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Long and winding roads: educational decision-making of youngsters at risk of early school leaving in Flanders

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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of youngsters are at risk of early school leaving. In this study, we examine educational decision-making of inner-city youth during their educational trajectories and how this could contribute to the decision to leave school without an educational qualification. Based on interviews with 34 youngsters in a Flemish city (Antwerp, Belgium; 2014–2016), our findings show that the educational trajectories of these youngsters were very diverse in terms of educational choices, characterized by frequent, illogical movements across fields of study, institutions and type of educational programmes. These educational trajectories can be seen as the result of a series of short-term decisions made throughout the school career, in which youngsters relied on the information available within their social networks. Educational decisions seemed influenced by the often precarious living conditions in which these youngsters live. The value of education is constantly negotiated against the importance of other life domains.

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Introduction

Reducing early school leaving (ESL) has become a critical matter on policy and research agendas. Educational qualifications are increasingly important for young people to enter more specialised educational and training opportunities and to prepare them for the labour market (European Commission. Education and Training 2013). Nevertheless, the study of ESL remains a difficult task, as the causes of ESL are situated at different levels, are complex and interact with each other. Previous studies have focused on the interplay of contributing factors at home, at school and/or in the labour market (Bradley and Renzulli 2011). Over the years, research has increasingly approached ESL as a process (Rumberger and Ah Lim 2008; Lamote et al. 2013b). Following this line of thought, in this study, we aim to study both the educational trajectories of early school leavers and those who stayed enrolled in technical and vocational educational programmes in Flanders (northern part of Belgium). More specifically, we will examine the decisions these young people have made during their educational careers and how these

decisions have shaped their educational trajectories. This research focus could help to gain more insight in the extent to which the required knowledge to successfully navigate and make informed choices within the Flemish educational system contributes to processes leading to early school leaving.

Early school leaving in Flanders

Previous research on ESL in Flanders found that gender, migration background, and socio-economic status of the family are important background characteristics associated with a higher risk of early school leaving (Lamote et al. 2013a). Moving beyond these socio-demographic risk factors, attention shifted towards educational factors (truancy, grade retention, school mobility) and processes leading to ESL. Studies indicate that especially students enrolled in vocational tracks in secondary education tend to show lower levels of behavioural, cognitive and emotional school engagement (Lamote et al. 2013c; see also Lamote et al. 2013b; Demanet and Van Houtte 2014, 2015) and a higher sense of futility (Van Houtte and Stevens 2016) compared to students enrolled in other tracks. This is an interesting finding as especially these students are found to be at higher risk of ESL (Lamote et al. 2013a). Van Houtte and Stevens (2016) inquired whether the higher tendency to leave school early in vocational tracks or to repeat a year was related to the students' heightened participation in paid employment after school. They found that students in vocational tracks were indeed more frequently involved in paid employment after school; however this was not related to school attainment. Other studies focused more on changes during young people's school career to understand ESL. Lamote et al. (2013c), for instance, examined the different growth trajectories of students' school engagement in secondary education. Students that show low levels of both behavioural and emotional school engagement at the beginning of secondary education, have a higher risk of becoming early school leavers later on in their educational career. Van Caudenberg et al. (2018b) found that events or experiences, such as repeated grade retention, do not necessarily have the same effect on youngsters' educational trajectories. Their study illustrates, how in an socio-ethnically stratified educational system, one's social position influences the availability of supporting and/or protective factors. Finally, Keppens and Spruyt (2018) found that truancy across Europe is a warning signal in the processes leading to early school leaving. Their findings show that both Dutch and French-speaking educational systems in Belgium are characterised by low truancy rates and high rates of early school leaving. According to the authors, this could be due to educational policies that stimulate school actors to push students that play truant to leave school directly.

