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Reference:

Van Praag Lore, Clycq Noël.- Going to work without educational qualifications : school-to-work transitions of early school leavers in Belgium
Journal of youth studies - ISSN 1367-6261 - Abingdon, Routledge journals, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2020, 23:4, p. 465-480
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1620926>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1606780151162165141>

Title page

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Cite as: "Lore Van Praag & Noel Clycq (2019) Going to work without educational qualifications: school-to-work transitions of early school leavers in Belgium, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1620926"

Author name: Lore Van Praag (corresponding author)

Contact information:

Telephone: +32 (0)3 265 59 64

E-mail: lore.vanpraag@uantwerpen.be

Website: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/staff/lore-vanpraag/>

Affiliation: Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS) – University of Antwerp

Address: Lange Nieuwstraat 55- 2000 Antwerp - Belgium

Author name: Noel Clycq

Contact information:

Telephone: +32 (0)3 265 49 54

E-mail: noel.clycq@uantwerpen.be

Website: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/personeel/noel-clycq/>

Affiliation: Department of Training and Educational Sciences – University of Antwerp

Address: Sint-Jacobsstraat 2 - 2000 Antwerp – Belgium

Going to work without educational qualifications: School-to-work transitions of early school leavers in Belgium

Abstract

Risks of exclusion can occur in multiple forms and start early in life. Early school leavers are especially at risk of social exclusion as this is strongly related to turbulent school-to-work-transitions. These young people often find themselves in low-qualified work or unemployment. In this article, we explore the labour market experiences of early school leavers in Flanders, Belgium. In total, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with nine early school leavers and analysed following a grounded theory approach. Our results demonstrate the difficulties early school leavers encounter in their transitions from school to work and their precarious situation in the labour market. Of particular relevance are the insights gained in revealing the perspectives of young people on the importance of educational qualifications, work experience and participation in the labour market, as well as the strategies they develop to enter the labour market without educational qualifications.

Key words: Employment; schooling; transition; unemployment

Introduction

Around 11% of 18 to 24 year olds across Europe leave school without having completed upper secondary education, which provides them with sufficient competencies and formal qualifications to find and secure a favourable labour market position (Eurostat 2016). Previous research has mainly examined processes leading to early school leaving, such as socio-demographic variables, impact of grade retention, processes of school disengagement, student-teacher relations, track changes and the broader institutional setting (e.g. Rumberger 2001; Van Praag et al 2018), leaving the school-to-work transitions of this group understudied. It is very important to study these transitions, however, as they can be quite challenging for early school leavers, due to the increased emphasis on education to get ahead in society (Furlong 2006). This study fills this literature gap by using qualitative research methods to examine the school-to-work transitions of early school leavers in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. In doing so, our study will focus on the lived experiences of early school leavers themselves, so that more attention can be given to the intertwining of labour market and educational dynamics (e.g. Hannan et al. 1995; Cregan 2001; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Thomson et al. 2002; Furlong 2006, Brzinsky-Fay 2006). This study can therefore produce revealing insights into how young people experience and act in diverse institutional contexts, how they adjust their goals and strategies to these circumstances, and also how they try to overcome contextual limitations by developing new strategies (Shavit and Müller, 1998). Including these experiences of early school leavers could provide a more complete image of the transitions these young people go through and give more insights into the non-linear, gradual and cyclic nature of these transitions (Rumberger 2001; EGRIS 2001; Gitschthaler and Van Praag 2018). When studying school-to-work transitions and the factors leading to leaving school early and entering the labour market, we will consider three aspects: 1) factors leading to early school leaving and the decision-making processes during the school-to-work transition; 2) the difficulties young people encounter in the labour market; and 3) the nature of the school-to-work transitions of early school leavers, by examining both cross-case and within-case analyses.

