

# Addressing school mobility in an attempt to reduce early school leaving: a case study of an urban high school in Antwerp (Flanders)

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# Overview

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# Resl.eu

- Multidisciplinary, mixed-method European research project on Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU (February 2013 – January 2018)
  - 9 countries: Belgium (Flanders), Netherlands, United Kingdom, Sweden, Spain, Poland, Portugal, *Austria* and *Hungary*
- Research areas in Flanders: focus on urban areas Antwerp (quantitative/qualitative) and Ghent (quantitative)

# Educational situation in Flanders

- Early tracking, hierarchical tracking structure
- Free school choice => Marketization of education
- Important social inequalities in education
  - SES one of the most important predictors
  - Other: immigration background, home language other than Dutch, gender
- Consequences
  - Segregation between and within schools
  - High amount of grade retention
  - High amount of school changes
  - Relatively high amount of ESL

# Educational situation in Flanders

## ➤ This presentation:

- Starting point is one of the dominant discourses among staff → *Linking (the amount of) school changes to ESL*
- The negative impact of (frequent) school changes is also suggested in the academic literature:
  - On the students: discontinuity of learning environment, loss of important social ties (e.g. South et al, 2007; Gesper et al, 2012)
  - On the peers, classroom, and school: e.g. instructional pace is slowed down (Kerbow et al, 1996), mobility introduces “chaos” factor and decreases teacher morale (Rumberger et al, 1999)
- How does an ‘exceptional’ school deal with this issue?

# School mobility: who is responsible?

- **Voluntary** school changes: e.g. school (s)hopping

*A real shopping culture has arisen in schools because of B- and C-certificates". (principal, school B)*

*"A lot of students change schools as much as they want, which has a huge impact on the proper progress in the classroom" [...] "The population changes a lot during the school year. This works very demotivating for the teachers and slows down the learning process of the class group".*

*(Principal, school C)*

➔ The pupil is responsible?

➔ But also 'reactive' school mobility (Rumberger et al, 1999) in response to negative experiences, so the schools are also responsible?

# School mobility: who is responsible?

- **Involuntary** school changes: difficult to capture the underlying processes
  - Suspension/expulsion policies and strategies
  - A-, B- or C-certification policies?
  - An important moment of involuntary school change: February each year
    - After the counting of pupils enrolled: funding scheme
- ➔ The schools are responsible?

## Case study School A

‘We hold on to the ones we have’

# Data collection

- Empirical data collected in school A (similar approach in 4 other schools in Antwerp)
  - School policy document analysis
  - 2 individual interviews: School principal & Coordinating principal
  - 1 FGD: 5 pupils
  - 1 FGD: 8 teachers
  - Individual interviews with 2 pupils

# Case study – School A

- Publicly funded but privately operated Catholic school
- RESL.eu data (173 pupils - 2014)
  - Pupil population: more than 80% Moroccan origin (= neighbourhood).
  - SES family:
    - Less than 50% of fathers has paid work; only 16% of mothers.
    - 65% the fathers and 81% of the mothers have no degree of secondary education
  - 53% of the pupils changed school at least once in secondary education (SE) and 30% more than once.
- Ministry of Education database:
  - 75% experienced (1 or more years of) grade retention in 2012
  - EEO indicators (2014-2015)
    - 85% of the pupils' mothers have no degree of secondary education, 71% receive a scholarship, 67% do not have Dutch as their home language, 94% live in a neighbourhood characterized by high levels of educational backlog

➔ Theoretically high 'at risk' student body

# Case study – School A

- But School A does score exceptionally well compared to the other RESL.eu schools (total of 41)
  - global self-esteem (2nd);
  - academic self-concept (3rd);
  - social and school support from parents (3rd /1st);
  - overall high school engagement (emotional, cognitive and behavioural)

# Perceptions on school mobility

- Inflow of pupils who change schools is associated with inflow of problem behaviour, truancy, school fatigue

*“I think that you can tell who comes from outside. I really think so. I won’t name any names, but last year I had a pupil and I was like ‘what did they do to you in your last school? What did they do to you? That first of all you talk to pupils like this, talk to teachers like this’.” (teacher A, School A)*

- Many of the pupils who eventually drop out from School A originally come from other schools

*“I also think that the drop, that the people who drop out, that most of the time they have been school hoppers” (teacher B, School A)*

- Pupils who stay in School A throughout their secondary school career graduate more often and show less problematic grades and behaviour

# Perceptions on school mobility

The role of the broader educational context:

- Flemish certification policy is considered to cause school mobility and allows schools to 'pass on the problem' to other schools

