual out of context (i.e. family, school, neighborhood) and focused on his or her capacity or ability to perceive and influence his or her surroundings.

The type of work that underemphasizes human beings as embedded (i.e. in a family, school, neighborhood) gives an inaccurate depiction of reality. The inaccuracy of theories that solely focused on the individual faculties of human understanding and human behavior can be assessed by the study of life pathways. Life pathways – in, for example, Flanders but also more generally in Western Europe – tend to differ fundamentally between people with different (e.g. socioeconomic and immigrant) backgrounds. Being embedded in a family with – for example – a low socioeconomic background has potentially positive and/or negative consequences on outcomes (e.g. academic achievement). If researchers study these differences solely focusing on the individuality of the human being, they are not considering all possible explanations for reality. In other words, accounting for differences between people using purely ‘individual’ variables will not solve the riddle of differential life pathways.
When most students in a specific group tend to accumulate inequalities, we should clearly look for explanations that go beyond individual aspects.

To further develop and enrich a science of human beings and therefore also an educational science, there must be a focus on the contours and borders of the sociality of human beings. This includes how to describe and define this sociality and what it can ultimately lead to. To understand educational inequalities and therefore also (phenomena that are related to) academic achievement, we distinguish between different study objects. Firstly, we distinguish between beneficial/detrimental ideas about achievement (e.g. educational expectations, teacher judgments), secondly, behavior that might be beneficial/detrimental for academic achievement (e.g. helping with and/or discussing education-related matters) and finally the level of certain types of academic achievement (e.g. the level of mathematics/reading literacy). There are a number of conditions that might affect these phenomena. We distinguish between conditions at a student level (e.g. gender, age, religious affiliation/practice and previous achievement), at family level (e.g. family structure, parental involvement at home/school and parental socioeconomic status), at school level (e.g. the composition and other characteristics of the school/classes) and at neighborhood level (e.g. characteristics of the environment in which the home and the school are situated). We focus on these conditions and their relationships with the study objects. This is done with the use of multiple samples of students in primary and secondary school in Flanders, Belgium and in other Western European countries. The chapters of the dissertation are organized by a micro to macro outlook and are thematic: they look at religious involvement (chapter 1), parental involvement (chapter 2), family, parental and school groups (chapter 3) and the neighborhood (chapter 4). In chapter 5, there is a conclusion.