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## **How to support and engage students in alternative forms of education and training? A qualitative study of school staff members in Flanders**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on how students, who for a variety of reasons struggle in mainstream secondary schools, can be supported and engaged by alternative forms of education and training to attain a (formal) qualification. Interviews and focus groups are carried out with school staff members of distinct types of alternative learning arenas in Flanders (northern part of Belgium): second chance secondary education, part-time apprenticeship track and part-time work-based vocational education. Our analyses reveal that, due to the selectiveness of mainstream secondary education, staff members in alternative learning arenas mainly struggle with the ways to develop inclusive curricula/practices and with the actual content of the curricula of their educational training or programme they are supposed to teach. Staff members struggle with putting into practice the fundamental aim to prepare socially vulnerable students for their future lives. Debates within the school team focus upon the relative importance of transferrable, specialist and social skills and competences. Results of this study are discussed to further enhance the professionalization of school teams, and can be seen as the starting point to specify and develop the curriculum taught in both alternative learning arenas and mainstream secondary education.

**Key words:** Belgium; Second Chance Education; Work-based Learning; Skills and Competences

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to factors that cause distinct groups of young people to become alienated from and possibly leave mainstream secondary education (e.g., Rumberger and Lim 2001; Lamb and Markussen 2011). Both factors in- and outside education play a complex role in the enrolment and engagement of young people in different kinds of educational institutions (Bradley and Renzulli 2011). However, this body of research too frequently leaves out the strategies that school staff (consisting of teachers, principals, care givers, counsellors, and internship coordinators) consider and apply to tackle these issues. Nevertheless, focusing on school staff may be crucial, as precisely the establishment of positive relationships in schools could enhance students' school engagement (e.g., Crosnoe et al. 2004). From an institutional perspective, school staff members are often the first ones to be confronted with students' difficulties and vulnerabilities. This is even more so the case within 'alternative' educational programmes, who have a larger proportion of students with a history of complex or troubled educational trajectories (Lamote et al. 2013). School staff within alternative learning arenas are even more confronted with and thus more aware of the ambiguous relationship their students have with schooling. This could mean that the establishment of a positive relationship with their students might have a larger impact on students' educational careers, compared to mainstream secondary education.

In the present study, we will focus on how students, who for a variety of reasons struggled in mainstream schools, can be supported and engaged by alternative forms of education and training. We will do so by applying a school staff perspective on the strategies used to deal with disengaged students or those at risk of early school leaving in alternative learning arenas in Flanders (northern part of Belgium). Therefore, we will examine how these strategies relate to the views of school staff on what matters the most in education, and how they, as actors of and in educational institutions, prepare students for their future lives. This study will further our understanding of how school practices are negotiated within school teams and how this affects the actual skills and knowledge learnt within these institutions, and the content of the educational qualifications offered by these alternative learning arenas.

### ***Starting from a school staff approach***

Due to societal changes, parents have been transferring increasing numbers of tasks related to upbringing to schools. As a result, schools and their staff are increasingly expected to solve numerous problems in society. The roles of schools and school personnel have therefore expanded over time (Fletcher 1984; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt and Vanroelen 2014) and school teams have become more

differentiated in order to deal with the changing challenges of post-industrial societies. Hence, teams consist of more than teachers and principals, including a wide range of specialised personnel, such as counsellors, care givers, coordinators, etc. who work together to respond to all kinds of difficulties, issues or problems at school (Hargreaves 1994). Consequently, increasingly more importance is attached to the roles of school staff when dealing with young people at risk of early school leaving. This is not so easy, as it seems that school staff within educational institutions outside mainstream education have to consider students' earlier (negative) educational trajectories, deal with heterogeneous class groups in terms of skills and abilities, and engagement, and weigh out the time they want to spend on the curricula (Van Praag et al. 2015). The study of school staff on this matter is important as – within their context – they enjoy considerable agency in exercising and even designing existing school practices and structures (Clement and Vandenberghe 2000). Furthermore, school personnel play an important role in the buffering of students' feelings of futility at school and alienation from school (Crosnoe et al. 2004). Students who feel supported by school staff may be less likely to have such feelings of futility (Van Houtte et al. 2012). This perceived support of school staff could help students to engage with and continue schooling in general. Finally, examining the perceptions of school staff members on how to support and engage young people in alternative learning arenas allows us to understand the 'success' (or failure) of alternative learning arenas and these insights may help to rethink prevailing practices in mainstream education.

