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MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION IN FLANDERS

Multidisciplinary Perspectives



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6. “We hold on to the ones we have”: Addressing School Mobility to Facilitate ‘Stable’ Educational Trajectories, a Case- study of an Urban High School in Flanders

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Introduction

In so-called knowledge societies with growing demands for highly skilled labour, educational credentials have become increasingly important to be able to enter the labour market and fully participate in society (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). In this context, young people who leave education without an upper secondary education diploma – often a minimum requirement to access these knowledge-driven labour markets – run the risk of being faced with a lack of economic opportunities, long-term unemployment, poverty, welfare dependence and social exclusion (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Nicaise, 2012). Early school leaving – and identifying its causes – is very complex and has been the subject of a growing number of studies over the past decades (for a review of the literature see e.g. Rumberger & Lim, 2008; De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & van den Brink, 2013). Overall, this body of research suggests that early school leaving is a multi-layered and long-term process that is influenced by a large variety of intertwined factors that have to do with the individual student, the family, the school, the community and the broader societal context in which the student lives. Early school leaving is also an important indicator of inequalities in education (European Commission, 2017). In Flanders, administrative data show for instance that 22.1% of the secondary school students who do not have Dutch as their main home language leave school early, compared with ‘only’ 7.3% of the students who do (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2017). PISA data

confirm this trend and demonstrate that, apart from extremely persistent socio-economic inequalities in educational opportunities, Flanders has an educational system in which the educational achievement gap between native students and students with a migration background is among the highest (Jacobs & Danhier, 2017).

One issue that has received only limited attention in the academic literature on early school leaving is school mobility¹, i.e. changing schools for reasons other than promotion from one year to the next. While students traditionally make foreseen school changes at specific points in time during their educational trajectory (e.g. when changing from primary school to secondary school), a considerable number of them also change schools during or in between school years for non-promotional reasons. In Flanders, research shows that more than a quarter of secondary school students change school once or more (Lamote et al., 2013). Like early school leaving, school mobility is more pronounced among specific social groups, and tends to occur more often among students with a lower socio-economic and/or migration background (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). Even though some school changes are purposeful, 'strategic' moves initiated by the students or their families, e.g. as a choice to attend a (presumed) higher-quality or better-fitting school, in the literature most non-promotional school changes are seen as planned or unplanned 'reactive' moves in response to negative factors over which the student has little or no feeling of control (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999; Gasper, DeLuca & Estacion, 2012; Lee & Burkam 2003). In this case, non-promotional school changes can be the result of students' dissatisfaction with a particular school and the feeling of being pushed away, e.g. because of a bad relationship with a teacher, an unwelcoming or uncaring school environment, or experiences of discrimination or racism. Furthermore, more explicit disciplinary actions taken by a school (e.g. suspension/expulsion) or broader educational policies (e.g. certification policies) can also impose 'reactive' school mobility on a student. Empirical evidence suggests that these non-promotional 'reactive' school changes can have detrimental effects on students' educational careers (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Gasper et al., 2012; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007; Lamote et al., 2013), and can moreover influence students' self-confidence and psychological and social well-being (Rumberger et al., 1999; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Ream & Stanton-Salazar, 2007).

However, school mobility affects not only the students who change schools but also their non-mobile peers as well as teachers and schools that are

confronted with mobile students, as it impacts on the general school climate and the curricular pace, and disrupts classroom learning activities (Rumberger et al., 1999; Kerbow 1996; South et al. 2007; Van Praag, Boone, Stevens & Van Houtte, 2015). Consequently, we can assume that limiting disruptive school mobility is in the interest not only of mobile students but also of the schools they are attending. If students change school because they (feel they) are being pushed away from their school, this implies that schools play an important role in triggering school mobility; however, it also means that schools can also take up a crucial role in tackling it. In this study we focus on one particular urban secondary school in Flanders that is actively committed to limiting school mobility within the school in an attempt to facilitate so-called ‘stable’ educational trajectories and consequently also reduce early school leaving. More specifically, we will use qualitative interview data and school documents to (1) examine the strategies the school adopts to increase their ‘holding power’ and (2) study the underlying rationale behind these strategies from the perspective of the school personnel. As a school that predominantly serves students with a migration background from families with a lower socio-economic status who find themselves in socially vulnerable positions – and which therefore can be considered a ‘high-risk’ context for school mobility and early school leaving – it makes for a particularly interesting case study that will allow us to further our understanding of the role that school-level policy initiatives and practices can play in influencing students’ educational trajectories. Before presenting our case study and our findings, first we briefly discuss some specific features of the Flemish educational system that are central to understanding the occurrence of school mobility within this context.

