Age is more than just a number! The role of age and maturity in the processes leading to early school leaving in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract

In many educational systems, age is used as a criteria to organize education. Children's age is used to group students together and to indicate the entry into particular programs. The use of age for organizational purposes in education stems from the idea that age provides an indication of the development of children, which is associated with teaching and learning. However, more far-reaching consequences of age-related educational practices are insufficiently recognized in policy and academic research. Qualitative methods are used to study students and school personnel in diverse types of educational institutions in Flanders (Belgium) to assess how age and age-related issues matter for the students' educational trajectories and educational decision-making processes leading to early school leaving. Data analyses reveal that school staff members consider age and perceived maturity during evaluation procedures. Students also consider age during educational decision making processes: when getting older or being too old for grade, students increasingly weigh the costs and benefits associated with getting an educational qualification and being enrolled in school and alternative opportunities. Students' expectations related to age shape their school experiences and feelings of belonging. Findings of this study demonstrate how these educational practices add to the reproduction of inequalities through education. These results could inform debates concerning the evaluation procedures in secondary education, compulsory education and the reduction of early school leaving in Europe.

Key words: Secondary Education; Institutional Context; Sociology of Education; Inclusion and Exclusion

Introduction

Age plays a crucial role in the everyday lives of young people and in the organisation of education and society (Riley, 1987), yet little attention has been paid to the consequences of organising education by age. In Western societies, biological age is important as it is assumed to give indications about children's development (NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2007) and transitions into adulthood (e.g., legal working age, end of compulsory education). These transitions should be considered within their socioeconomic and educational contexts (Ainley & Allen, 2010). It is therefore remarkable that so little academic research has explored the importance and consequences of age and age-related matters in the decisions made by young people and school staff members during their school careers. At present, the importance and consequences of age in youngsters' school careers and everyday school life are not fully recognised by educational policy makers. One of the key principles that lies at the heart of educational development, and which is also reflected in children's rights, is the idea that children should express their own views and that these views should be considered in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 24, OJ C 364 18.12.2000; UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 12). Accordingly, policy makers have used age and maturity to organise education. Indeed, following Piaget (1954; 1971), children and young people are grouped together in classes based on age. Previous studies have mainly examined the importance of age at particular points in children's educational trajectories, such as age at school entry (e.g., Sharp, 1995; Eurodyce, 2014), adolescence (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993) and when compulsory education ends (Simmons, 2008; Cabus & De Witte, 2010). Other scholars have studied the importance of age when a delay occurs in a child's educational trajectory due to grade retention (Lamote et al., 2014) or migration (Gonzalez, 2002). Finally, relative age effects caused by artificial age cut-off points have also been examined (e.g., Sharp, 1995; Cobley, Abraham & Baker, 2008).

In the present study, we aim to address this gap in the literature and explore how age and age-related matters that signal the transition into adulthood impact upon: (a) students' choices during their educational careers and their feelings of being treated age-appropriately by school staff and schools' educational practices; and (b) school staff's evaluation procedures (e.g., decisions about whether or not to retain students) and career guidance (e.g., orientation towards a specific educational programme/institution). In doing so, we examine the potential impact of age and age-related matters on the processes leading to early school leaving, contributing in particular to the body of research that examines the factors that play a role in these processes (NESET II, 2017). The relationship between age and early school leaving is of the utmost importance as age effects accumulate over the course of the school career (see Baert et al., 2013) and could therefore play a decisive role in processes of early school leaving (NESET II, 2017). For instance, in the studies of Cabus and De Witte (2010) and Simmons (2008), raising the age at which compulsory education ends was believed to reduce the number of pupils leaving secondary education without qualifications. In other studies, young people have often referred to age-related issues such as maturity, mature treatment and grade retention when discussing their educational trajectories and processes of school disengagement (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Downes, 2013). These studies lend support to the idea that age plays an important role in the processes that result in early school leaving.