Previous studies already demonstrated the importance of school staff for the re-engagement of students in education, for instance, when examining the role of teachers' beliefs with respect to their students (e.g., Finn 1989; Van Houtte and Demanet 2015; 2016), perceived interpersonal teacher behaviour (Van Petegem et al. 2008) or institutional discriminatory practices (de Graaf and Van Zenderen 2009). However, less attention has been paid to how school staff position themselves in the educational landscape and respond to vulnerable students enrolled in the institution in which they teach. These ideas do not take place in a social vacuum and are reflected against their colleagues. Hence, this involves not only the study of teachers but of the entire school personnel team (Hargreaves 1994). As the views of staff members working in one institution are not necessarily the same, this could lead to conflicts within the school team, and/or even negative results when trying to deal with the obstacles and issues young people face during their school career. Therefore, the study of the strategies used by school staff members within particular educational contexts requires more in-depth consideration to understand school processes that hinder young people's engagement in school and potentially contribute to early school leaving. This is particularly true in alternative learning arenas, which have a high focus on vulnerable groups in education, and where school teams become increasingly diverse in terms of specialised functions, making them more dependent on one other (e.g., due to co-teaching, in the context of workplace learning; etc.).

## ***Alternative learning arenas***

Aside from mainstream secondary education, young people have other opportunities to obtain some kind of educational qualification, to which we will refer as alternative learning arenas. In many of these alternative learning arenas, students are trained and prepared for a specific occupation, often working closely together with workplaces and sectors. There are various ways in which policy makers have designed strategies to re-engage students and help them to get an educational qualification, like recovery programs, work-based trainings or programmes in which students can combine work and training (Lamb and Markussen 2011, Eurostat 2012). Most previous research on alternative learning arenas has mainly concentrated upon the evaluation of existing educational systems and intervention programmes (e.g., see overview Prevatt and Kelly 2003; Dynarski et al. 2008), or particular school and/or classroom characteristics, such as ethnic composition, or frequency of truancy (e.g., De Witte and Rogge 2013). Although these specific features of institutional contexts may play a decisive role in the extent to which an educational system succeeds in responding to the vulnerabilities of young people, less is known about the dynamics between staff members within these educational institutions and the strategies used to prevent early school leaving. The study hereof is crucial to understand the school practices that occur in these institutions when implementing particular measures, when dealing with specific systemic features or when (re-)designing alternative learning arenas.

Schools should prepare young people in the best possible way for their future work and lives (Jonasson 2014). However, it remains unclear what this actually involves and how schools should realise this main objective. Schools are responsible for making their students critical citizens that take a deconstructive perspective on hegemonic norms and values; this involves grouping them according to their skills, interests, abilities and future perspectives and teaching them a particular curriculum, which enables them to qualify for a specific job or further training (Peschar and Wesselingh 1995). However, due to limits in time and resources, when setting up daily activities (Peschar and Wesselingh 1995), schools experience some tensions in the realisation of their objectives. What it actually means to prepare students for their future lives is negotiable, free for interpretation (for school staff), and closely related to societal dynamics and changes over time (Moor, Wentink and van der Net 1977). Thus, the study of the strategies school staff apply in alternative learning arenas to assist and support their students could add to a better understanding of actual school practices and difficulties school staff encounter – individually and as a team – in their daily professional lives. Results of this study could enhance the professionalization of school staff and give principals and designers of such alternative learning arenas a starting point to set out clear guidelines vis-à-vis what they really want to achieve with the programmes offered by their institution.

To summarize, the present study focuses on the strategies school staff in alternative learning arenas in Flanders apply to prevent students from disengaging from school and leaving school early. We will do so by making use of qualitative research methods in three different alternative learning arenas.