Other studies examined the ways in which institutional arrangements and school cultures and practices, play a role during young people's educational trajectories and decision-making processes leading to ESL. A study by Van Houtte and Demanet (2016) shows that especially in vocational tracks, compared to other tracks, teachers' shared beliefs about the teachability of students played a larger role in students' intentions to leave school early, regardless of the perceived teacher support and sense of futility among students. Compared to students in academic tracks, students enrolled in vocational and technical tracks, were already at higher risk of leaving school early as they were more likely to plan to leave secondary education without educational qualification. Furthermore, Van Caudenberg et al. (2018a) show how school staff deal with ESL and introduce school level policies to limit outgoing and incoming school mobility, in an attempt to both reduce their risk of ESL and

avoid the side-entry of new students whom the school staff associate with problematic school behaviour. Finally, institutional arrangements and agents were found to matter for processes leading to ESL as they determine the moment and the extent to which students are allowed to switch between fields of study or tracks (Van Praag et al. 2018). Overall, these studies indicate that paying attention to decision-making processes during the educational trajectories of young people at risk of early school leaving is crucial when studying ESL.

Educational decision-making of students at risk of ESL

In Flanders, most attention has been given to the crucial institutionalised transition moments (i.e. transition from primary to secondary education, at the end of each year/grade) (Spruyt, Laurijssen, and Van Dorsselaer 2009; Boone and Van Houtte 2013a, 2013b; Thys and Van Houtte 2016), which are similar for all students. Decisions to change tracks/schools/fields of study at unforeseen moments, such as during the school year or when leaving school early, are far more difficult to grasp and less documented in the existing literature. For instance, students have to make educational choices after being told they may not continue in a particular track, or after being forced to change school/tracks/fields of study, due to disciplinary issues, poor results, suggested career reorientation by teachers, or when they feel they do not belong in school (Spruyt, Laurijssen, and Van Dorsselaer 2009; Van Praag et al. 2015). These choices are often more negative in nature, and the available options are sometimes limited (e.g. because of track/school exclusion) (Spruyt and Laurijssen 2010). Existing studies in this field remain limited to full-time secondary education, and focus on students that are still in school. Gaining more insight into decision-making processes at foreseen and unforeseen transition moments adds to a better understanding of processes leading to ESL (Lamote et al. 2013b). Moreover, examining the support and guidance received during decision-making could provide tools to prevent ESL (Thomson et al. 2002).

In this study, we build on three theoretical perspectives: the cultural reproduction theory, rational choice theory and social capital theory (see Boone and Van Houtte 2013a). Put shortly, adherents of the cultural reproduction theory focus on the role of cultural resources young people and their parents have at their disposal. Students and parents from higher social classes have more knowledge about the education system enabling them to navigate through it with ease (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Reay 2004; Devine 2004; Draelants and Ballatore 2014). Proponents of the rational choice theory, on the other hand, claim that young people and their parents consider costs and benefits of all different educational options and their chances of success within each educational alternative (Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). Finally, the third line of research in this field, focuses on the importance of social capital to gather different kinds of information within parents' social networks, which is used when making educational choices (Ball 2003; Jaeger and Holm 2007; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Devine 2004). These three lines of research have found partial evidence for the explanation of social class differences in choice processes. Examining students at risk of early school leaving could add interesting insights in the functioning of decision-making processes, and the interplay between timing, opportunity and identity during educational trajectories (Thomson et al. 2002).

In the present study, we use a qualitative approach to understand the perceived and experienced difficulties socially disadvantaged inner-city youth encounter when making educational choices during their educational career and how these decisions possibly result

in early school leaving. We focus on a group of students at risk of early school leaving that consists out of both young people who left education without qualification, and others still enrolled in education but who have an increased likelihood of leaving school early. By selecting this group, we acknowledge the processual nature of ESL (Rumberger and Ah Lim 2008), and intend to study whether there are triggering factors during decision making processes in these trajectories that contribute to the decision to remain in education, or to leave school without an educational qualification. Hence, this study adds to the literature on educational choice by studying a specific group of students. We will use a qualitative approach to examine young people's narratives on the changes in their educational trajectories. This approach is particularly suitable to consider the often temporary and processual nature of early school leaving (Keskiner and Crul 2018).