When theorising about the ways in which age could affect the processes leading up to early school leaving, a second age-related factor, namely maturity, should also be considered (NESET II, 2017). Although age and maturity are closely interrelated, they could affect the processes resulting in early school leaving differently. Young people's age, for example, could influence their plans and decisions about whether or not to continue with particular forms of education. This may be especially the case when the pupil in question is older than the others in the grade, for instance due to migratory reasons or after grade retention. While age is easy to measure, a pupil's degree of maturity depends on their social environment, cultural background and social and cognitive development (see also Eccles et al., 1993). In general, maturity is expected to increase with age, but the exact development

of an individual's maturity and how this relates to age is more difficult to capture. Children and young people develop at different speeds and may also interpret 'maturity' and being treated in a 'mature' way differently, and perhaps differently from school staff and parents. Their interpretations of maturity may range from having a say at school to making their own decisions about time and organisational issues and being seen as equal, adult human beings. Moreover, as argued by the stage-environment fit approach (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), the importance of maturity is largely related to the environment. When adolescents' social environments do not provide them with sufficient opportunities to develop, this affects their school experiences and motivation to achieve in school (Eccles et al., 1993). Similarly, when discussing processes of school disengagement, youngsters often report wishing they had been treated in a more 'mature' way at school – whatever this may mean and regardless of their own degree of maturity (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Downes, 2013). Hence, we argue that both age and maturity should be taken into account when studying the processes leading to early school leaving, and, furthermore, that the social environment, especially the school context, should also be considered.

The aim of this study is to apply a qualitative approach to examine how age influences students' experiences in school (i.e., treatment by school staff members, school disengagement) and the making of educational choices (school/track/programme choices, grade retention and the decision to leave school early). We focus explicitly on the manner in which age affects how school staff members treat, support and orient students and how they evaluate students' achievement and behaviour. This study adds to the literature because it is among the first to 1) map how age structures school practices, experiences and trajectories; 2) focus on the perceived influence of age in the processes of early school leaving; and 3) combine the perspectives of both students and school staff members on the importance of age in everyday school life and school practices in distinct educational institutions in Flanders (the northern region of Belgium). The following section begins with an explanation of how education is organised by age in the Flemish context.

The Flemish educational context

Like many other educational systems, the Flemish system is structured and organised according to age groups, assuming that the knowledge and abilities acquired in each grade/year relate to children's development processes (Eurodyce, 2014). Students start primary education at the age of six. Primary education is intended to last six years, after which students transfer to secondary education at the age of twelve (for another six years). In the first grade of Flemish secondary school, students are usually aged 12-13; in the second grade they are aged 13-14, etc. If students follow this 'ideal' path, they finish secondary education at the age of 18, which is also the age at which compulsory education ends (Eurodyce, 2017). Most students start their secondary school careers in mainstream secondary education, which is a highly hierarchical and selective system with a rigid tracking structure. In mainstream education, many students start in the higher status academic tracks but (are advised to) switch to the less highly regarded technical and vocational tracks later (Boone & Van Houtte, 2011; Van Praag et al., 2015; 2017).This 'downward mobility' is often accompanied by grade retention. Indeed, administrative data show that in Flemish full-time regular secondary education, around 25% of students have experienced one or more years of grade retention (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2017) and are consequently older than they are 'supposed' to be in their grade. In some cases, students leave full-time mainstream education early and enter alternative learning arenas to continue their education or prepare for the labour market, as well as to receive some form of educational qualification (and meet the requirement of compulsory education until they reach the age of 18) (Nouwen et al., 2016).

Methods

Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted in eight educational institutions in one city in Flanders (northern region of Belgium) between 2014 and 2016 as part of the comparative European RESL.eu project. The selection of the educational institutions (N=8) was based

upon the type of vocational education they offer (part-time work-based/full-time school-based, adults only/also including minors, regular education/alternative learning arena) (Nouwen et al., 2016). Four regular secondary schools (referred to in the Results section as Schools A-D) and four alternative learning arenas (referred to as Institutions A-D) were included. All regular secondary schools offered at least the vocational and technical tracks. The following alternative learning arenas were included: two institutions providing second chance education to adults (people aged 18 and older), one institution providing part-time school-based vocational education and training (VET) and one institution providing a part-time apprenticeship track combining work and study. Both of the latter institutions offer programmes for young adults aged between 15-16 and 25 years.

Since data collection was initially directed towards evaluating the prevention, intervention and compensation measures for tackling early school leaving, we used a theory-driven stakeholder evaluation (Hansen & Vedung, 2010) to study the convergence of the perceptions and experiences of three stakeholder groups: directors/supervisors (i.e., director, coordinating principal), implementers (i.e., teachers, educational counsellors, employment coordinator, psychologists, etc.) and the target group (i.e., students) (see Table 1). Within each educational institution, one researcher conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the directors/supervisors in charge of the measures and two researchers worked together to lead focus group discussions with the implementers and the target group so that sufficient notes could be made during the discussions. These interviews and focus group discussions (approx. 1 to 2.5 hours) were organised separately with the three groups of stakeholders so that all respondents were free to discuss the struggles they encountered regarding issues related to early school leaving.

