

You are kindly invited to the public defence to obtain the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

of **dra. Margaux Pyls**

The defence which will take place on **25 September 2026** at **17:00** CET.

Aula D.2.01 (Building D) – VUB Main Campus Brussels
Pleinlaan 2 – 1050 Brussel

**THE UNEQUAL PROMISE OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION
ACCESS, PARTICIPATION AND OPEN CLASSROOM CLIMATE IN
PRIMARY EDUCATION**

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(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

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Prof. Dr. Katrien Struyven (Hasselt University)
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Please confirm your attendance before 18 September [via this form](#).

SUMMARY

Citizenship education (CE) aims to prepare students to become informed, critical, and engaged democratic citizens. Schools are therefore expected to provide students with opportunities to participate, express their views, engage with different perspectives, and develop citizenship competences. Yet these opportunities are not equally accessible to all students. This dissertation examines how inequalities in citizenship education emerge in primary schools, focusing on students' opportunities to participate and be heard and on the role of teachers in creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and discussion.

Across four complementary studies, the dissertation approaches these inequalities from both student and teacher perspectives. A systematic review of European research maps existing evidence on inequalities in citizenship education. Three qualitative studies subsequently explore how primary school students experience opportunities for participation, how teachers facilitate classroom discussions, and which competences teachers need to establish an open classroom climate.

The findings show that simply providing opportunities for citizenship education does not ensure that all students can benefit from them equally. Students encounter institutional, relational, and personal barriers that shape whether and how they participate and whether their voices are recognised. Classroom discussions can provide valuable opportunities for dialogue and citizenship learning, but they can also reproduce inequalities by favouring students who, for example, have stronger language skills, greater confidence, or more prior knowledge. Teachers therefore play a crucial role in creating safe and open classroom environments, encouraging participation, supporting students in expressing their ideas, and constructively navigating disagreement and diverse perspectives.

Overall, the dissertation argues for an equality-sensitive and process-oriented approach to citizenship education. Its democratic potential depends not only on whether opportunities for participation are provided, but also on how these opportunities are organised, supported, and experienced by different students. By paying greater attention to these processes, schools and teachers can help ensure that all students have meaningful opportunities to participate, be heard, and develop as democratic citizens.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Margaux Pyls is a PhD candidate in Educational Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and a researcher at the Brussels Research Centre for Innovation in Learning and Diversity (BILD). She holds a Bachelor's degree in Primary Education from Odisee University College, during which she completed an Erasmus exchange at University College Copenhagen, and a Master's degree in Educational Sciences from VUB. After completing her master's degree, she joined BILD as a researcher, where she coordinated an Erasmus+ project on self-regulated learning. Since 2022, she has been pursuing her PhD in Educational Sciences at VUB. Her doctoral research focuses on citizenship education and educational inequality in primary education, with particular attention to students' opportunities for participation and voice and to the role of teachers in creating open and inclusive classroom environments. Her research has been presented at international conferences and published in the field of citizenship education and primary education.