School mobility in the Flemish educational context

In the Flemish educational context, school mobility is strongly linked to what is often referred to as ‘unstable school careers,’ indicating school careers in which students change school and/or educational track once or several times throughout their educational trajectory, possibly after exclusion from specific courses or tracks or expulsion from particular schools. These unstable school careers are to a certain extent a central part of Flemish (secondary) education as a result of several systemic features. First of all, secondary education in Flanders is characterised by an officially regulated early as well as rigid tracking structure that sorts students in specific educational pathways that steer towards

different futures: a general or academic track (ASO) that orients students toward higher education, a technical track (TSO) that prepares students for either (professional) higher education or skilled technical professions, or a vocational track (BSO) that leads more directly to particular lower skilled professions on the labour market. Although official educational policy presents the different tracks as equally important and valuable (Clycq, Nouwen, Van Caudenberg & Timmerman, 2015), in practice a clear hierarchy exists in which the general track is placed at the top and the vocational track at the bottom of the ladder of social prestige (Clycq, Nouwen & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Van Praag et al., 2015; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Because of this status hierarchy, many students and their parents tend to opt for the (high status) general track when starting secondary education; however, a considerable number of them will sooner or later be reoriented towards (lower status) technical or vocational tracks, a process known as 'streaming down the waterfall' (Van Praag et al., 2015; Baert, Cockx, & Picchio, 2016). This 'downward mobility' is institutionalised in the educational system by means of a certification system that regulates students' individual educational trajectory. This certification system includes three different types of binding certificates that a student can receive at the end of the school year: an A-certificate that allows the student to proceed to the next year and continue in the same educational track, a C-certificate that obliges the student to repeat the year in the same educational track or in a different (lower) track, and a B-certificate that lies in between an A-certificate and a C-certificate and gives the student a choice between either repeating the year in the same track or proceeding to the next year while being confronted with some specific restrictions for certain tracks, usually implying streaming 'down' on the metaphorical waterfall (Lamote, Pinxten, Van Den Noortgate & Van Damme, 2014; Spruyt, Laurijssen & Van Dorsselaer, 2009). In Flanders the majority of schools are organised around specific tracks, with schools that focus either on offering education within the general track or education within the technical and/or vocational track (Van Houtte, 2006), therefore changing track as the result of a B- or C-certificate will often also entail changing schools.

Another central feature of the Flemish educational system is the high level of autonomy that schools have as a result of the fundamental principle of 'freedom of education' as a constitutional right. Schools have to comply with certain general regulations regarding e.g. the educational structure and specific developmental goals and curriculum targets to be eligible for government funding from the Flemish Ministry of Education; but other than that they are relatively free in

developing and implementing their own school policies and curricula. In this same line, schools and teachers also have considerable power and autonomy when it comes to evaluating their students. There are no standardised tests; instead, at the end of each school year, students are evaluated by their teachers in so-called ‘deliberations.’ During these deliberations, for each individual student the teachers and supporting staff decide in a group which certificate the student will receive. There are no standard procedures for these deliberations so, in principle, each school is free to decide on its deliberation policy and evaluation criteria. Often, these deliberations are not only about the student’s academic results but other issues such as student behaviour and perceived motivation may play a role as well, particularly in the lower status technical and vocational track (Stevens, 2007; 2012). Research furthermore shows that the way teachers evaluate their students can be biased and that, even when controlling for academic performance, ethnic minority students (particularly from Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds) and students from lower SES families are more often oriented towards lower status tracks or confronted with grade retention (Spruyt et al., 2009). Individual schools and their teaching body thus play a crucial role in the educational trajectories of their students but there is only minimal control over or information on how they orient them.