## **Methods**

### ***Research area: Flanders***

In the Flemish educational system, most students start their school career in mainstream secondary education, which is a highly hierarchical and selective educational system with a rigid tracking structure. In mainstream education, many students start in higher status academic tracks and change to the less esteemed technical and vocational tracks. This changing of tracks (and schools) is particularly prevalent among vulnerable students and often results in a loss of motivation and feelings of failure (Van Praag et al. 2015; Van Houtte and Stevens 2015). Moreover, changing tracks could result more easily in early school leaving (Baert, Cockx and Picchio 2015). Some of these students that leave full-time education early find their ways to alternative learning arenas to continue their education or prepare for the labour market, and to receive some kind of educational qualification (often because education is compulsory until the age of 18) (Van Praag et al. 2016; Glorieux et al. 2011). These alternative learning arenas have a very specific educational objective, namely to reintegrate and re-engage students in education and/or to guide them towards the labour market.

### ***Data collection***

Data was collected in one city in Flanders (northern part of Belgium) as part of the comparative, European RESL.eu project. Since data collection was first and foremost directed at the evaluation of distinct types of programmes offered in different alternative learning arenas, a theory-driven stakeholder evaluation (Hansen and Vedung 2010) was applied that included three groups of stakeholders: directors/supervisors (i.e. director, coordinating principal), implementers (i.e., teachers, educational counsellors, employment coordinator, psychologists, etc.) and the target group (i.e., students). The rationale behind this evaluation procedure is to triangulate data derived from interviews and focus group discussions with distinct stakeholders to examine to what extent the accounts of the distinct stakeholders converge. For the present study, we used the data collected from supervisors, designers and implementers of the programmes involved, which we will refer to as the 'staff'. We moved away from this theory-driven stakeholder evaluation, and instead used a 'grounded

theory approach' to analyse the data, starting from themes that emerged during interviews and theorizing (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Focus group discussions were organised to include group dynamics and study diverging strategies within school teams, as well as the ways teams consider these diverging views and dynamics. During the interviews and focus group discussions many school staff struggle with [the dissonance between] the needs of their students and the ways of meeting 'the demands' set by their educational institution. The school dictated that time should be spent efficiently as possible with the largest possible outcomes in terms of student success, but neglected to give staff instructions about priorities or build up any unity within the school team. Struggling with how to best approach particular students (de facto categorized as vulnerable students). This led to the construction of a coding tree that was centred around the tensions school staff encountered in dealing with their students. This resulted in codes such as 'labour market training', 'finding a job', 'optimizing qualities', 'changing society/labour market', 'transferrable skills', 'difficult living circumstances conflicting with school', 'demands labour market', 'specialist skills and training', 'objectives of the institution', 'difficulties to function in labour market/society'. This coding tree formed the starting point for more in-depth analyses. All citations are translated from Dutch and edited by the authors to facilitate legibility.

The qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in four educational institutions that are not part of mainstream secondary education, and are all situated in a large multi-ethnic city with a high share of early school leavers. The selection of the educational institutions (N=4) was based upon the type of vocational education they offer (part-time work-based/ full-time school-based, adults only/ also including minors) (see Van Praag et al. 2016). Institution A and B are Second Chance Schools for Adults that organize education for people aged 18 and older (no maximum age) – who left secondary school without a secondary education diploma and still want to obtain their ISCED III qualification (see also Glorieux et al. 2011). Both institutions are privately operated but publicly funded. Both institutions make use of a modular learning system instead of a linear system. While the linear system – as traditionally used in mainstream secondary education in Flanders – is organized around sequential school years that offer a specific curriculum, the modular system steps away from the school year approach and instead offers the curriculum in separate modules. Successful completion of one module leads to a 'partial certificate', and after completion of all the necessary modules, the student will obtain his or her secondary education diploma. Institution C offers part-time vocational education and training (VET) that combines learning and working for students up to 25 years of age who have finished their first two years of secondary education (15-16 years). Students in this institution are provided with school-based education (for part-time VET two days/week; i.e., general and vocational courses) and ideally engage in workplace learning for the remainder of the week (for part-time VET three days per week) to gain professional

competencies and work experience. Nonetheless, many students are not in regular employment and can be provided with alternative trajectories. Finally, institution D is an independent non-profit organization that offers an apprenticeship track that combines learning and working. In this institution, students can enrol after they have finished their first two years of secondary education (15-16 years) until they are 25 years old. Students can combine one day a week of school-based learning (i.e., general and vocational courses, similar to school-based VET) and four days of workplace learning, choosing from 200 distinct professions for which they can attain professional qualifications. In contrast with the other institutions, Institution D is not funded by the Flemish Department of Education, but is financed by the Flemish Department for Work. In the following table, an overview is given of the participants of the interviews and focus group discussions:

<Insert Table 1 here>

In total, the analyses are based upon four semi-structured interviews with the school management of four different institutions, and six focus group discussions with implementers, resulting in data from 29 respondents (20 females, 9 males).