The Flemish educational system

The Flemish educational system offers an interesting case to study educational trajectories and decision-making as it is very open to individual decision making (Boone and Van Houtte 2013a, 2013b; Van Praag et al. 2015). In this educational system, track choice (and therefore often school choice) plays a decisive role in the organization of schooling. At the start of secondary education, students are grouped into either A- or B-stream, which roughly prepares students for a further career in, respectively, an academic or a vocational track. After the second year, students are grouped into four tracks (academic (ASO), arts (KSO), technical (TSO) and vocational education (BSO)), each of which comprises particular fields of study. These tracks are commonly hierarchically classified by level of abstraction and theorizing; academic education is widely regarded as the most prestigious and demanding track, while technical and vocational tracks are placed at the bottom of this ladder. This institutional set-up has given rise to specific patterns of track choice. As there are no standardized tests, and advice given by teachers or student counsellors is non-binding, students and their parents enjoy considerable freedom when making educational choices and refining these over the course of their educational career. Transitions during students' secondary school career are institutionalized by certificates (A, B, C) given by teachers at the end of each school year. An A-certificate means one can pass to the following year without restrictions, a B-certificate means one can pass on condition of changing to a 'less demanding' field of study or track, a C-certificate means one has to repeat a year. These specific features of the Flemish system have resulted in a tendency to start secondary education in the most demanding and prestigious fields of study. Whenever students encounter learning difficulties, receive a B- or C-certificate or lose their interest in the courses offered, they change to less appreciated and less demanding tracks or fields of study.

Methods

Data were collected between 2014 and 2016 as part of a large-scale mixed-method study on early school leaving in the EU (RESL.eu project, 2013–2018; Clycq, Nouwen, and Timmerman 2014). Quantitative data collection for the RESL.eu project in Flanders involved two waves of student-surveys that were administered in inner-city schools that provided technical and/or vocational education and in alternative learning arenas (i.e. part-time work-based education and adult "second chance" education) in two Flemish cities. Subsequent, qualitative

research focused on the city of Antwerp, characterised by the highest percentage of early school leavers in Flanders (20.9% in 2015–2016, Flemish Department of Education, 2018) as well as the highest levels of youth unemployment in Flanders (VDAB 2017). In this city, qualitative data collection included two rounds of semi-structured in-depth interviews with young people that were purposefully selected based on their initial educational status: 16 youngsters were still enrolled in vocational or technical tracks in a regular secondary school, 9 youngsters were enrolled in alternative learning arenas (i.e. second chance schools for adults, part-time vocational education and training programmes and apprenticeships track that combine learning and working) and 9 youngsters were contacted that had left regular secondary education without an upper secondary education qualification (ISCED level 3), in line with the definition of the European Commission. Education and Training (2013) of early school leavers. The latter were recruited through local youth initiatives (5 respondents) or selected because they participated in the first round of the survey but had left school (and had provided their contact details) before the second wave of data collection (4 respondents).

For the 16 students still enrolled in regular education at the time of the first interview, we selected respondents with an “at risk” profile for ESL based on their socio-demographic and educational background variables administered in the survey (cfr. Lamote et al. 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Demanet and Van Houtte 2014). The majority of them were enrolled in vocational tracks. Within a selection of four case schools with low levels of overall mean teacher support in the survey, youngsters with “at risk” profiles were selected from four quadrants based on the combination of the highest and lowest quartiles of levels of school engagement and social support. We purposefully selected students with various combined levels of school engagement and social support, both of which have been shown to correlate strongly with the risk of ESL. By doing so, we aimed to study more in-depth to which extent perceived social support of parents, teachers and peers play a role in helping youngsters navigate through the Flemish educational system.

We draw on interviews that were conducted with 34 respondents in and outside of regular secondary education. The youngsters were asked to participate in two interviews, with at least six months of time in between each one. We were able to interview 25 of the original 34 youngsters during the second interview wave. The reasons for attrition were geographic and school mobility. In addition, we were not able to reach some of the youngsters because they had changed their phone numbers. In total, 5 first generation immigrants, 20 second generation immigrants and 9 respondents of Belgian descent were interviewed; most coming from families with a lower socio-economic status. In Figure 1, we present an overview of the socio-demographic characteristics and the educational trajectories of the youngsters interviewed. In this table, changes within tracks are not charted, as this would make it too complex.