The freedom of education principle implies not only a high level of autonomy for schools but also ‘free school choice’. Students are not formally assigned to a specific school nor is there a requirement to attend a school in the direct neighbourhood (Van Houtte, Demanet & Stevens, 2012). This free school choice applies not only to traditional school transitions, but also to school changes between or during school years. While in some exceptional cases schools can refuse to enrol a student in the middle of a school year (for instance if a student wants to re-enrol in a school s/he was excluded from up to 2 years earlier, or if a school can prove that it does not have sufficient ‘capacity’ to take on a student who left another school as a result of disciplinary action or expulsion), in principle students may generally (choose to) change schools at any point in time, provided the school they are changing to has an open place. This phenomenon of changing schools ‘when one pleases’ is often referred to by school personnel and policymakers as ‘school s/hopping’. While particularly middle class families benefit from the free school choice principle at traditional school transition moments, since they possess the necessary resources – to access information about educational options, to invest in school searching, to pay extra transportation costs etc. – to send their children to what are considered high-quality schools

(Nouwen & Vandenbroucke, 2012; Ambler, 1994); school s/hopping between or during school years resulting in 'unstable school careers' is more pronounced among lower SES and ethnic minority students, and among students in lower status vocational tracks (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2014; Van Praag et al., 2015). Data from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2014) furthermore show that in the vocational track around 28% of school changes during the school year are the result of expulsion. Based on these insights, we therefore argue that school mobility or so-called 'school s/hopping' resulting in unstable educational trajectories should not be considered as merely a result of free school choice of students and their parents, but also of the way individual schools function and how they use their autonomy to address their student population within this broader educational context. We will explore this further by examining how the issue of school mobility is being dealt with in one particular urban secondary school in Flanders with relatively 'low' school-mobility rates compared to other schools with similar profiles regarding their student bodies (i.e. a relatively high number of socially vulnerable students with a migration background) and their place within the educational landscape (i.e. schools that predominantly offer education within the lower esteemed technical and vocational tracks).

Methods and research setting

The data on which this chapter builds were collected in the framework of the European research project entitled 'Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe – RESL.eu'. As part of this broader research project, qualitative fieldwork was conducted in 28 secondary schools in urban areas across seven EU countries to evaluate school-based prevention and intervention measures that (indirectly) focus on tackling early school leaving (see Nouwen, Clycq, Braspenningx & Timmerman, 2015). In this chapter, we use a qualitative case-study approach (Merriam, 1998; 2009) and draw on the data that were collected in one specific school (School A) that was part of the Flemish case selection. A qualitative case-study approach is well suited to research about a specific programme or institution (Merriam, 2009) and allows us to focus on one particular entity (School A) to explore in-depth the strategies this school uses to limit school mobility, as well as the rationales underpinning these strategies.

Description of the case

School A is a publicly funded but privately operated Catholic secondary school situated in a large multi-ethnic city in Flanders (the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). The school has approximately 600 students and provides courses in the vocational and technical track, and since 2010 also in the general track. The large majority of the students are in the vocational track and to a lesser extent the technical track. The school also offers so-called reception classes (OKAN) that non-Dutch speaking migrant youth between 12 and 18 years old who have recently arrived in Flanders have to attend for one year before they can continue on to regular secondary education. The school has two buildings that are located close to one another. One building offers primarily business-oriented fields of study on the general, technical and vocational tracks. In the other building the focus is on education in fashion and care on the vocational and technical track.