## **Results**

Our analyses reveal that staff in alternative learning arenas mainly struggle with the importance they should attach to the overall integration of their students in society and the realisation of the curricula. School staff want to include students that need some type of educational qualification as much as possible or, at least, teach them some competences and keep them on board in education and society as a whole. At the same time, they also want to safeguard their integrity and – in their view – main task, namely to teach the curricula they are supposed to, as defined by the Ministry of Education, but do not know which parts of the curricula they should emphasize to prepare students for their future lives. Given the specific context of and type of the educational programme in which they teach, these tensions are not a surprise. In the specific alternative learning arenas included in this study, the students have already followed a more complex and longer educational trajectory compared to students in mainstream secondary education. Consequently, these programmes and trainings are mainly perceived to be the last options for students to obtain some kind of educational qualification. In the following sections, we will go deeper into 1) the issues related to the increased focus on inclusion in alternative learning arenas and 2) issues related to the realisation of the curriculum, which mainly relate to the balance staff members have to find between teaching transferable, professional and social skills, as well as between the potential relationship between education and the actual needs of the labour market.

### ***Integration: the increased focus on 'inclusion'***

School staff members working in alternative learning arenas constantly compare their strategies and actions with mainstream secondary education by emphasizing the importance of a holistic student care approach (see also Van Praag et al. 2016). By doing so, they think they are better able to meet the higher needs of students who have already left mainstream education and who would otherwise try to enter the labour market without an educational qualification. As mainstream education is not willing or able to consider the specific needs of these vulnerable groups, school staff in alternative learning arenas feel obliged to 'take care' of these young people and provide them with some kind of training or qualification:

*Teacher (Institution B): 'It is the job of regular secondary education to include more students. It is not our job; we put a lot of effort into including and supporting them – they can repeatedly enroll in different classes. If you've already failed ten times, and you come back for the eleventh time, alright, try again. That's the message we give them. Some of the guys have been in this school for ten years, and suddenly they succeed. They alternate periods of working and training; this is possible in our school, while in secondary education, you have to stay enrolled the entire year and have to take all the courses for the entire year.'*

The focus on care suggests that school staff members in alternative learning arenas frequently look at education from a more societal perspective. Hence, these alternative learning arenas are especially organised for those who do not seem to fit in the system:

*Principal (Institution A): 'Well, we are an extension of the secondary education aiming to teach people who apparently don't fit in a system, to teach them to function in a system for example by arriving on time. Attitude, punctuality, that's a social problem; it goes beyond just us -- but, well also certainly with our people, it's really an issue.'*

Another example is principal of Institution C, who fears that reforms being implemented by Flemish policy makers that aim to better align internships with the needs of the labour market (Flemish government 2015) would exclude especially vulnerable students:

*School principal (Institution C): 'I think there is a big difference with regular education, however, we fear that with the upcoming reforms, it will be hard to keep on making a difference. In the current version of the reforms; they focus on another group of students, but are we still able to make such a difference? To give you a number, last academic year, nine students graduated and got their diploma; these*

*are nine students for which we were able to make a change. These students are students that would have been unqualified school leavers in the regular secondary education.'*

As shown in this quote, this principal clearly takes the particular features of their target group into account when rethinking their pedagogies and when discussing institutional features or reforms. Furthermore, he wants to make sure that *all* young people find their place in education. Another teacher focuses on personal growth and the empowerment of their students, and therefore stresses the importance of self-reliance, self-confidence and wants to make sure the students *'also get some 'life wisdom', including some insights from the guidance [they received at school] that they can use this further when they go to work etc.'* These general skills and insights are considered to be important, since *'the world is hard; [we want] to strengthen them to deal with this so they do not suddenly fall into an 'empty hole''* (psychologist, member of the care team of Institution A). These quotes suggest that staff members in alternative learning arenas frequently approach schooling from a societal perspective and not merely from a school-perspective. In doing so, a holistic care approach emerges and seems inevitable.