Entering the labour market

While a wide variety of combined reasons may trigger or inspire young people to leave education without qualifications, such as having a strong sense of the futility of school or lack of financial means (Rumberger 2001; Van Praag et al 2018), this does not necessarily help to understand how they make and evaluate their decision to enter the labour market. Early school leavers could rely on distinct resources or use different strategies when deciding to leave school without qualifications and to enter the labour market. Three main theories that could help to understand these processes are those of cultural reproduction, rational choice and social capital. *Cultural reproduction theory* posits that young people coming from higher social classes have more access to cultural resources that assist them in making better choices throughout their educational and professional careers, compared to those who do not have similar resources at their disposal. This theory would suggest that early school leavers are not very familiar with the dominant culture in society and not very able to use the educated language, resulting in a loss of interest in continuing education and being more prone to search for alternatives in the labour market (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Reay 2004). A second theoretical perspective, *rational choice theory*, states that youngsters weigh up the costs and benefits of all options they perceive and consider their individual chances of success for each option. Considering all perceived options in education and in the labour market, early school leavers think of all the (perceived) resources available and the urgency of their personal or familial needs when making decisions, which in some cases could result in the decision to leave school early (Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). A third theory, *social capital theory*, argues that young people have access to distinct networks and types of information about potential choices within their broader social networks, which also affects the (informed) choices they make (Ball 2003; Jaeger and Holm 2007; Horvat et al. 2003). For example, Russell (2014) found that students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds manage to work through informal pathways and acquire more information through informal means, reducing the likelihood of finding a job with good working conditions, while

Thompson and colleagues (2014) show that even with strong social support networks, many NEETs (people who are 'not in education, employment or training') in northern England feel isolated and lack a sense of control over their lives. In a previous study, Van Praag and colleagues (forthcoming) found that a combination of both social and cultural capital theory helped to understand how vulnerable young people at risk of early school leaving made educational choices during their entire educational trajectories. Especially the most vulnerable students had to make the most choices throughout their educational career. In the present study, we aim to look beyond the educational trajectories and examine whether similar mechanisms are at work for the group of young people who actually leave school without qualifications and enter the labour market.

Difficulties in the labour market

When looking at the difficulties early school leavers encounter in the labour market, it is clear that the relationship between educational level and (un)employment has been repeatedly documented; more specifically, it has been shown that people who have no educational qualifications will encounter difficulties in the labour market (e.g. Brzinsky-Fay 2006; Furlong 2006; Hannan et al. 1995). Nevertheless, more research is needed that explicitly focuses on the school-to-work transitions of early school leavers. Previous studies have focused on particular aspects of this transition, such as the structural unemployment of disadvantaged groups (MacDonald 1998; Ryan 2001) or the success of vocational trainings and programmes for young people who do not intend to enrol in higher education (Ryan 2001; Ryan and Lorinc 2018). In addition to this, research on vulnerable youth often addresses the situation of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), mainly using survey data. This group of early school leavers was found to have lower rates of participation in employment, education and training, to occupy a precarious position in the labour market, and to have a lack of financial resources (Hannan et al. 1995; Cregan 2001; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Furlong 2006, Brzinsky-Fay 2006; Thompson, Russell and Simmons 2014; Salvà-Mut, Thomás-Vanrell and Quintana-Murci 2016). Finally, this field of research on school-to-work transitions is not integrated into the research conducted on early school leaving, which mainly concentrates on the educational context (e.g. Van Praag et al. 2018). Thus, previous research has shown that, when looking at their labour market outcomes, early school leavers encounter difficult times in the labour market. However, less is known about their perceptions and the strategies they use when entering and navigating the labour market.

School-to-work transitions of early school leavers

School-to-work transitions appear to be complex to study, due to their dialectic and cyclic nature. Youth studies have increasingly approached school-to-work transitions as only one part of an entire range of transitional strands that characterise young people's entry into adulthood (MacDonald 1998; 2011). In this field of research, it is widely acknowledged that youth transitions take place at a different pace for every individual, depending on individual, social and institutional features (Furlong 2006; MacDonald 2011; Ryan 2001). These transitions do not progress by definition in the same direction, since individuals have various goals in life, experience different obstacles in trying to achieve them and develop new strategies to adapt to changing situations and opportunity structures. They are also characterised by change, delays and uncertainty (Ryan 2001; Wolbers 2007). Additionally, both phases – entry into the labour market and early school leaving – can alternate, and should be conceptualised as a long transition period of cyclic phases of being in and outside education and in and outside the labour market (Rumberger 2001; Van Praag et al. 2018). This cyclic process parallels the increasingly more de-standardised and fragmented structure of youth transitions and, therefore, cannot be studied separately (EGRIS 2001; Furlong, 2006; Cahuc et al., 2017; Gitschthaler and Van Praag 2018). Furthermore, these school-to-work transitions are dependent on the institutional structures of their countries (Brzinsky-Fay 2006; Hannan et al. 1995; Shavit and Müller 1998; Wolbers 2007). While most studies focusing on the institutional context apply a macro- and/or meso- level economic approach, examining the narratives of early school leavers is necessary to fully understand the peculiarities of the

interrelation between both education and the labour market (Brzinsky-Fay 2006; Shavit and Müller 1998).