We applied a grounded theory approach to analyse the data, starting from themes that emerged during interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Questions for the biographical interviews revolved around nine themes: “Educational trajectories”, ‘Aspirations and motivations’, “School-related and study behaviour”, “Connectedness to School & Education”, “Employment experiences”, “Perceived challenges and resilience”, “Social networks”. These themes also formed the basis for the general coding tree, which formed the starting point for more in-depth analyses that focused upon the educational trajectories of the youngsters. We first asked the respondents about their educational

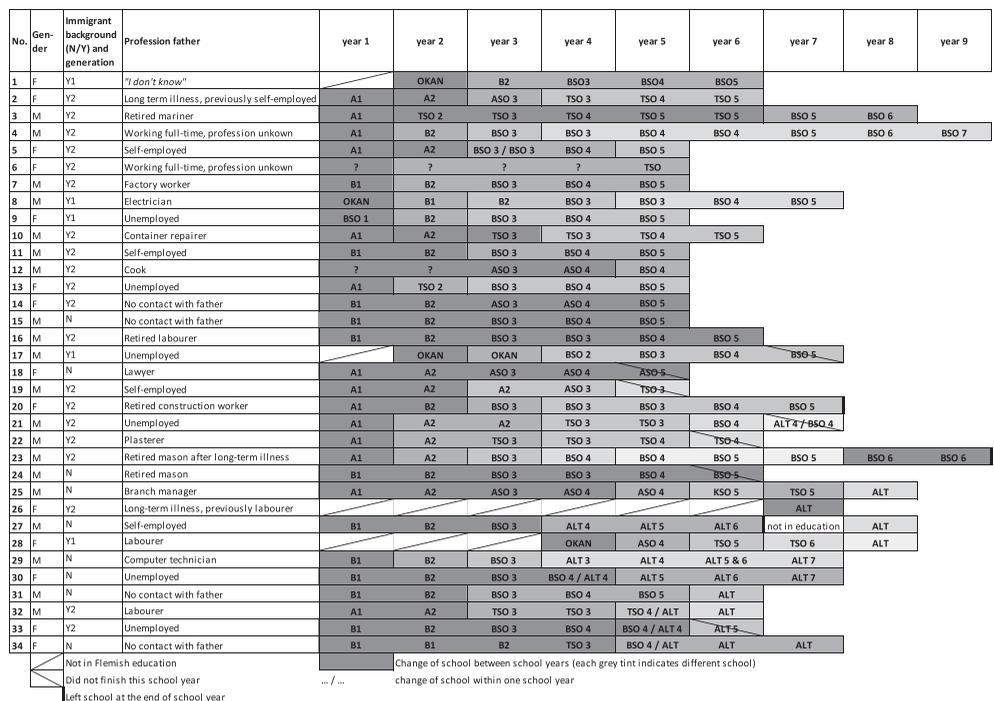


Figure 1. Socio-demographic features and educational trajectories of the respondents in secondary education until first interview¹.

trajectories by asking about the schools, programmes and the tracks in which they were enrolled. For every change, we asked why they had changed between tracks and fields of study. However, to delve deeper into the decision-making processes that lie at the basis of youngsters’ educational trajectories, we also selected the interview extracts in which respondents discussed other aspects related to their school career, which were often touched upon or triggered when discussing the other eight themes. This allowed us to fully understand all decision-making processes that have an impact on youngsters’ trajectories in education. All citations are translated from Dutch and edited by the authors to facilitate legibility.

Results

Inconsistent educational trajectories

A first conclusion we could draw from our analyses was that nearly all respondents seemed to have followed very complex, diverse routes through Flemish education. These routes often seemed illogical in that they do not prepare these students for a particular career and as recent choices were not necessarily in line with previous choices. Nor do they seem in line with their educational and occupational interests, skills or competences. For instance, youngsters changed from childcare courses to hairdresser courses, from office courses to car mechanics courses, often in various kinds of educational institutions, as shown by Youngster 32:

Youngster 32 (Male, second generation immigrant, father works as a labourer, alternative learning arena): ‘First, I enrolled two years in “Sports” in City X at School X. The first year, I got an A-certificate [pass to the next year] and I could still continue and then the second year I got a B-certificate. Then I went to School Y in City Y, and I enrolled in “Social-technical sciences’. Then, I had to repeat this year, then I got a B-certificate. Then I couldn’t stay at that school either so I went to School Z.’