*"those (schools) who give C-certificates often don't experience the consequences of it, because these pupils indeed change schools" (coordinating principle school A)*

- The high amount of school changes in the Flemish education system as a result of this certification policy that leads to a high level of grade retention is seen as a main cause for ESL

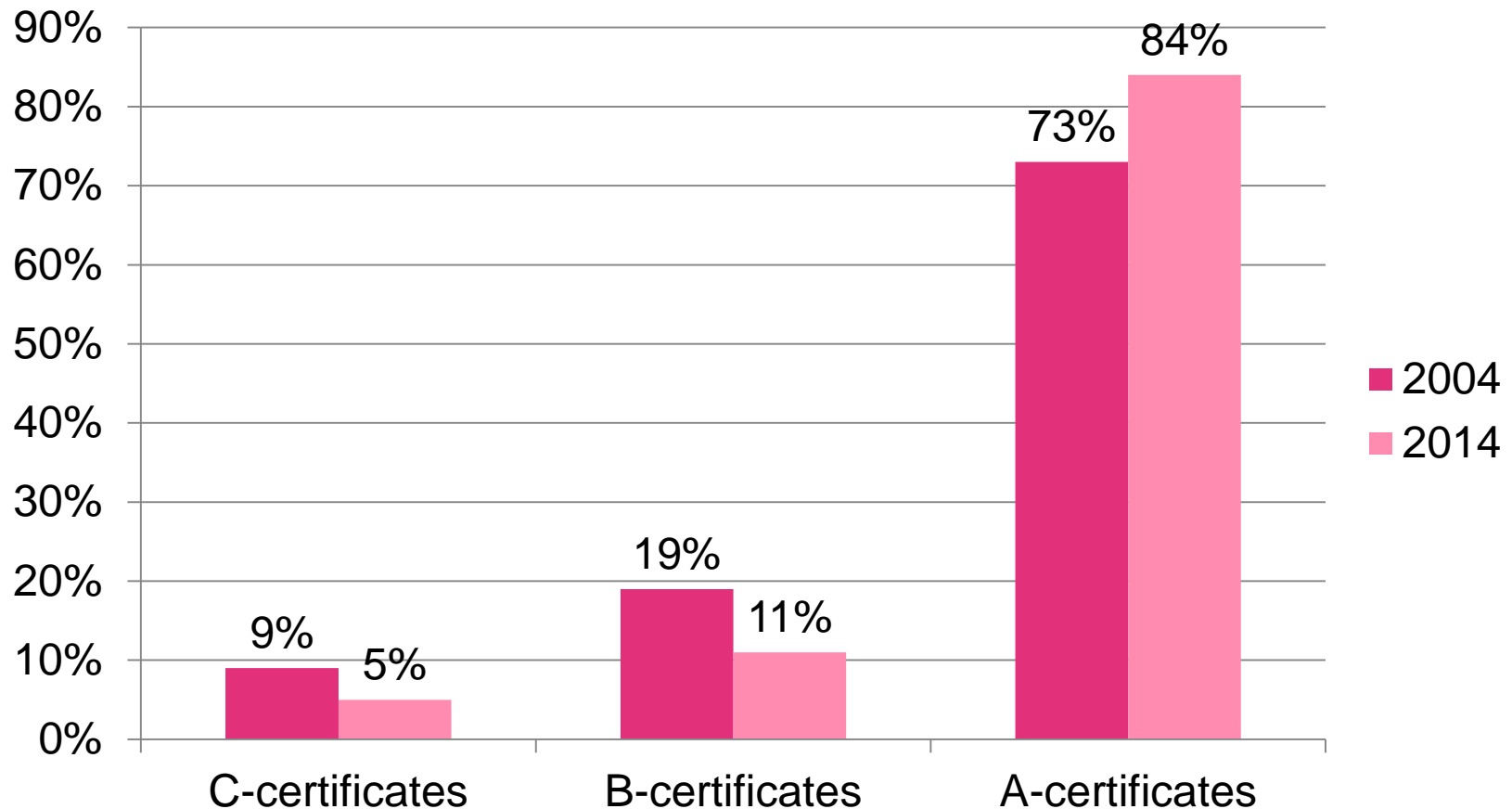
➔ What can a school do?