School A predominantly attracts students that live in the direct neighbourhood, which is one of the most densely populated areas of the city with a high number of inhabitants with a migration background – primarily of Moroccan descent – and relatively high levels of unemployment and inactivity. Consequently, the school has a strong presence of students with a migration background from families in socially vulnerable positions who in educational policy discourse are referred to as ‘Equal Educational Opportunity (‘GOK’) students’ (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015) – that is students who meet certain socio-economic indicators of ‘vulnerability’, such as a non-Dutch home-language and a mother who did not obtain an upper secondary education diploma and/or entitlement to a scholarship, and for whom the school receives additional financial resources from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. Quantitative data that were collected in School A in the framework of the abovementioned RESL.eu project show indeed that less than 1% of the students in the school’s sample are of native Belgian origin whereas respectively around 32% have a first and 67% have a second generation migration background. Approximately 65% of the students’ fathers and 80% of the mothers did not obtain an upper secondary education diploma, and less than half of the fathers and only 16% of the mothers are in paid employment.

Regarding school mobility, the RESL.eu data indicate that a little over half of the students in School A’s sample changed schools at least once during their secondary education career. While this can still be considered a lot, it is notably less than the average of 65% of the entire sample of schools in the RESL.eu

project with comparable profiles and ‘vulnerable’ student bodies. Internal documents and administrative data of the school furthermore indicate that the early outflow of students – i.e. students that left School A prior to obtaining their diplomas, either to change to another school or to become early school leavers – that accounted for 13% of the student body in 2004-2005 had decreased to 9% by 2012-2013. These data suggest that the occurrence of school mobility has diminished within School A and that relatively more students spend their entire secondary education career in this school than is the case in other, similar schools, making this school particularly relevant to being studied more in-depth in order to understand where this relative ‘low’ mobility rate originates from.

Data collection and analysis

In a first phase we collected and analysed the available school documents to gain a first insight into the school’s mission and its organisational structure. Next, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the school management (n=2) as well as a focus group discussion with the school staff (n=8). In total our sample thus includes 10 respondents (5 males and 5 females, 9 of which are native Belgians and 1 who has a mixed native Belgian-Greek background). The school management consists of the school principal and the coordinating principal. The coordinating principal is the former school principal of School A (a position he held for 19 years) and was recently appointed coordinating principal of the local school board. Nonetheless, he remained actively involved in School A at the time fieldwork was conducted. The school staff that participated in the focus group discussion included 7 teachers and 1 student guidance counsellor. The teachers primarily taught in the vocational track, though 3 teachers also gave courses in the general and/or technical track. Two teachers combined their teaching activities with other responsibilities within the school. During the interviews and the focus group discussion a topic list was used to guide the conversations. This topic list included open-ended questions that primarily focused on the specific measures that existed (or not) at school level to (indirectly) tackle early school leaving. Topics included the extent to which early school leaving was considered a problem both within the school and more generally, the specific goals and objectives of the measures the school developed as well as the underlying problem they wanted to tackle with these measures. The interviews and focus group discussion were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using qualitative data analysis software programme NVivo 10. All quotations used in this chapter are translated from Dutch and edited by the authors to facilitate their legibility.

Findings

Analyses of the data show that the school management of School A considers that school mobility seriously hinders the educational opportunities of the students as it is linked to grade retention and educational delay, ultimately also increasing the risk of leaving school early. The broader educational context, and particularly the certification policy of the Flemish educational system, is seen as playing a crucial role in this matter. According to the school management it is precisely this certification policy that is contributing to high levels of grade retention, and consequently also early school leaving:

The education [system] has a considerable share in creating and increasing early school leaving. And that has to do especially with the certification policy that is being implemented in schools. ... If there were an entirely different certification policy that would have serious effects on reducing early school leaving. (Coordinating principal)

Moreover, the certification system is also criticised for allowing schools to ‘pass on the problem’ to other schools as ‘those [schools] that confront their students with B and C certificates will often not see the consequences of this act because the student will indeed change to a different school’ (coordinating principal). As explained before, within the Flemish educational context B and C certificates indeed tend to go together with school changes because schools are often organised around specific tracks. However, as illustrated by the quotation below, the school management not only relates this tendency of changing schools to the fact that schools do not always offer the particular educational track the student has to change to, but also to the previously mentioned status hierarchy that exists between the different tracks; that is, even when they can stay in the same school, students are still considered likely to switch to another school because they feel embarrassed going to a lower prestige track:

Even if they would be able to stay in the same school, and of course that has to do with image and such, like ‘yes, I have to go to BSO [vocational track], I won’t do that here, because my friends...’ (Coordinating principal)