The focus on inclusion by staff members is mentioned to stem *out of (perceived) necessity*. To be more precise, due to the particular characteristics of the student body (e.g., immigrant backgrounds, need to work after school), they feel that they are obliged to do so in order to succeed and continue with other aspects of their job (i.e., teaching specialist occupational skills and knowledge, classroom management). Due to a variety of reasons, many of their students are perceived to need *more care and support*:

*School principal (Institution A): 'So we have a group of people who, luckily, find their way to us, because there are a lot of them who don't. But they do need a different approach or different care. A lot of support.'*

Another example can be found in Institution D, which shows that staff members are constantly aware of the previous (negatively experienced) educational trajectories their students have had, stating things like: *'What I have learned is that many of my students have screwed things up earlier in their school career and –having turned 18 or 19 – returned to education in our alternative trajectory.'* (Teacher, Institution D). Another teacher who teaches bakery-related professional courses tries to keep all students on board by using a more personal, holistic care approach:

*Teacher (Institution D): 'Many teachers put a lot of effort into keeping students enrolled by asking things like 'how come you don't do your homework anymore'; if*

*students do not react, the student counsellor tries to reach them by calling them (in the evening) and asking them why they do not show up anymore. They're free to discuss anything – they can tell everything to the student counsellor. There are a lot of people who lack a supportive family, or who have nobody that really cares for them. It is really important that they can tell their story and express how they are doing. This is often the case for people coming from another country.'*

In this citation, the teacher is concerned with the difficulties that students encounter that leads to them not doing their homework, or worse, not showing up at school. In the next example, the student counsellor refers to the determining role of students' personal stories, the strong impact they have on their current and future school careers:

*Student counsellor (Institution B): 'The labour market often demands bachelor's degrees for rather simple tasks, for which students with only a secondary degree could apply for. Many young people can't cope with the changing society, they can't get a bachelor's degree, have to care for their families, terrorism in families. The personal stories of students are so hard to take, which makes it impossible for them to get a bachelors' degree. There is a large gap between the demands of the society and the things these students have to offer. Students often feel it already at an early age, they feel that they can't handle it.'*

Thus, the student counsellor in Institution B sees the personal stories of the students as a hindrance for their school career. In Institution A, the student counsellor mentions students' direct type of 'emotional capital' (see Reay 2004):

*Learning trajectory counsellor (Institution A): 'They also just enter [our office] to tell about how their cat died. Then I am like 'sorry but that does not interest me', but just because they say 'that actually has an effect on my learning trajectory and I will not tell it to all my teachers but I am [glad to be] able to tell you, at least....' Just being able to tell someone is a relief; just having someone they know will listen to them helps [their school trajectory].'*

The students' feelings of lack of support and their lack of competence to deal with everyday life situations and worries, coupled with their lack of restraint in expressing the associated emotions in school, leads school staff members – both specialised care personnel as well as teaching personnel – to provide both space and time to support their students in daily life and societal struggles, to even

prioritize this over the provision of practical information and support vis-à-vis their educational trajectories.

In general, staff members take the type of education offered (general/vocational track, full-time/part-time, compulsory/adult education) and the target group (i.e., vulnerable groups in society), constantly into consideration when forming their strategies for fulfilling their professional tasks and roles. This inclusive approach seems necessary to re-engage students who have left mainstream education, as many factors outside school, such as lack of support or (informational, material) resources at home, have to be solved first before students are able to concentrate on the actual educational training.

The attention given to inclusion in alternative learning arenas is in most cases also institutionally embedded. Many educational institutions hired additional school personnel who are seen as crucial for the successful functioning of their institutions, or put a lot of emphasis on the guidance of the students' careers, as is the case for the care team in Institution A:

*Training coordinator (Institution A):* 'It's often the case that this performance anxiety, that they've already been carrying this around for a long time, and secondary education often pays too little attention to it, although it is a factor of school dropout. And then they come to us, and luckily, I think that in this centre we have an enormous support network. I think they are trying really hard in this centre – I have only been here for three months, but it is already very obvious -- and that we need to be able to pass on these signals to keep them on track.'