# School A policy strategies

- According to the principle, reducing ESL requires a comprehensive approach in which the focus lies on a continuous flow of their own students, and (in)voluntary outflow and inflow of pupils is limited
- Strategies:
  - 'Mild' certification policy to avoid grade retention
  - Permanent evaluation and feedback moments as EWS
  - Suspension/expulsion ≠ answer to behavioural problems
  - Small class sizes and limiting the amount of classes
  - Focus on well-being of pupils and teachers

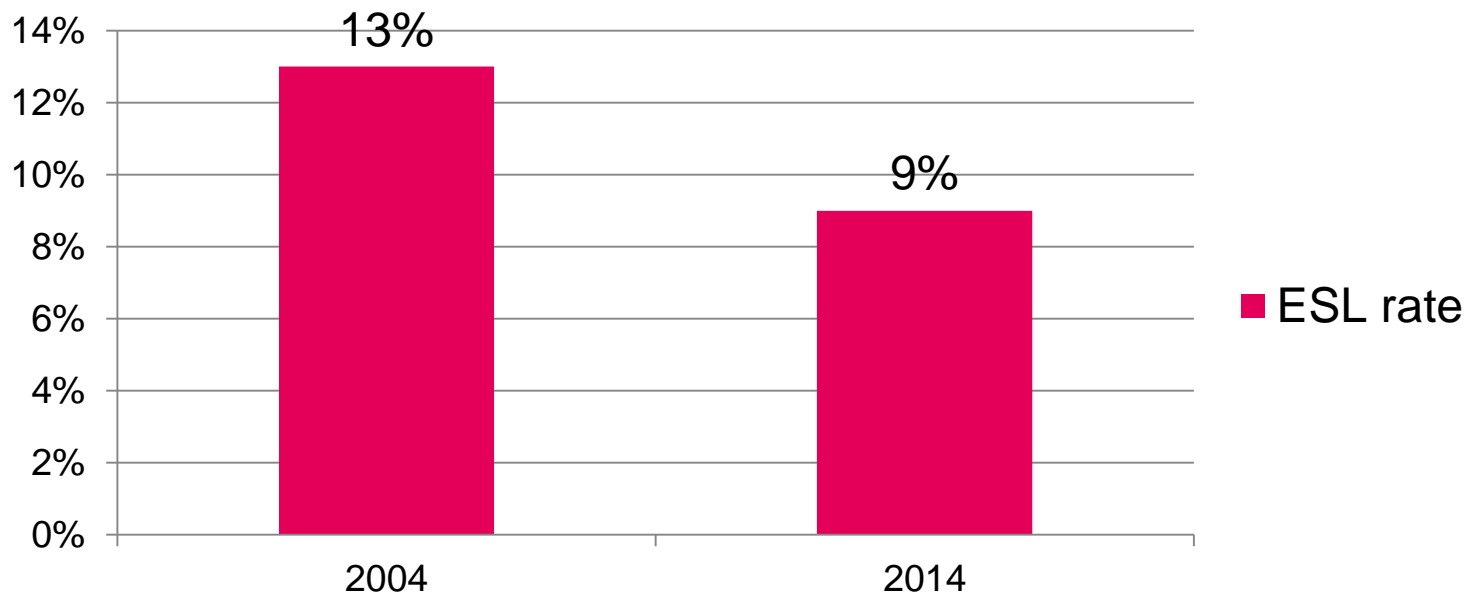
*"I believe that the pupils here with us get the feeling, maybe that sounds a bit sentimental and soft, but that they do feel that they belong. That doesn't take away that sometimes it's very difficult and that things happen, there are fights, for example a window getting smashed, but still, it was a lot worse seven or eight years ago. Then we had more inflow, more turmoil in school, more C-certificates, yes, that whole spiral"*  
(principal, school A)

# Certification strategy



# Evolution of ESL rates

*“The investments of the school in keeping the pupils in school by implementing this comprehensive school policy has resulted in lower ESL rates.” (school principal school A)*



# Consequences: becoming an inclusive-exclusive school

*“ By keeping the class sizes limited and therefore have a more continuing flow from your own pupils... few losses and few inflow... And this in its turn works in interaction with... with... a situation where you take in less problems.”*

(principal school A)

- By limiting class sizes in the higher years, the school deliberately tries to limit the inflow of pupils that change schools throughout their secondary school career (and are associated with problematic behaviour), thus ‘excluding’ other students

# Consequences: becoming an inclusive/exclusive school

- Some schools in the area (can) complain that this policy hinders the other schools as they cannot refer their students to school A because of its limited inflow
  - While other schools want to copy this strategy
- This policy seems to ‘contradict’ the Flemish educational principle of ‘free school choice’
  - But it is applied for a ‘good cause’?

# Conclusion

- School A does very well
  - Lower ESL rates
  - Pupils feel supported and are engaged
- School policy 'engages' with broader educational policy and
- Can it work when it stands alone in the educational field? When it operates in a 'grey area'?

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