At the same time, our data show that the school management considers schools to have the ability to tackle this tendency of changing school by making students feel comfortable at their school: 'if they feel good in a school and, yes, can establish for themselves that 'yes, fine, I didn't succeed', well, then they won't necessarily have a problem staying in their school.' (coordinating principal). Given this point of view, for School A increasing their 'holding power' is about avoiding grade retention and educational delay as much as possible, but also about focusing on the students' well-being so they will feel good at school and thus be less inclined to leave or change schools. This feeling of 'well-being' at school is considered crucial though not evident because of the particular student body of the school. As mentioned before, School A predominantly attracts so-called 'Equal Educational Opportunity' ('GOK') students with a migration background from socially vulnerable families. The school personnel considers that it is more difficult for these 'GOK' students to feel good at school than for other – more privileged – youth, because the latter are seen to have a greater feeling of well-being in general or, as the coordinating principal explains it, 'feeling good at a school is de facto more difficult for socially vulnerable students than for others. You know, if in general you feel better about yourself, then you will also feel better at school.' Working with and teaching this particular group of 'GOK' students has come to be considered the 'core business' of the school and is framed within a context of a need to 'give opportunities':

Sometimes we say, like, everything in our school is 'GOK', you know, we have to give opportunities... We don't have that many privileged students, so everything is 'GOK', everything is about how can we try to give as many opportunities as possible. (School principal)

It is from this commitment to create a climate of 'well-being' and give students as many opportunities as possible, thereby hoping to 'hold on to them', that School A developed several specific policy initiatives and school practices. In the following sections we will go more deeply into what these practices and strategies actually entail and the rationale that lies behind them from the point of view of the school management and the school staff.

Facilitating stable educational trajectories to limit outflow of students

Our analyses of the school documents and the interview data revealed certain specific initiatives School A had developed to facilitate 'stable educational

trajectories’ in which students can proceed as much as possible to the next year without changing educational track or school, and that allow a feeling of well-being among the students at school to increase. Because of the high number of Equal Educational Opportunity (‘GOK’) students, School A receives a significant amount of additional funds from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. Our data indicate that, apart from investing in school infrastructure, School A also uses these funds to invest in more teaching hours so the number of students per class group can be kept small:

Because we have so many GOK students ... we receive a lot of [financial] resources. Therefore, we can invest in infrastructure, but also in small class groups. You know, because that’s another thing, it’s really very important to ensure that your class group is not too big. (School principal)

These small class sizes are considered crucial as they allow the teacher to pay more attention to each individual student, which in turn makes it possible to create a closer inter-personal relationship between the teachers and the students. Another important result of these small class sizes is that – instead of sticking to strictly teaching the curriculum – they allow spaces to be created in which there is more room for interaction, as one of the teachers explained:

During class there are also a lot of things that are discussed with the students. And I think that’s actually the case for everyone here. It’s not like French or English, bang open the book and start. That’s not how it works. There really is a lot of interaction. (Teacher)

Another teacher talked about a concrete example that recently took place during one of her classes:

For example, in my English class with 7 Office [name of the class], I was having them listen to that John Lennon song about ‘war is over’, ‘Christmas’, you know. I also showed the video and they were really moved by it. Really moved. And then Aicha asks, asks all of a sudden, ‘but what can we do about it? We can’t do anything about it, right?’ And then we had this whole conversation, in English, about what you can do... because actually war takes place at a higher level but actually

sometimes also at a small level; what can you do to actively remedy war...And it really occupied Aicha, really... so that should get a place [in the class]. (Teacher)

This situation shows how the teacher is trying to be receptive to what is going on in the students' minds and integrate it into her teaching. Rather than insisting on teaching the curriculum in its strict sense, the teacher gave room to the students' concerns and used it as an opportunity to engage with them. These accounts demonstrate how, in their attempt to connect with their students, the teachers use the small class sizes to emphasise the relational and emotional aspect above teaching what needs to be taught according to the curriculum. Apart from explicitly choosing small class sizes, School A also installed formal 'one-on-one reflection moments' between the teachers and the students. While the school management initially and primarily developed these reflection moments to allow for mutual feedback between the students and the teachers as a way to support the learning progress of students, practice shows that '9 out of 10 times these reflection moments are about the students' well-being' (teacher), rather than about specific course-related issues. Therefore, these talks are not only considered to provide an opportunity to have the students reflect on their educational progress and trajectory, but also to focus on their general well-being within the school and beyond.