Interviewer: “You couldn’t stay at the school because there was no vocational secondary education or?”

Youngster 32: “Yeah, exactly. I actually had a B-certificate which excluded me from STW [social-technical sciences], so I had to look for another field of study again. And then, I wanted to take up hotel studies, so I went to the School Z in City Z. Then the fourth year. And then, that lasted until February, I think, and then that ended as well.(...)”

Interviewer: “And then at the end of the year ... ”

Youngster 32: “No, I didn’t even finish that.”

Interviewer: “Did they advise you to do something different then or did you say ... ?”

Youngster 32: “No, I got thrown out of that school actually so I had no other choice.”

The educational trajectory of Youngster 32 illustrates how educational trajectories appear to be made out of a series of seemingly illogical decisions, involving frequent changes of schools and study careers, in which long-term consequences are not always considered. The account of Youngster 32 furthermore shows how these educational choices do not occur randomly during a youngsters’ school career but are triggered by failing a year or a specific course, by the certificate received at the end of the school year or by expulsion from school. Moreover, these outcomes were frequently triggered by particular problematic school behaviour or incidences/living conditions outside school. For instance, Youngster 11 (Male, Belgian descent, self-employed father, vocational education) stated that: “*Yes, I fought, as self-defence. Yes, like the previous year, if I fight again or do something similar, they will expel me from school.*” In the next section, we will examine the (repeated) decision-making processes of these youngsters more in-depth.

Random educational choices?

Many of the youngsters in our sample had to make more educational choices than the minimum that the educational system requires students to make (at the end of year 2 and year 4). When taking a closer look at the decision-making processes, our analyses suggest that, at first sight, educational choices seem to be inspired by coincidental factors, meetings and events. The youngsters did not appear to be fully informed about all possible alternatives. Moreover, they seemed unaware of the long-term consequences of their choices and appeared to be guided by no clear aspirations. The difficulties searching for information about educational alternatives were related to the lack of clear and consistent aspirations:

Interviewer: “How did you notice, like ‘I don’t really belong here [academic education]’?”

Youngster 13 (Female, second generation immigrant, father is unemployed, vocational education): “For example, if we had to prepare for a test, or most of the time, we even had to prepare for two tests in one day, everyone else was stressing, studying and reviewing over and over again. But I sat there, like ‘I don’t have to do this, that’s not

necessary [for me].’ If you don’t study at home, then [the next day], it will not help to repeat only part of the course. That’s how I used to think. So I thought like, ‘those are ‘real’ students, they really want to go for something like this’. I was more like waiting, deciding whether this [course/school] was right for me or not? I also didn’t know what I was going to do, or what I wanted to do, I didn’t really have a vision.”

Interviewer: “Did you have the feeling that the other students or classmates had a vision?”

Youngster 13: “Yes, for example during a class, it was like ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ We had to make an entire PowerPoint presentation and stuff about that. And I didn’t know exactly, I gave multiple options but back then, I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do. And they were immediately like ‘I want to be a professor, I want to be a doctor’. So I thought yes, they all have something in mind. I also think that’s the reason why you will put more effort into school because you are focusing on one goal. And I didn’t really have a goal. Studying, like I said, it’s not really something for me, so that’s why.”

As illustrated by Youngster 13, having no clear aspirations for the future seemed to be related to students’ motivation to put effort in school (e.g. studying for tests and doing their homework) and to search for all educational options available. For others, like Youngster 23, it appeared that obtaining an educational qualification is in itself often more important than actually preparing for a specific profession.

Youngster 23 (Male, second generation immigrant, father is retired after a long-term illness, vocational education): “Suppose I find a job which is perfect for me for the coming – for about ten years. Even though I would know that, I would have a job for ten years, then I am good to go for ten years. Then there would still be some part of me saying: ‘No, you need to get your diploma.’ So, I think it’s a very important document. It’s just important to have it, to be able to carry it around.”

This search for an educational qualification – regardless which one – coincides with the increasing credentialism in society (Herremans, Vansteenkiste, and Sourbron 2016), however, it does not help students make informed and meaningful educational choices. Obtaining an educational qualification can be seen as a motivation to put effort into school and to achieve a good future. However, merely being focused on getting educational qualifications could also result, in practice, in disengaging from school, as it is merely an extrinsic motivation to study.

