

R|E|S|L.eu

Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe

A narrative approach to explore youngsters' lived experiences on schooling and early school leaving: the stories of Karim and Simon

Rut Van Caudenberg

Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman

University of Antwerp, CeMIS

CIEYE 2017, Barcelona 13 July 2017

R|E|S|L.eu

Reducing Early
School Leaving
in Europe

*This project has received funding from the
European Union's Seventh Framework Programme
for research, technological development and demonstration
under grant agreement no 320223.*



Introduction

- Focus of the paper:
 - Analyze school narratives of 2 ESLs in Antwerp (Flanders) who speak from different locations in terms of their migration background, SES and educational trajectory
 - Explore what it means for them to be at school
 - Explore how do their different social situations and socio-demographic features impact on their schooling experiences
- ➔ Part of PhD research in RESL.eu project

Flemish educational system

- Dominant narrative: meritocratic and neutral system of equal access and opportunity
- ↔ reality of strong **social and ethnic stratification processes** that influence students' educational trajectories (Groenez et al, 2009; Duquet et al, 2005; Clycq et al, 2014)
 - Early and rigid tracking into hierarchically structured tracks with different levels of social prestige
 - Downward mobility between tracks; (almost) no upward mobility
 - High level of autonomy for schools and teachers to evaluate students ~> teacher bias
- Flanders has one of the largest **inequalities in educational outcomes** (PISA 2015)
 - Students with migration and/or lower SES background highly overrepresented in lower-esteemed vocational track, experience more grade retention, are more likely to leave school early

Data & Methods

- 2 youngsters are part of larger sample (n=18) of ESLs in Antwerp (Flanders)
 - **Simon:** 21 y/o, native Belgian, middle class; 2 years of grade retention and 3 school changes before leaving education early and changing to adult education at age 19
 - **Karim:** 21 y/o, 2nd generation Moroccan origin, working class; 3 years of grade retention and 5 school changes before leaving education early at age 21
- Data collection via in-depth semi-structured interviews
 - Interviewed twice with approx. 9 months between each interview
- Thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008)
- Representation of the data via 'narrative portraits' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013)
 - Bring voices of the youngsters to the forefront
 - Illuminate underlying mechanisms and processes

Simon

“If in mainstream secondary education you have to repeat the year, you have to repeat everything even if you only failed two courses for example. **So then it's like the stuff you actually already know, you have to repeat it.** For instance, I've always been bad at French, al-ways. Very often it came down to French and one or two other courses that I had to repeat everything and then **I used to get really mad at French ...** During the year I always tried to cooperate very much and it all went pretty good I thought. But then there are the exams. **I really think that's a pity that a few weeks can actually ruin an entire year. But those are the rules of the school, right. That's how the system works...**”

Schooling experience

- **Criticizes systemic features** of educational system
 - Linear system → difficulties with a few courses obstruct educational progress
 - courses = object of frustration
 - “*I used to get really mad at French*”
 - Focus on exams overshadows efforts made during the year
- But does not question that **those are the rules by which to play** and *‘that is how the system works’*
- Changing to adult education not considered act of ESL but choosing another way to obtain his diploma

“I do not think that it’s the school’s job to hold onto the students, I think that it’s more their job to actually show the students like ‘look, these are actually all the possibilities, and did you already take a good look at all of that?’”

Simon

“As a student I was a bit of class clown... I always participated in the lessons and stuff, when it interested me, but I also talked a lot, I drew a lot during class, did stuff on my phone, played games with classmates when the teacher wasn't looking... I never had a fight with the teachers. They were always very hopeful for me, well, most of the time. And every year at the end of the year, the same explanation 'look we believe in you but you just have to try harder'. I really didn't do a lot... The teachers tried to keep me in school. But for example, extra classes, I never really went to them. That was my own fault. They did try to invite me for it.... I think motivation was the biggest problem. My parents really tried to motivate me. For me it was either really interesting and then it all went perfectly, or I was like, 'what use will this have in my life? I don't think this is important enough.' And that's entirely my own fault, I think. Although there are some things that I think could be a little different. Like, for instance, the modular system [from adult education]. I thought that was much easier to find motivation for.”

The impact of the teachers and sense-of-self

- Considers himself ‘a bit of a class clown’ who did not always pay attention in class
 - ⇔ did not impact his relationship with teachers who **remained ‘hopeful’, voiced their belief in him**, and tried to keep him in school
- ‘non-succeeding’ in mainstream education mainly seen as a **result of his ‘lack of motivation’**
 - but also about the way schooling is organized
 - ~ linear system versus modular system

“[with the modular system] you just think like ‘yes, ok just finish this module and then that’s also finished, then that’s done with.’ And I also think that’s why the modules are so much better, because you will be less likely to quit.”

Simon

“What it was like when I obtained my diploma? I had expected much more of it. Finally done with it, and then it was like ‘ah ok’. There was this ceremony, but nothing special or anything. You know, for the people who organize it, it’s the same thing every year right, people who graduate. To be honest I also missed half of the ceremony because I was too late and I also didn’t think it was very interesting. For me it was actually just like ‘now I have my diploma, now I can get on with my life’. It was mainly that. I think my studies just took much longer than they should’ve taken. I think I could’ve done more with my life by now. Just a real pity that I made so little effort to get the motivation for it.”