Although the diversification of the staff is initiated by the need to focus more on students' educational choices, the tasks of these staff members almost automatically expanded to listening to students' stories and daily concerns, as most staff see the *integration* function of schooling as a crucial precondition to guarantee students' successful continuation of their educational trajectories. Doing so, alternative learning arenas want to put as much effort as possible into attracting and re-engaging all potential students that want to continue education and get an educational qualification. Staff members have to rethink their own educational practices from the mainstream secondary education they are familiar with. Nevertheless, in general, they still encourage their students to fit into 'dominant' society and explicitly mention which dominant values and norms they think matter in the labour market (Peschar and Wesselingh 1995).

A final but important remark with regard to the ideas our respondents referred to when talking about the inclusion of all students in education is that although most respondents agree with the use of a holistic care approach – especially from an institutional point of view – that characterizes their institutions, this does not mean that staff do not criticize mainstream education for falling short in this regard:

*Student counsellor (Institution B): 'The minors [who enrol in adult education - there has been an increasing number of registrations] have specific profiles, such as being subject to bullying, or being autistic. Some people do not find their way in regular secondary education and come to us. It is the job of regular secondary education to include more students. It is not our job.'*

In this extract, the student counsellor suggests that alternative learning arenas are confronted with the consequences of the lack of care in mainstream secondary education, and – although they seem to take up their caregiving role – they do not see themselves as a 'caregiving institution'. Interviews suggest that staff members propose that all educational institutions – including mainstream secondary education – should focus more on the inclusion of all students in education and their integration in society. This way, alternative learning arenas could focus more on their supply of alternative learning methods and approaches (e.g., internships, modular learning) and less on simply caregiving as such. We will discuss in the next section how this increased focus on inclusion causes tensions for school staff with respect to the ways they are to interpret, design and teach the (often loosely formulated) curricula.

### ***A broad realisation of the curriculum***

Our respondents encountered difficulties related to interpretation and realisation of the curriculum. These difficulties arise out of the tensions felt between the need to focus on transferable skills, occupational skills and the potential relationship with the labour market. The curricula taught is highly debated, as it is perceived to determine to a high extent students' future life chances in the labour market (see also Kap 2014) and to increase students' engagement in education.

First, school staff experience uncertainties with regard to the *level of specialization* of the skills they have to teach, as shown in the following discussion:

*Teacher A (Institution B): 'Yes to a certain extent, I teach some of the basics of bookkeeping, but the demands in the labour market are a lot higher.'*

*Teacher B: 'It depends on the courses. In the course informatics, I teach online banking.'*

*Teacher A: 'That is [for] personal use, it does not really apply to the labour market.'*

*Teacher B: 'They need these kinds of skills to function in our society, how to deal with e-purchases, etc. – that is general education.'*

*Teacher A: 'General education is necessary to function in society, technical courses need to prepare students for the labour market. There is no demand in the labour market for many [of these] courses.'*

These two teachers debate the necessity to teach specialist versus transferrable skills. This debate relates to the fact that many of these alternative forms of learning and training are intrinsically intertwined with the demands of the labour market. Previously, this meant that young people were taught more specialist knowledge and skills that were immediately applicable in a working context. Nowadays, with a highly changing labour market and the increasing automatization of manual labour jobs, one could question whether, in order to accommodate to the labour market, schools should focus more on the teaching of transferrable skills and knowledge. Thus, school staff in alternative forms of learning and training question to what extent the programmes they offer should connect to the demands of the labour market, be specialist or transferrable, and meet 'high' standards (Clycq et al. 2015). This is even more so because many of our respondents assume that future employers want to know what a specific qualification actually entails.