The institutional context in Flanders

In Belgium, the level of young people between 18 and 24 years old that in 2015 were early school leavers was 10.1%, which is below the average level of the EU (28 countries) of 11.0%. While males outnumber females, there is a trend that early school leaving for the total population is mainly situated in and around (specific) urban areas (Eurostat 2016), which is also the locus of the respondents in our study. To fully understand these statistics and school-to-work transitions, we should point out that the labour market and the educational system in Flanders are not really adjusted to each other. This means that secondary education is not necessarily oriented towards the needs of the labour market, which can be characterised as an *'organisational space'* (Maurice et al. 1982; Müller and Shavit 1998). The different educational tracks (i.e. academic, arts, technical, vocational) in secondary education, and the various higher education institutes (i.e. professional/academic bachelors/masters) that are intended to prepare students for distinct occupational futures (Van Praag et al., 2015) are also not directly linked to particular jobs in the labour market (Verhaest, Sellami and van der Velden 2012). This lack of a clear connection between educational programmes and qualifications could be confusing and may give the impression that these educational qualifications do not really help a graduate succeed in the labour market (Van Praag et al 2016). However, what is striking is that the institutional solution to early school leaving by providing part-time or full-time vocational education in schools often becomes the final stop in young people's education trajectory. In particular, in an early tracking system such as exists in Flanders, with a strong hierarchical division between tracks, the vast majority of the overall category of early school leavers are young people that left when they enrolled in vocational education (Van Praag et al 2018). It is therefore important to acknowledge the experiences and perspectives of young people themselves to better understand these processes.

Methods

The data collection in Flanders was part of a larger comparative project, titled 'Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe' (RESL.eu project). In the Flemish sample, data were collected in one large, multi-ethnic city with the highest percentage of early school leavers in Flanders (22.2% early school leavers in 2013-2014, Flemish Department of Education 2014). For the purpose of this study, only those nine youngsters that were at the start of our project identified as early school leavers were selected, as they provided a sufficiently rich amount of data for this qualitative study. These nine respondents, aged between 16 and 27 years old, were recruited through local youth initiatives and those who were initially included in the first round of the RESL.eu survey but had left school (and had provided their contact details) before the second wave of data collection (see Clycq, Nouwen and Timmerman 2014). Seven respondents had a migrant background, and two had a Belgian background. Respondents were asked to participate in two retrospective biographical interviews, each with at least a six-month period in between. Three respondents did not want to be interviewed again in the second wave. The use of bio-interviews allowed the researcher to include and consider the sequences of the distinct phases of employment, job searching and school enrolment in young people's trajectories and processes of early school leaving. Seven respondents left school after being enrolled in a vocational track (exceptions: one in a technical track in secondary education and one in an alternative learning arena). However, they had all followed distinct tracks or alternative educational programmes over the course of their educational trajectory. Interviews were built up thematically (e.g. educational trajectories, aspirations, social networks and so forth) to understand and compare the educational trajectories of early school leavers. Data was analysed following a grounded theory approach, using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This method consists of distinct phases in which data is systematically broken down and (re)coded and connected to each other by comparing all similarities and differences within and between codes. This cyclic process of coding and comparing, using the computer facilitating software Nvivo, resulted in the creation of relevant categories which could be

related to each other. After some initial explorative analyses were carried out, involving all themes, the general code 'Employment experiences' formed the starting point of more in-depth analyses. All codes of the interview data were systematically contrasted against each other, and differences and similarities were compared. In doing so, more fine-grained themes emerged during the interviews (e.g. attractiveness of the labour market, the difficulties and strategies developed when searching for/keeping a job, differences over time). All citations are translated from Dutch to English and edited and anonymised by the authors to facilitate legibility.

Results

Data analyses indicate that the transition from education to work for early school leavers is not a straightforward one and is characterised by a cyclic process. In this cyclic process, the added value of labour market experience and educational qualifications are constantly contrasted against each other. In the following three sections, we apply a cross-case analysis to study the reasons participants put forward for leaving school early, which guided their decision-making, and how they experience both the transition to the labour market and searching for a job. In the final section, we present more specific within-case analyses to study how specific participants look back and readjust themselves, their goals and strategies after a longer period looking for a secure position.