Value of a diploma

- Needed this diploma to be able to *‘get on with his life’*
- Not having obtained his diploma in what is considered the ‘normal’ way makes him feel like he **wasted time and is disappointing people**
- Considers his schooling experience as a ‘failure’ even if he obtained his diploma

*“When people ask about my studies **I have to disappoint them**. That it just didn’t work out for me. That studying is not for me.”*

Karim

“Why I started secondary education in BSO? Corruption. ‘Hup hup BSO’, that’s how I got there. The teachers probably don’t feel like explaining the difference between educational tracks, so they say ‘that’s an allochthone [person with a migration background], he probably won’t make an effort so we send him to BSO.’ I don’t think that’s ok. I actually would have liked to try ASO or TSO. (...)”

[Year 3 in School 4], top year, the teachers were great. Then year 4 also in [School 4] but on a different campus and everything changed; stricter teachers, stricter rules. I really went through to a lot there, fights with teachers. I thought ‘I’m never going to make it’, but they gave me an A-certificate and then I thought ‘the best thing I can do now is to change school because say I stay here, maybe they will get me next year and make me repeat my year.’”

Schooling experience

- Sees his start in the (low-status) vocational track as a result of **teachers' prejudices** against students with a migration background ('*allochthones*')
 - Aware of stigmatizing views teachers hold (unconsciously), particularly towards students of Moroccan and Turkish background (Nouwen & Clycq, 2006)
- Start in vocational track considered a result of **unequal educational opportunities** rather than matter of educational skills or interests
- Frequent school changes
 - **relationship with teachers !**

Changes school with A-certificate because of bad relationship with teachers; did not trust they would give him a fair chance

- '*maybe they will get me next year and make me repeat my year*'
- Good relationship with teachers considered crucial to be able to proceed successfully through education

Karim

“I’m someone who gets distracted easily. But when the teacher spoke to me privately then I could concentrate on that during the next classes. But that didn’t happen most of the time. They mostly shouted through the classroom... **When I thought I was being mocked, I talked back to them. Then I was told to leave. That was often a problem... Teachers who purely abuse their power.** ‘We’ll see who will laugh at the end of the year, we’ll see how your grades will be.’ My grades... they make them lower. I really went through a lot of situations. More and more frustrations. **The teachers always said that I’m someone who contradicts a lot. But actually I just have my honour.** *‘You’re the teacher, you should be teaching us. You don’t have to belittle us. That’s not how it works.’* They always get the final word. **Sorry for saying so, but they’ve got a fucked up system. In the end they’re playing with your future. They don’t care.** It’s easy to simply give a C-certificate. [Name school] is actually a pretty good school. A lot of people say that. But it’s the teachers who change that. Who ruin the school.

And I think it’s a shame...”

The impact of the teachers and the sense-of-self

- Relationship with teachers = relationships of **unequal power dynamics and conflict**
- Defended his 'honour' and resisted to stigmatized identity by *'talking back'*
 - ⇔ treated as mere deviant behaviour by the teachers which led to *'more and more frustrations'*
 - the teachers *'don't care'*, play with his future, and ruin what is actually a *'good school'*
- Relationship with teachers **strongly influences connection with school**; the system is *'fucked up'* and he thus no longer believes he can succeed in it
- Questions **legitimacy** of an educational system of unequal educational opportunities and unfair treatment

Karim

“I’m working for a car rental company now, but I’m trying to get a full-time job.

Once I have that, I’m going to combine it with the central examination commission, so that I can get my diploma. I can’t go around without a diploma. My whole family has a diploma. My mother wouldn’t be proud of me. Suppose I find a perfect job, then there’d still be some part of me saying: “No, you need to get your diploma.” I think it’s a very important document. I want to be able to proudly tell people: ‘Yes, I’ve graduated’. Because for most people, I’d say racists and the like, they look at you like: ‘Do you have a diploma? No?’ Then they think: ‘Ah, he’s on welfare. He’s from that neighbourhood. It’s one of those people.’ But when you say: ‘Yes, I’ve graduated. I’ve got my diploma’, then they would look at you in a more positive light. And I would like that.”

Value of a diploma

- Questions legitimacy of the education system but does not question importance of obtaining a diploma
- Obtaining his diploma not about having an entry-ticket to the labour market but interpreted as a **symbol of personal achievement...**

- *“I want to be able to proudly tell people ‘Yes, I’ve graduated’”*

... and a way to protect himself against discriminatory and racist perceptions and practices, and challenging stereotypes

Conclusion

Narrative approach = useful lens to explore how broader educational context and social contexts like school intertwine with individual experiences

- While Simon's narrative shows some critique of systemic features of the educational system, as a member of the dominant group he 'escapes' teacher bias and perceives his schooling experience mainly an **individual story of 'no motivation'**. The legitimacy of schools and the educational system itself is not questioned, teachers do their job and obtaining a diploma is about being able to move on
- Karim's narrative shows a much more **profound critique of the educational system**, in which he feels negatively stigmatized by teachers, deprived of educational opportunities. This ultimately makes him feel he cannot succeed in this system. Wanting to obtain a diploma becomes a proof of resistance to 'prove people wrong'

→ Importance of being aware of youngsters' various experiences and critiques, and context in which these are shaped, if efforts to tackle ESL are to be successful for all youngsters

Thank you!