Next to focusing on the students' well-being, School A also developed measures that are meant to influence the students' educational trajectory in a more direct way. We have already pointed out how the school management of School A critiques the Flemish certification system and particularly the grade retention it creates, which is perceived to increase the chances of school mobility and also early school leaving. Therefore, in an attempt to avoid grade retention among their students as much as possible, the school chooses to apply a mild certification system and limit the number of C certificates. In practice this means that, when the school staff evaluates the students during the 'deliberations' at the end of each school year, the school policy is not only to look at whether or not the students passed all the courses but also to take into account their previous educational trajectory. Especially in the later years of secondary education and in the case of students that have already experienced grade retention C certificates hold a potential threat to the students' educational progress that could even jeopardise their chances of getting a diploma (see also Lamote et al., 2014). The coordinating principal explains that 'by implementing this certification policy

you don't create too much educational delay, so [you create] less risk of outflow of unqualified students,' thus clearly linking grade retention with outflow of students; or, as one of the teachers put it:

Students that can continue [to the next year] won't run away. (Teacher)

Following a broader trend in vocational oriented schools, School A also installed a system of permanent evaluation instead of organising examination periods that are traditionally held twice a year. The school documents show that these permanent evaluations entail that the 'learning process is regularly evaluated throughout the school year' and furthermore allows the students to receive 'immediate feedback on their progress and potential difficulties.' The main advantages of the system of permanent evaluation are seen in the fact that it not only encourages the students to continuously process the course material throughout the year, but also releases the emphasis on performing well in the examination, thereby giving students who have difficulties in meeting specific curriculum targets a better chance of passing. Permanent evaluation generates the possibility of evaluating the students more broadly than would be the case with traditional examinations, for instance by also focusing on whether students bring the right material to class and how they are behaving, as one of the teachers explained:

I also pay a lot of attention to side phenomena, 'did you bring your folders or not', and 'how did you behave', and then I can still translate that into marks. (Teacher)

In combination with the mild certification policy, this system of permanent evaluation is considered to increase the students' chances of proceeding to the next year and limit educational delay and unstable school careers, and thus also limit negative school mobility.

On the other hand, the data showed that School A looks at school mobility as being an issue that has to do not only with the 'outflow' of the schools' students, but also with the 'inflow' of new students that enter the school between or during school years. In that sense, educational delay and the risk of early school leaving are also considered to be being 'brought into the school', as the coordinating principal explains:

But you have to take into account that you also bring educational delay and the outflow of unqualified students into the school. You bring it into the school ... when you have open spots [in the school].”
(Coordinating principal)

Further analysis of the interview data revealed that an underlying consideration of School A's commitment to increasing its holding power is also to avoid this side-entry of so-called school s/hoppers, as the inflow of these new students is equated not only with importing 'educational delay' into the school, as pointed out by the coordinating principal in the above quotation, but also with the inflow of problematic behaviour. In the next section we elaborate further on this.

Increasing holding power to avoid side-entry of new students

During our conversations with the school management and the school staff, we repeatedly heard that the arrival of new students that enter the school in the middle of the school year or between school years is linked to importing problematic behaviour into the school and into the classrooms. The school management, for instance, referred to an instance where a number of new students entered a class in one of the higher years of the vocational track and where 'half of them' had 'caused trouble':

Last year in 6 Office [name of class] we opened our doors and enrolled several new students. And I think that out of those 5 or 6 [new] students, half of them caused trouble; [in the sense that they showed] behavioural problems, school fatigue, playing truant, those kinds of things. (Coordinating principal)