Rationale to enter the labour market

One recurrent finding in research on early school leaving is the impact of one's personal situation that steers individuals to find solutions that seem to fall between the current institutionalised trajectories between school and work (Van Caudenberg et al. 2017; Rumberger 2001; MacDonald 2011). A major narrative several of our participants put forward is their personal struggle, in a context where their individual and familial situation is very precarious, to balance the importance they attach to 'success in education' and the need or pressure to make the transition to the labour market. This precarious situation seems to pressure our respondents into earning a living within a very short time frame:

Interviewer: "Why exactly is your work so important?"

Bahir (male, Moroccan descent): "It changed this year. My brother got married at the end of September. My oldest brother. He's married, he doesn't live at home anymore. And I'm the oldest guy at home now. So I can hardly go to all these trainings while I'm really – If I had a full-time job, I could take care of people at home."

Kashef (male, Afghan): "[...] I have to care for my mother. Because of that, I'd rather quit school because the garage only pays for fifty percent and they don't give me a full-time contract."

Interviewer: "Part-time?!"

Kashef: "Yes, that was three days a week and that's what I had for my mother. I have to care for my mother because she is ill and I have to work."

Abdou (male, Moroccan descent): "I left school, I stayed home for two months and did nothing. That's all because of him [that one bad teacher]. All those applications which are not successful, the income that I have not had... the work that I have not fixed, the diploma I was unable to get.. That's all because of him. My career, my school career that didn't continue, it's all because of him. So actually anything that I now encounter that's bad... That is actually, I think: ah, that's all because of him. If he was someone good and who could turn a blind eye... Someone who has a heart, which he doesn't have... My friends, my classmates have all graduated and now I'm sitting here. That's not something fun to see. That really hurts."(...)

Abdou: "I registered with the central examination commission, that's right. But I haven't started yet. Why? The reason is... searching for the security of having a job, I have already told you!".

While both Bahir and Kashef felt it was impossible to keep being enrolled in school and working full-time, they had family obligations that could not be dismissed. Kashef mentioned that he had to quit school as he had to take care of his mother. Bahir felt that his family responsibilities had become more stringent and could not be combined with school enrolment. For Adbou, on the other hand, both school- and non-school-related factors mattered. While he felt discriminated against by a teacher in secondary education, he also mentioned that he needed to have a job first before re-enrolling in education after some period of time. Overall, it is striking that respondents' accounts referred to the inability of the combination of rigid school and working duties.

The urge to immediately quit school without a qualification was triggered by a combination of non-school-related factors, such as the need for an income, and school-related ones such as turbulent educational trajectories and/or disciplinary problems at school. For these youngsters, staying enrolled in school might have been the preferred option. At the same time, due to specific circumstances, they could also see the benefit of entering the labour market earlier. When reading Bahir's account, at first sight it seems that it was mainly the labour market that pulled him out of education. However, on taking a closer look, Bahir was already tempted to do so; as he puts it "find another way, so school wasn't necessary anymore". As it turns out, he had initially high aspirations, but had to conclude over the course of his school career that the existing school system was not for him, stating that "It was more like: for me, that the school system – it had already become clear in the second year of secondary school – that it was not something for me. It was way too exhausting and I didn't enjoy it." Bahir therefore seemed to have changed his mind, in order to find an equivalent that was more suitable for him. This account illustrates how respondents seemed to value work experience and educational trainings more or less equally, seeing them as equivalents. The account of Adbou is actually the other way round: first he refers to this discriminatory teacher who made him stop school, but it later became clear that he also needed to earn a living. This constant struggle between opting for work experience and obtaining an educational qualification in the accounts of these youngsters indicates that for some youngsters the Flemish education system does not really cater for their needs, curiosity and concerns about future participation in the labour market. Some respondents are in immediate need of financial resources, and argue that they need specific work experience to be able to access these financial resources. For instance, as Bahir and Kashef stated earlier, for them, the security of a full-time and fully paid job would make a fundamental difference to their current (family) situation. The combined set of factors leading to early school leaving also seemed to have changed the context in which young people framed their decisions and how they personally interpreted the respective value of labour market experience and educational training.