While the educational decisions of the youngsters appeared to be random at first sight, upon closer scrutiny, these choices seemed guided by people within their social networks. For instance, youngster 33 (Female, second generation migrant, father works as a labourer) knew of the existence of part-time learning “*because I had girlfriends that were enrolled in part-time*”. Youngster 29 also demonstrates the importance of social networks:

Interviewer: “How did you know about part-time learning?”

Youngster 29 (Male, Belgian background, father works as a computer technician, alternative learning arena): “That was actually via a friend who went to part-time [education] and then I also wondered to myself like ‘Part-time! What is that?’ and he replied: ‘Three days working and two days school’ and I already thought like ‘Okay, that’s

appealing' and because I was so tired of school, I began to ask for it and I immediately went for it."

In this sense, the composition of youngsters' networks and the resources available in those networks mattered considerably for youngsters' choices and hence, final careers. Taking a closer look at the professions these youngsters referred to and the type of relationships youngsters referred to, the social networks of our respondents consisted primarily of people living in similar socio-economic conditions (see Lucas 2001; Behtoui 2016). Furthermore, these accounts indicate that many short-term and practical factors were considered by students when opting for a particular track or school, which did not necessarily relate to the content of this trajectory and possible future opportunities.

These seemingly random choices were often made by weighing costs and benefits of education in the near future. They should be understood within the broader social context in which these students live. Moreover, they seem to be the result of a lack of knowledge about the particularities of the Flemish education system necessary to fully grasp the long-term costs and benefits of education. The social context in which most of these youngsters find themselves seems to relate to decision-making processes in two ways: 1) the available resources and examples within their networks and 2) the insecure financial and economic conditions in which most of these students live.

With regard to the resources available through respondents' social networks, there appears to be a lack of information concerning educational options and a lack of examples that demonstrate the importance of making long-term decisions (Lucas 2001). Some respondents mentioned that they had not discussed their aspirations nor their choice with peers and people in their immediate environment, like Youngster 16 (Male, second generation immigrant, retired father, vocational education): *"Outside of school, we actually don't really talk about it [education]"* or Youngster 17 (Male, first generation immigrant, unemployed father, ESL): *"We don't really talk about the future. We mostly talk about money, about work, how much [you get paid]"*. Others appeared to follow the career paths of their networks rather blindly, without weighing the pros and cons of other possible options (see above).

With respect to the living conditions, the majority of the respondents mentioned financial insecurity and the need to provide for the family as decisive factors in deciding which educational option to choose. In many cases financial insecurity fuelled the need to apply a short-term perspective:

Youngster 24 (Male, Belgian background, father is retired, ESL): *"Because I grew up in a poor environment, I'd been working as a student worker since age fifteen. I usually had money to do something for example, but after a couple of months, I stopped being a student worker and I didn't want to do nothing. I was like 'if I'm working, I might as well make some more money, depending on what type of job I have'. And I enjoyed my student work more than going to school."*

Youngster 17 (Male, first generation immigrant, father is unemployed, ESL): *"At that moment, everyone was telling me not to quit school. My foster-family, my family, my mother, they all said 'don't quit school, it's better to complete your education' but at the time it was very difficult. I really needed to work, because my parents are very old, so I really needed a job, it was very important to me."*

The interview extracts show that the socio-economic conditions in which the youngsters live interfere with the search for information about all possible educational options.

The absence of resourceful networks and lack of guidance from teachers and pupil counsellors combined with the fact that most of the youngsters grow up in financially insecure families seemed to impact their educational decision-making processes. We will now discuss how these trajectories influence the instrumental value youngsters attach to education and educational qualifications, and how these prevent them from career specialization and in some cases from obtaining an educational qualification.

Pathways to early school leaving?