This problematic behaviour is linked to the reason why the students are believed to change school. On the one hand, new students are seen to arrive at School A as a result of disciplinary action at their previous school. Hence, rather than being the students' first choice, for these students the school becomes a 'second option' after a negative experience at their previous school. These students are considered to take this negative experience with them to the new school and show this in their behaviour, for example by talking to their peers and teachers in a way that is considered inappropriate, as one of the teachers suggested:

I think that sometimes you notice who comes from another school. I think so. I won't name any names but last year I had this student and I was really like 'what did they do to you in your last school? What did they do to you?! That first of all you talk to students like this! That you talk to teachers like this!' (Teacher)

On the other hand, school staff also consider that students change to School A because they might be 'lost', shopping from one school to the next, or afraid that they will not be able to succeed any more at their school and thus see switching to another school as a possible way out.

Having new students enter the school mid-year or between school years is seen as problematic not only because of the behaviour of the individual student who joins the school, but also because it interrupts classroom dynamics and the efforts that have been made to build a feeling of 'community' within the peer group. When students start secondary education together and can continue their educational trajectory as a peer group, they have the opportunity to get to know each other. However, when new students enter the school and the peer group is constantly changing this disrupts existing interpersonal relationships and dynamics, which is detrimental to the peer group and the school as a community:

Student guidance counsellor: In the first year they make a lot of effort to have these encounters within the class groups, when they are being put together, and make a whole week's project of it. But then that doesn't continue because in the second and third year up until the seventh year once again sometimes half of the class group is new. And that, yes, that takes time.

Interviewer: If I understood correctly this side-entry of new students has become less, though?

Student Guidance Counsellor: Yes, it has. And then you notice it perfectly, for example in the Office track, that it's a lot quieter now.

The second part of this conversation shows that it is acknowledged not only that the inflow of new students has become less, but also that as a result of it the class groups have become noticeably quieter. Not having new students enter the school is perceived to have a clear impact on the situation in the classroom.

The overarching idea is that creating an atmosphere in which stable educational trajectories can be facilitated and where a feeling of well-being can develop works best ‘when the students are ours’ (teacher), referring to students that have been part of the school since the beginning of their secondary education career. The fact that the school is now confronted less with problematic behaviour and disciplinary issues than before seems indeed related to a context in which the inflow of new students is occurring less often. It is this reasoning that also implicitly underlies School A’s commitment to increasing its ‘holding power’; that is, by holding on to its students the school can circumvent creating empty spots for potential school s/hoppers who might want to change to School A, and consequently avoid importing problematic behaviour into the school:

At the moment we have hardly any new students on our Office track, because you implement a policy that aims at making students indeed feel good, and of course because you keep the class sizes limited and therefore have a more continuing flow from your own students ... few losses and little inflow... And this in turn works in interaction with... with... a situation where you take in fewer problems. (Coordinating principal)

As illustrated by this quotation, avoiding the side-entry of new students is clearly linked to ‘taking in fewer problems’. Furthermore, avoiding such side-entry is considered to be made possible precisely by implementing a policy of limiting class groups and focusing on the students’ well-being, as this facilitates stable trajectories or a ‘continuing flow’ of the school’s own students. School A’s strategies to ‘hold on’ to its students is thus not only about getting its ‘own’ students to the finishing line of secondary education but also about limiting as much as possible an inflow of so-called school s/hoppers and the problems they are perceived to bring into the school.

Discussion

In the academic literature on early school leaving the issue of school mobility has received only limited attention. Nonetheless, empirical evidence suggests that non-promotional school changes between or during school years can have detrimental effects on students’ educational careers (Rumberger et al., 1999;

Gaspar et al., 2012; South et al., 2007; Swanston & Schneider, 1999; Lamote et al., 2013). In this chapter we focused on the role of school-level policy initiatives and practices in students' educational trajectories and, more particularly, their mobility between schools. We used a qualitative case study approach (Merriam 1998; 2009) and aimed to gain insight into how one urban secondary school in Flanders with a student body that predominantly consists of students with a migration background from families in socially vulnerable positions addresses the issue of school mobility in an attempt to facilitate so-called 'stable' educational trajectories and consequently also reduce early school leaving within its school. We analysed school documents and interview data as we were particularly interested in understanding (1) the school's strategies for increasing its 'holding power' as well as (2) the underlying rationale behind these strategies, from the point of view of the school management and the school staff.