These debates become even more robust when school staff consider the real demands in the labour market and the main purpose of educational qualifications:

*Counsellor of employment (Institution C): 'What is the most important? When talking about unqualified school leavers, you ask about the competences they have. For us, we have to prepare them for a place in the labour market, a place in society. Starting from this viewpoint, the most important thing is that students get a job, not necessarily get a degree. We do feel a change in the sense that we feel that students are increasingly opting for getting a degree, compared to some years ago.'*

Regardless, the initial idea to emphasize the relationship between education and training and the labour market, many of the careers offered are intended to prepare for positions that have to be filled in the labour market:

*Teacher A (Institution B): 'Students that feel that their diploma doesn't suit the labour market. Some get extra motivated to get a bachelors' degree, others lose their motivation when they realize: even with this diploma, I won't make it, why even finish because it does not really match with the labour market.'*

As shown in this excerpt, debates become even more complicated as there is often not a specific need for the particular jobs students prepare for within these institutions. In some cases, this makes the teaching and the provision of all kinds of very specialist skills superfluous. Similarly, school staff

members have to teach the standard curricula designed by the Ministry of Education, but they do not always see how these curricula meet the demands of the labour market:

**Researcher: ‘To what extent does the content of professional courses correspond with the needs of employers?’**

*Teacher C (Institution D): ‘For my course, totally not! The course on plumbing I teach now is... For instance, it is the same as teaching multiplications in mathematics or teaching comprehensive reading assignments in language courses in the first year of primary education... Who designed that curriculum for plumbing? I don’t know!’*

*Teacher D: ‘When was this curriculum designed? Before or after the world war? [laughs]’*

While these tensions mainly relate to specialist skills, providing specialist skills and knowledge has to compete with the provision and support of social competences that are seen as a prerequisite and are perceived to be undeveloped in many of the students enrolled. As a consequence, school staff often debate whether they – as actors in an educational institution – are responsible to teach and support social skills and competences. For instance, a teacher of Institution D questions the extent to which he has to teach a particular curriculum or skill, or ‘merely’ accompany his students in order to be inclusive: *‘There are students that are just not able to work independently. They haven’t learned how to study. And what is our role supposed to be, just to accompany them? To stand there and say ‘keep working’, ‘make sure you finish in time’?’* This teacher is here reacting to the continuing demand to supply an educational training for all kinds of students, even those who lack basic social [and scholastic] competences. Over the course of the years, educational policy makers have changed the emphasis towards the teaching of personal and social competences, including them in the curricula in educational institutions. This complicates the tensions felt by school staff between the skills and knowledge that have to be learnt, as was the case in Institution C:

*Curricula coordinator (Institution C): ‘[Teachers] have to meet “the standard” [the curricula] and that’s why these set criteria [end goals] are the first thing on teachers’ mind. Other competences are rather secondary or additional, and are therefore not teachers’ main concern anymore. By contrast, twenty years ago, we started from the personal and social competences and evolved from there. Mathematics and Dutch became additional. Now, it’s the other way around.’*

*Principal (Institution C): ‘Nobody evaluates these social and personal competences. They only look at the achievements in terms of set curricular goals. Well-being in general is incorporated in those evaluations; they do not focus on learning*

*attitudes, except for some specific learning attitudes that are part of the set end goals. However, they are seldom part of the focus anywhere, and especially not here.'*

These accounts illustrate how school staff struggle with the changes in the approach of the government with regard to the curricula. Consequently, the following interview excerpt shows that school staff members – as a group – have varying ideas of what kind of skills their educational institution should provide:

***Researcher: 'What changes would you suggest to policy makers? If you had more resources at your disposal, what would you change?'***

*Teacher B (Institution B): 'More resources to make our courses more oriented to the labour market and practical things.'*

*Teacher A: 'To focus on the link between school and the labour market: coaching during their internships. For instance, they always come late, to school and to their job.'*

In this focus group, both teachers stress the need to prepare young people for the labour market, however, while doing so, they emphasize distinct types of skills and knowledge that have to be learnt. While teacher B would invest in more specialist skills that would make students more suitable for the labour market, teacher A would focus more on social competences, such as punctuality, as these are indispensable skills for facilitating students' transition to the labour market. To conclude, our analyses indicate that school staff struggle with the type of skills and competences they should teach their students and what the qualifications provided by alternative learning arenas actually stand for.