Rather than waiting for 'the long route to success' via an educational qualification, our respondents redefined their goals to the new situation and developed new strategies. Their accounts illustrate why for specific profiles of youth certain institutional solutions put forward by policy makers do not fit their specific needs. While Flemish policy makers have aimed to organise students in tracks that prepare them for distinct professional futures (Van Praag et al., 2015), the Flemish educational system remains an organisational space where 'education' and 'work' are not strongly interrelated. This is particularly the case with respect to the urgent needs some young people are confronted with and how they perceive the instrumental value of education when it comes to securing a job. Furthermore, it is remarkable that several participants argued that they were not convinced that the accumulation of 'work experience' gained through specific vocational programmes would provide them with the necessary resources and skills to find a job in the labour market. This can be illustrated with the narrative of Bahir, who argues that he needed a new strategy to gain the necessary skills outside of school. This remained a constant worry when transitioning to the labour market. He even argues that 'student jobs' (e.g. working in a low-skilled job such as a waiter or doing administrative work in a company) would provide him with more experience and resources (but probably also more financial resources, as student jobs often give full pay instead of the limited compensation of some vocational training programmes) to become successful, while their vocational training in the Flemish educational system does not:

Bahir (male, Moroccan descent): “Like I said: I think the lack of [work] experience had a bigger influence on my decision to drop out [than the economic crisis]. I think that [the lack of work experience] is the reason why I can’t find a job. If I had had even just a few student jobs while I was enrolled at school, I would have gained some experience. If I had done that earlier, compared to dropping out now and starting to apply for jobs, I think I would have had a better chance [in the labour market] than I have right now.”

Similarly, Tommy was raised in a precarious family environment in terms of financial means. Therefore, he needed to invest in a student job from early on. Since he was fifteen years old, while enrolled in school, he has worked in a factory on the conveyor belt or been employed at a warehouse. He often felt comfortable with working, saying: “I enjoyed my student job more than going to school in essence”. As he started to earn some money, he got ‘the taste for it [working]’, which persuaded him to search for a real job, arguing “I was more like, if I am working then I might as well make some more money, depending on what type of job I have.”

Thus, the urge to quit school without a qualification was certainly triggered by non-school-related factors, yet school-related factors were part of the process. This complex and stressful combination of institutional, contextual and personal factors led these respondents to the decision to leave school early. Following rational choice theory (cfr. Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997), young people seemed to have weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of staying enrolled in school and, often more pressing, the need to provide for themselves and their families. The solution in their eyes is entry into the labour market in the short term, yet without discarding educational success as irrelevant. During this process, and within a particular restricted context, this decision was fuelled by the idea that work experience was equivalent to an educational qualification. Although the respondents often did not reject the idea that educational qualifications are important to succeed in life, their personal situation reframed the available opportunities they had at their disposal. This resulted in the idea that leaving education without an educational qualification is – within their opportunities – regarded as a rational and positive decision. Remarkably, respondents hardly referred to their social networks, nor did they mention the overall educational system and its prevailing culture. The lack of any references to such social and cultural resources in their accounts could indicate an absence of such resources that could inform their choices, which characterises groups coming from lower socio-economic. It could also suggest that these resources are less valuable or relevant to understand the decision-making of early school leavers, especially when entering the labour market. Finally, it could also be that through personal experiences throughout their school career, young people learnt that their resources did not help them to advance in (school) life (cfr. social and/or cultural capital theories: Lareau and Weininger 2003; Reay 2004; Ball 2003; Jaeger and Holm 2007; Horvat et al. 2003; Russell, 2014; Thompson et al., 2014). Nevertheless, when entering the labour market new obstacles arise and the reasons for deciding to leave school without an educational qualification do not seem sufficient.

Churning without learning? Difficulties in the labour market

When entering the labour market things often did not go as expected. The account of Roos shows that – similar to other participants – she assumed her previous work experience would help her to rapidly secure a stable position in the labour market. However, she felt herself going from one job to another looking for the best fit for her.

Roos (female, Belgian descent): “Yeah, I also worked in a supermarket as a student, like at weekends and occasionally during the week, because I wasn’t going to school. So, they [my employers] thought that was pretty handy, but then I recently quit that [job] just because I didn’t feel like it anymore. And now, since April, every Thursday and Friday I pick up a three-year-old boy from school. And then essentially do a bit of babysitting, like giving him a bath, eating a sandwich, playing a bit and stuff, so that’s like my little job now. That’s just a lot of fun.”