As a result of several systemic features of the Flemish educational system – notably its certification system that steers students' educational trajectories and institutionalises 'downward mobility' within a context of rigid and early tracking, as well as the fundamental principle of free school choice – school mobility is a central part of secondary education in Flanders. In this context, addressing school mobility could be considered as something that is out of reach for schools. At the same time, the Flemish educational system attributes a high level of autonomy to individual schools. The findings of our study indicate that schools can use this autonomy to develop and implement initiatives that can limit school mobility by facilitating 'stable school careers.' However, it is only by acknowledging the role of schools in students' educational trajectories that such measures can come about. School A starts from this realisation and engages with the broader educational policy to 'create opportunities' to get their students to the finishing line of secondary education. Our analyses showed that, by focusing on the students' well-being within the school and by applying a mild certification policy and a system of permanent evaluation, School A is succeeding in increasing the number of students who have 'stable' school careers and in reducing the number of students who leave their school early. Focusing on students' feeling of well-being within the school is a desirable development and a noteworthy effort in a general context where school staff continue to situate the main causes of early school leaving predominantly outside the school's arena and responsibility (Kaye, D'Angelo, Ryan & Lőrinc, 2016). At the same time, our findings reveal that School A's efforts to increase their 'holding power' are also motivated by the school's wish to avoid the inflow of so-called school s/hoppers who enter the school between

or in the middle of school years. As these new students are associated with an influx of problematic behaviour and furthermore disrupt classroom dynamics, their joining the school is considered undesirable. By deliberately limiting the inflow of new students in an educational context where B and C certificates as well as expulsion practices are not uncommon, however, School A may be closing its doors to students in need of a new school and for whom School A and its different approach could be a viable alternative to turn their previous negative educational experiences round. The school's commitment to 'hold on to the ones they have' could thus result in excluding the ones that missed the opportunity to start their secondary educational career in School A. Moreover, while school-level policies like those implemented in School A can be successful in facilitating 'stable' educational trajectories, thereby also contributing to leading a so-called 'vulnerable' student body to the finishing line of upper secondary education, at the same such practices could entail the danger of reproducing prevailing educational inequalities. That is, by approaching a particular student population as 'problematic' and lowering educational expectations, for instance by assuming that not meeting specific curriculum targets is 'a price to pay' in order to obtain an educational qualification, schools may run the risk of confirming rather than contesting the existing status hierarchy between the different educational tracks and the prevalent deficit perspective (see also Stevens and Vandermeersch, 2010; Clycq et al., 2014).

In this chapter we focused on one particular theoretically relevant school to explore how this school deals with and perceives the issue of school mobility. To further our knowledge of how schools use the autonomy they are given within the Flemish educational system, it would be relevant to broaden the scope and study how other schools with a similar student body perceive this issue of school mobility and how they deal with it. Furthermore, as school mobility continues to be a regular occurrence, particularly among specific social groups and in the (lower-status) vocational tracks, avoiding the side entry of new students on the part of one school is likely to have an impact on other schools in the area. Further research could take a more holistic approach and look at the dynamics between various schools in the same area to gain insight into the effects of initiatives initiated in one particular school on other schools, and how these schools respond to such practices. Finally, our study started from the perceptions of the school management and school staff. Including the voices of the students and exploring their perceptions on issues of school mobility, (un)stable educational trajectories and early school leaving, and the role they attribute to the school and

their school personnel in these processes, could shed further light on the extent to which school practices and strategies influence their schooling experiences.

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Notes

- 1 In the international literature the terms '*school mobility*' and '*student mobility*' are used interchangeably. In this chapter we opt to use the term '*school mobility*' as our focus lies particularly on the issue of changing between *schools*, whereas in the Flemish educational context '*student mobility*' could also be understood as referring to changes between educational tracks within the same school, which is less our focus here.

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