Notwithstanding the very diverse stories of the youngsters in our study, one recurring issue comes to the fore, namely that all seem to question the overall “superior” instrumental value of education for their personal lives or in society in general. Education was not necessarily perceived as the ‘ultimate ticket to success’, as shown by a quote that suggests that finding a job is *“Really difficult; even with a certificate, it is hard”* (Youngster 25, male, Belgian background, father works as branch manager, alternative learning arena). They seem to nuance the importance of education in Flemish society, suggesting educational qualifications are just one possible way to prepare for their future, but not necessarily the only way. As a consequence, our respondents’ views on the value of education did not necessarily underline the importance of getting a degree for themselves, as suggested by Youngster 22 (Male, second generation immigrant, father works as plasterer, ESL): *“Achieving a prestigious job, a high function, that is something that is achievable. Something that many people can achieve, especially without a diploma”* or Youngster 25: *“I am not going to say explicitly like ‘hey, you don’t have to study!’. Well, I’m just going to say like ‘hey, you have to follow what’s important to you.’”* In these accounts, youngsters appear to prefer pursuing what would personally suit them best and seem to search for ways to evaluate themselves in a positive way (see also social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner 1979; Van Praag et al. 2017).

When analysing these different kinds of reasoning, there appeared to be one dominant tension between two life spheres youngsters struggled with, namely school and the labour market. The continuing balance between staying in school and entering the labour market is often triggered by the idea that “work experience” is very important (generally in combination with the need for financial means); even more than educational credentials as such. This is also illustrated by the high value the youngsters attach to internships, insofar as they provide them with some kind of work experience, as shown by Youngster 9 (Female, first generation immigrant, unemployed father, vocational education): *“And I really needed it – if I hadn’t done the internship, then I would have difficulties finding a job in the future. (...) “Experience means a lot to me, to get a job.”* Youngsters consider labour market options and do not merely weigh all educational options (i.e. regarding programmes, tracks, fields of study, schools) against each other. This means that some respondents preferred the benefits of obtaining work experience to the continuation of education and getting educational qualifications, which is illustrated by the account of Youngster 9::

Youngster 9 (Female, first generation immigrant, father is unemployed, vocational education): *“Actually I want to quit my studies this year. Yeah, I want to stop, because I also got a job offer from this company X. This company promotes all kinds of products by phoning people, going door-to-door, and organising events. I attended one day in which I had to observe how they do it [explains the observation of door-to-door sales].”*

Interviewer: “Are you already working in this company?”

Youngster 9: “I’ve attended this observation, and the 27th, I have to participate in a training session which lasts an entire week. I need to get to know all the products and what the job is like, because it is not an easy job. I’m the only student there. The others are all higher educated people who went to university. Still, the employer was willing to ... he said: ‘I think it’s a good thing you took the step to come here and apply for the job, because we don’t see that very often with students’. But it’s very hard; normally you really need to have a degree, but I don’t. Nevertheless, I have got the chance to achieve a degree in business management for free, so that’s another thing I will have.”

This example illustrates that this youngster was fully aware of the difficulty of finding a job without educational qualification, but nevertheless, when being offered a job, she perceives it as an opportunity to start working. In other words, the weighing of costs and benefits of education against immediate labour market entry, leading to both work experience and financial means, seems to inform the final decision to leave school early, which is in line with rational action theories (Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997).

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to understand the decision-making processes of youngsters at risk of early school leaving. By approaching early school leaving as a process (Keskiner and Crul 2018), we focused on the decision-making processes of these young people throughout their school career and not only at key transition moments. Using qualitative research methods, we found that our respondents, nearly all having a lower socio-economic background, had educational trajectories that were diverse and characterized by frequent changes. These changes can be interpreted as being the result of a series of inconsistent – and not initially foreseen – decisions made throughout the school career. Important to note here is that especially the most vulnerable students, in terms of socio-economic background, achievement results and migration background, have to make the most educational choices in the Flemish educational system. When respondents searched for information and inspiration that could guide their educational decisions, they often relied on their social networks, with a similar socio-economic, migration background and educational experience. For this groups, social networks were crucial when making educational decisions. However, most people within their social networks were not familiar with the available educational alternatives. This is reflected in the decisions our respondents made over the course of their educational career.