This constant search for the 'ideal' job by early school leavers, such as Roos, does not always go as smoothly as they expected and often consists of short, alternating periods of employment and unemployment ('churning') (Furlong, 2006). The decision to leave school early was frequently presumed to be taken with little thought about the possibilities of finding a good job, and school leavers' ideas about labour market opportunities were often not clearly attuned to the needs of the labour market or applied to their personal situations. Participants mentioned having changed several (types of) jobs during their first active period in the labour market. This was, for instance, the case for Marouane (male, Moroccan descent), who even surprised himself during the interview when he listed the more than 20 jobs he had held in a period of two years (between 17 and 19 years old), ranging from working in factories, administration, youth work, in the harbour, as a chef and as a security worker. He summarises this period as follows: "During the last two years, I have done a lot of jobs well [meaning 'well-executed']. [But] I didn't do them well for long." He explains these changes as the result of being curious to try out new things. However, it also illustrates the difficulty of finding and holding on to their 'ideal' job.

As a result of constantly switching horizontally between 'similar' jobs, several participants did not advance in one of these jobs and were not able to accumulate the skills and work experience they needed to advance in their future career. This was the case for Bahir, who stated: "*Right now, I only have experience with cleaning.*" He wished he had more work experience in order to give some relevant references to future employees. The respondents argued that their lack of sufficient and/or relevant work experience could not compensate for their lack of educational qualifications. Similarly, Safaa (female, Moroccan descent) states that her job applications in most cases received negative responses "because I don't have enough experience yet, half a year is very little, most ask for a year to two years or a secondary school diploma". What became clear is that our respondents continuously encounter difficulties in the labour market they initially did not foresee. All early school leavers remained stuck in jobs with precarious working conditions, as was the case for Safaa (female, Moroccan descent):

Safaa: "I have been busy part-time, worked half a year in the store.(...) They employed me half a year ago and told me yeah we'll try to evaluate you and at the end, we'll discuss if you'll stay here or you'll need to find another job. And then, in my case, I had to find another job."

Safaa was fired during her trial period, so she again had to look for a new job. The account of Tommy also demonstrates how easily people without educational qualifications were replaced and how they were treated in the labour market:

Interviewer: "And then how did you look for jobs, if it really wasn't important to you?"

Tommy (male, Belgian descent): "It depends, like I have quite a lot of, like, jobs, like from IBO [Individual Vocational Training] for example, so I mostly did that. But there were also a lot [of jobs] that were like, for example, jobs where too many people were hired already, and they said like yeah you have no experience."

As the interview of Tommy shows, previous work experience is more highly valued in the labour market than an educational qualification, which especially applies to the type of jobs he now qualifies for. Having no clear future perspectives or aspirations and "just doing a job that he likes" did not seem to result in a long-term job and more actual work experience. Later, when asked about the position he wants to obtain in the following five years, he replied: "definitely something with a stable job".

Overcoming the first struggles to actually *find* a job aside, many youngsters that managed to obtain a position additionally found it hard to secure a stable and good position in a particular company that fulfilled their aspirations, gave sufficient job satisfaction and provided them a future perspective. For most respondents, these initial jobs are often perceived as *temporary* solutions. However, in many cases, early school leavers stayed for quite a long time in this 'temporary' phase, in search of something else, or not knowing what they would be doing in the (near) future. When looking for security, several ended up in a similar insecure position, 'churning' between jobs without any improvement,

encouraging them to rethink their goals and strategies. We address these issues in the following section. These results are also in line with the study of Furlong (2006), which, based on survey data in the UK, indicated that a growing number of young people were constantly 'churning', meaning that they were repeatedly caught up in a cycle of low-paid insecure apprenticeships and (voluntary) jobs, followed by periods of unemployment, and/or enrolment in training programmes that did not seem to lead to clear employment opportunities. Moreover, a study by Cahuc and colleagues (2017) among early school leavers in France showed that acquiring work experience in the labour market does not by definition raise one's chances of finding a new job. This only appeared to be the case when early school leavers can show that the skills they acquired are also formally certified.

Early school leaving for life?