## **Discussion**

The present paper focuses upon how students, who for a variety of reasons struggle in mainstream secondary schools, can be supported and engaged by school staff members in alternative forms of education and training to attain a (formal) qualification. This is an important issue, given that studies show having a (formal) qualification can have a major impact on future life trajectories. Hence, we studied the strategies of staff members in alternative learning arenas to engage their students and help them to obtain an educational qualification. The focus on these strategies is especially interesting as these staff members constantly face students who have already followed a very diverse educational trajectory, have lower school engagement levels and a higher risk to leave school without an educational qualification (Lamote et al. 2013).

Two main findings can be drawn from this study. First, our respondents indicate that there is a lot of uncertainty and debate about the relative importance they should attach to students' integration in society and realisation of the educational end goals. On the one hand, schools aim to be inclusive and prepare students to become socially valued citizens that find their way in society. On the other hand, schools should teach their specialised curricula to provide their students with specific skills and knowledge to find a job in the near future. The tensions school staff members feel with regard to the fulfilment of both school objectives characterise alternative learning arenas. Within these institutions, a relatively larger share of students do not feel a sense of belonging for the schools they were previously enrolled in, nor for society in general. At the same time, these alternative learning arenas offer an educational programme that demands quite a bit of specialisation and focus. Our analyses indicate that school staff in alternative learning arenas feel obliged to pay more attention to inclusion and care, however, they do also emphasize that all educational institutions in Flanders should take up this role. It is important to note here that hardly any attention is paid to the values and norms that should be taught through schooling in general. Instead, the focus is on the support educational institutions give to their students comply with the norms and values of dominant groups in society.

A second main finding of this study is that school staff have difficulties defining, and striking a balance between, the types of skills (i.e., transferable, professional and social) they teach their students. This tension relates to the primary place education should occupy in society in general. Does education turn young people into citizens and adults *and/or* is education meant merely to train young people to become good workers – and to that end, does it adequately prepare them to fill positions in the labour market? Our analyses indicate that staff members seem to question to what extent they should teach a particular curriculum to enable their students to qualify for a specific job or further training, while more basic, transferrable skills are perceived to be so undeveloped in most of their students. Being part of an entire team, individual staff members struggle with questions that do not entirely correspond to their colleagues' ideas, which shows the hindrances alternative learning arenas as institutions have to deal with in striving to provide an adequate training and schooling for students who occupy a vulnerable position in education.

These tensions staff members encounter have important practical consequences. First, in one particular school career, the courses are not adjusted towards each other in each subsequent year or between subjects. While one staff member focuses on the teaching of transferrable skills, another may not be pleased with the previous knowledge and/or skills of his or her student afterwards (see also Van Praag et al. 2015). Second, the fact that alternative learning arenas put a lot of effort and resources into the hiring of additional personnel – apart from teachers, who then focus on the inclusion of all students in education, may give teachers the impression that they should not focus on inclusion. Nevertheless, teachers often remain the first and main contact for students when they face difficulties

(Fletcher 1984; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt and Vanroelen 2014). Hence, a more thorough communication about the roles each staff member should fulfil in their institution, both within the school team and towards students, could facilitate the collaboration and innovation within this school team and improve the skills and knowledge acquired by students. Third, since even staff members in alternative learning arenas have diverging and contrasting views on the time and effort one should spend on particular skills and knowledge, future employers and other personnel in educational institutions also encounter difficulties to understand what a particular educational qualification actually entails (Kap 2014), not only for students' future jobs but also for finding apprenticeships and facilitating workplace learning. This vagueness and uncertainty in the interpretation of educational qualifications may hinder students' transition to the labour market. Future research could approach employers to gather their perspectives on the curricula and see how they interpret particular educational qualifications.

For educational policy makers, the results of this study demonstrate the need to rethink existing educational practices in mainstream secondary education and pay more attention to the integration of all students. At this moment, mainstream secondary education does not have the time, support, resources or intentions to make sure all students are included at school. Furthermore, educational policy makers and principals of alternative learning arenas could support their staff members better by providing clear guidelines on the actual content of the curricula they have to teach. This could also help future employers and staff members from other educational institutions to have a better idea what a particular educational qualification or training actually stands for, especially because most alternative learning arenas explicitly focus on the close relationship they have built with the labour market.

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