The cultural reproduction theory and social capital theory (see Boone and Van Houtte 2013a) help to understand the educational choices young people make during their school career. The lack of cultural resources students and their parents have at their disposal (see Lareau and Weininger 2003; Reay 2004; Devine 2004; Draelants and Ballatore 2014) made young people rely more on information available within their social networks (see Ball 2003; Jaeger and Holm 2007; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Devine 2004). The types of resources accessible through the social networks of youngsters have already been found to be related to their social background (Granovetter 1973; Lucas 2001; Behtoui 2016). As most of our respondents come from families in which the parents did not obtain an educational certificate nor have a lot of experience with the Flemish educational system (due to migration), the social capital they had at their disposal did not appear to be a guiding

force or not very resourceful in the actual decision-making process (Behtoui 2016). Remarkably, career counselling and support provided by their school was not mentioned as a decisive factor during decision-making processes. This is in line with the findings of Spruyt et al. (2017), who mentioned that, in the case of truancy, many students feel misunderstood when communicating with student counsellors.

At first sight, the choices made by the youngsters in this study do not seem to support the rational action theory as they do not suggest the conscious weighing of costs and benefits of educational alternatives (Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). Nevertheless, this finding should be nuanced. The respondents did compare the costs and benefits of work experience (in internships or in the labour market), gaining financial means (part-time or full-time) and staying in education. Although Van Houtte and Stevens (2016) did not find that paid work employment is related to students' educational attainment, our findings indicate that the experience or short-term perspective of paid work could have an important impact on educational decisions that often have a more long-term impact on youngsters' careers. When doing so, the value of education was put under question and not automatically seen as superior to other ways of learning and living. Many respondents perceived paid employment and education as exchangeable and equally valid alternatives (see also Ryan and Lorinc 2018). This line of thought is very present in the accounts of our respondents but it is not in line with the actual employment chances of students who left education prematurely in Flanders (Herremans, Vansteenkiste, and Sourbron 2016). Therefore, for our youngsters, an acknowledgement of the value of education as such did not really serve as a protective factor to stay enrolled in education. Finally, the insecure and unstable financial and economic living conditions in which many of the youngsters find themselves appeared to weigh heavily upon educational choice making (cfr. Lamote et al. 2013a; Ryan and Lorinc 2018). In many cases, financial strains urged youngsters even more to opt for more (relatively) short-term decisions, often favouring immediate labour market entry (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). When looking at the actual "costs of education", youngsters referred not only to the costs of being enrolled in education or not being able to work, but also to the efforts put into school, given the relatively low interest in school and school engagement. We can conclude that the inconsistency in previous educational choices in terms of career specialization, the precarious living conditions and the constant negotiation of the value of education against other important life domains, especially paid employment, seems to fuel the decision to leave school early.

These findings suggest that rational action theories that try to explain differences in educational choices seem to have put too much emphasis on long-term social mobility expectations and financial returns. These theories insufficiently consider the economic, social and cultural capital that youngsters (and their parents) have at their disposal when making their choices in education. Finally, we can state that the findings from this study underline that exactly because of the Flemish educational system's openness to individual educational decision making (Spruyt, Laurijssen, and Van Dorsselaer 2009), cultural and social capital and youngsters' living conditions are very important. Future research could demonstrate the vulnerabilities of distinct educational systems by comparing the extent social and cultural capital is needed when making educational choices. Another suggestion for future research is to expand the sample of this study to the entire group of students enrolled in regular secondary education, which might identify other vulnerable groups of early school leaving and get a wider overview of protective factors of ESL.

In the fight against early school leaving, policy makers in Flanders should pay more attention to the follow-up of students at unforeseen moments (e.g. during the school year), when they are redirected to other educational institutions or programmes. Additionally, policy makers and educational professionals need to rethink the organisation and support of decision-making during students' educational careers. As shown by this study, students are often insufficiently aware of the content of fields of study/tracks when making choices – especially in the beginning of their educational career. Moreover, when making decisions about what educational institutions to attend, educational careers to follow, or possible future professions to study for, students too frequently have to rely almost entirely on their personal social networks. This often results in a trial and error of tracks, fields of study, schools and type of programmes throughout their educational career. Finally, vocational programmes need to be strengthened, for instance by providing more opportunities for work-based learning, to demonstrate the concrete value of education for the lives of youngsters at risk of early school leaving.

Note

1. Alternative learning arenas are specified as “ALT” and reception classes for newcomers are described as “OKAN”.

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