The two rounds of data we collected allows us to apply a within-case analysis to grasp the experiences of our participants after being a longer time out of school and looking for work. One of the main narratives is that several participants became increasingly aware that they did not have the 'required' qualifications and experience to secure a stable position in the labour market. In response to their – for them – unexpectedly precarious situation, some rethought their goals and strategies for fulfilling their needs, and also for how to secure a stable position in the labour market. This resulted in two main strategies. For some, this period of trial and error was concluded with the intention of going back to education or training first and then trying again in the labour market. Others preferred to stay in the labour market, but they put more effort into looking for stability because their precarious situations did not improve significantly, or because they did not see an immediate solution in going back to education or training in the short term. This decision – similar to their decision to leave school early – seemed once again to be confined by their personal and family situation. In total, out of the nine respondents, three did not engage in any kind of educational/vocational programme or training, two successfully obtained their ISCED III qualification through the central examination commission, four were enrolled in this central examination commission, and one had followed an additional professional training.

For participants in precarious personal and familial conditions, the need to secure a stable position in the labour market remains paramount. Even though these respondents experience similar difficulties to other participants, their strategy remains focused on achieving job security. What is interesting to note is that several of them mentioned having experienced some kind of "personal progress and stability", as Bahir refers to it in the second interview and reflecting on the past period as "Everything got a lot calmer and then I just constantly got more independent and I also have a girlfriend now (...) And just, everything sort of came together in my head too". One of the consequences of 'things calming down' is that respondents indicated that new opportunities were emerging and that they had progressed in their transition into adulthood. Abdou, who was in a socio-economically precarious personal and familial situation and had also had a very negative school experience, enrolled in educational training again after the first interview.

Abdou: "Actually [an educational qualification is] very important, I am someone who can't walk around without a diploma. And I also said... I did not say that I'm going to get it, but I would rather first have job security, and when I had that, and I had worked, for example, for more than a year, and I can also do my best to get my diploma."

However, even in these cases the same 'risk factors' at the contextual (e.g. continuing lack of income or enduring difficulty to combine education with work) and personal level (e.g. lack of discipline and anxiety issues) might hinder them in successfully engaging with these trajectories.

What emerges from the participants' narratives is that similar reasons that led to their early school leaving also complicated their search for a job. This was, for instance, the case for Tommy, who suffered from severe back pains and wanted a job where he could sit more. However, after contacting the VDAB (public employment service of Flanders) and a mentor for career guidance, he became employed as a night guard where he had to stand up all the time, which was quite difficult for him and

he got fired. Throughout the narratives, we found that sometimes the same physical and psychological constraints that hindered participants from graduating also made it difficult to find and keep a job. Our analyses clearly show that early school leavers often experience various types of issues, such as a low self-concept, performance anxiety, concentration and motivational issues and/or felt they were not treated as adults. These experiences also emerged when applying for a job and gave them the feeling that they were not being respected or treated 'like adults'; but it may also have led them to avoid new experiences of failure.

Interviewer: "Have you already applied for many jobs?"

Bahir (male, Moroccan descent): "Actually, not that many. I submit online and if I get an invitation, I never will actually, I also don't, I recently went to Volvo Ghent [factory]. I drove from here to Ghent to take a test that actually did not make any sense at all. (...) So, basically I failed two tests and then they [Volvo cars] said: 'We can't let you pass'. And I thought to myself: 'Look, save me the trouble', but said: 'Okay that's good!' I just stood up, ripped up my CV, threw it in the trash and went out. [They had me] take a test for four to five year olds. The motivation was gone for me. I really didn't expect it to be so bad."

This fear of being treated in an immature way and doing seemingly useless 'childish' tests, are often mentioned as important reasons for leaving school early, and again seem to matter when searching for a job. The constant search to be treated 'as an adult' may be an important feature of puberty and a crucial element in the transition into adulthood. While young people seem to experience a cyclic phase between participation in the labour market and educational training, or in between jobs (Furlong, 2006; Cahuc et al., 2017; Gitschthaler and Van Praag 2018), this is an element that is a common thread throughout the respondents' entire transition into adulthood (see also Van Caudenberg et al. 2017).

In addition to this, some participants who did not find a job for which they were motivated or did not know what they were looking for in a job, encountered difficulties in maintaining this job, as explained by Roos: "I also did a lot of jobs, so many times I also said like 'I'm not staying here anymore', and then I just walked out." As she continues:

Roos: "When I receive too much criticism, then I just leave...[criticisms] about my work or something, because I'm not obliged to stay there, the only thing people are obliged to do is dying at the end of their lives, other than that, nothing."

For Roos, it is important to acknowledge that this switching of jobs and rethinking goals is not a possibility available to all. For those in precarious situations, such as Bahir and Abdou, the need to work and earn money seemed to be fundamental to evaluate and understand their situation and their goals. For respondents like Roos, the return to education and the immediate need to have a job appeared to be much less urgent. Even though she stated in the first interview that 'it is a lot of fun' to do some babysitting, she now argues that this is not what she wants for herself: "But there are also some who have also never seen that, and think 'Without a diploma you need a bit of luck and you will have a good job', and that's not true. That's completely not true!". As she continues, she feels early school leavers often do not have the opportunity to do 'decent' jobs, which made her return to education:

Roos: "People who don't have a diploma need to get up at six because they have to go and work in the factory. They have to work 'under' someone. They also receive criticism all day. They work with people who are depressed. They just have a bad work environment. That's what I think, I also went through that already, because I quit school when I was 17 and since then I've only worked in factories and stuff, jobs without a diploma. So, I know what that's like. That's also the reason why I went back to study, because it was not yet too late for me."

Often, the length of time that had passed since leaving school early seemed to matter regarding their views on their personal trajectories in school and the labour market. After some time, the respondents

noted that they encountered a lot of difficulties when looking for a 'good' job, which made them evaluate their past trajectories differently. These results bring us to the cyclic nature of this school-to-work transition period and demonstrate the importance of 'time' when analysing school-to-work transitions and the cyclic nature that characterise them.

Discussion

Examining school-to-work transitions of early school leavers encompasses issues on schooling, employment and training (Ryan 2001). Here, we discuss our main findings and their implications. First, the need to sustain their family/themselves and to have an income, paired with the high value attached to work experience (which was insufficiently included in their school career, according to the respondents), can be seen as an important factor that causes young people to leave school without an educational qualification. When weighing up the costs and benefits related to leaving school without an educational qualification, as argued by rational choice theory (Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997), young people's decisions were constrained by the financial situation in which they found themselves. Second, although financial constraints are not for all students either the main or only reason for leaving school early, these issues are certainly not solved by leaving education. This is the case as several respondents ended up in poor working conditions, and frequently alternated short periods of unemployment and (under)employment (cfr. MacDonald 1998; Furlong 2006). Young people are impatient and have a strong need to become successful in the labour market after an unsuccessful school career while simultaneously fearing not finding a job. This could be due to the fact that there is a weak connection between work and education in Flanders (Verhaest, Sellami and van der Velden 2012; Maurice et al. 1982; Müller and Shavit 1998). Nevertheless, this lack of patience and/or urgent need to enter the labour market is paradoxically a hindrance for smooth school-to-work transitions, and it causes a dilemma about which is more valuable for securing a good future: obtaining an educational qualification or investing more in securing a stable job and income. Thus, the entry into the labour market appears to be less successful than hoped for. Third, the analysis of the school-to-work transitions of early school leavers demonstrates the importance of including the cyclic nature of such transitions within research. A major difficulty for our participants was that the obstacles they encountered in the labour market were quite similar to the ones they experienced in education. Again, the strategy to circumvent the education obstacles by leaving school early did not help them in the long run. This finding could be a very valuable insight when designing or reflecting on more work-oriented educational systems or systems of dual learning (both in education and in the labour market).

This study not only provides us with unique insights into the actual school-to-work transitions of early school leavers, but it also allows us to gain insight into the possible success of policy measures that integrate work experiences into educational trainings and programmes and existing institutional structures to reduce early school leaving. Our analyses indicate that the accounts of the early school leavers under study require a more inclusive education system that is also focused on tackling the individual issues that students are dealing with (psychological, social and financial), both in and outside school. For this group of vulnerable students for early school leaving, the transitions in life can somehow be reversed or sometimes even coincide. Having a good, fixed and/or desired position in the labour market could reduce existential and financial stress, and provide an important experience of personal success hitherto not found in education. These factors may allow them to return to or invest more in education, where they have until now felt insecure, unsuccessful and out of place, and go for 'a second chance'. However, if these transitions are not guided and supported by counselling or clear institutional arrangements, this reversed trajectory could lead to nowhere and result in another failing experience and disappointment. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the need to consider, both in research and in policy, labour market and education dynamics together and to pay more attention to the possibility of reversing decisions made during young people's transitions into adulthood (EGRIS 2001). Future research should include the psycho-social issues and insecurities young people at risk of early school leaving are facing and that hinder them during their school-to-work transitions.

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