<Insert Table 1 here>

A grounded theory approach was used for data analyses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach allowed us to gradually develop a research question that examined how age – an under-theorised concept in the literature on early school leaving – affects day-to-day educational routines, practices and educational choices and how age is interpreted by distinct actors. The grounded theory approach was ideal for our purposes for two reasons: firstly, the concept of age remains insufficiently theorised in educational research, and secondly, the importance of this concept is not fully recognised in the minds and actions of actors involved. Exploratory analyses indicated that while many references were made to 'age' (e.g., mature attitudes, childish treatment, compulsory education, age composition of schools/class groups and feelings of being 'too old'), these references to age were taken for granted and not questioned critically. As this theme reoccurred frequently during the open coding and seemed to structure the actors' understanding of the perceived opportunities and ways of being treated, sequential processes of axial and selective coding allowed us to connect age to more frequently used concepts in the literature and actors' discourses, such as maturity and school cultures. Furthermore, this process enabled us to discover how actors connect these terms in everyday educational discourses and use them when making decisions. Qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo) facilitated the comprehensive application of the principles of grounded theory, the constant comparative technique and the triangulation of transcribed audio-taped interviews and focus group discussions with the various stakeholders. In the Results section below, all quotations have been translated from the original Dutch and edited by the authors to facilitate legibility.

Results

The data analyses indicate that age plays a more crucial role in the educational decision-making processes of students and school staff and in the processes leading to early school leaving than is currently recognised in academic research. The importance of age is clearly reflected in the decision-making processes of students and school staff members with regard to choice of school/track/programme, whether to repeat a year and whether to leave school early. One example of such a situation is when a student stops making an effort at school and decides to wait until they are old enough to enrol in adult education or part-time apprenticeship tracks. Another example in which age plays a prominent role during educational decision-making processes is when students and

school staff estimate the age at which a student will finish secondary education, as illustrated by this quotation:

> R1 (Institution A, staff): "They [the students] will have come a long way by then, when they are eighteen and then get the opportunity [to enrol in adult education]. In secondary schools, school staff refer students to second chance education when they don't know what to do. 'He is only in the fourth grade and he will be eighteen' or 'In the fifth grade, he's failing [this year] again, so maybe another form of education will work for him'. CLB [the centre for pupil guidance] will look into their cases, and sometimes they [these youngsters] end up in part-time education."

As illustrated by this quotation, school staff often see age – and especially being too old for the grade – as problematic and use it as a reason to advise students to make educational changes. This is because age is assumed to correlate with other factors that are believed to underlie educational delays (e.g., poor achievement, disruptive school behaviour and low school attendance). Because of this perceived correlation, being too old for the grade is frequently interpreted as a warning or seen as a risk factor for students to leave school early. However, there are a number of other factors that could lead to educational delays, including educational practices, such as changing track/field of study, or major life events, such as illness or migration. One example from our sample was R2 (student, Institution A), who was delayed in his educational career because he migrated from Morocco to Spain and later to Belgium, and therefore did not fit into regular secondary education: "*I was 19 years old [when I arrived in Belgium), so I couldn't enrol in regular secondary education and that's why I came here [second chance (adult) education]."* Thus, being too old for the grade is frequently used as an argument for making alternative educational decisions, regardless of the reason for the delay.

The data analyses reveal that age is a central concept in the minds of both school staff and students, and seen as a valid criterion with which to guide their decisions throughout their education. Hence, near the end of secondary education, age as a means of organising education seems to become increasingly decoupled from the idea that it relates to the developmental stages of children and young people. In the following sections, we explore the role that age plays in the educational decisions made by school staff and by students.

The role of age according to school staff

During data collection, school staff mentioned age and age-related issues for two main reasons. First, they were concerned with the creation of homogeneous class groups based on age, as this is believed to increase students' sense of belonging and enhance their relationships with classmates. While homogeneous grouping by age is encouraged during the first years of formal education, due to the importance attached to the relationship between age and children's developmental stages (Piaget, 1954; 1971; Eurodyce, 2014), this reasoning seems to make less sense in the later years of secondary education. The focus on age, and the occasional reorientation of students towards other educational programmes (for instance, adult education) because of their age, is assumed to ensure that students do not leave school early with no educational qualifications because they feel too old compared to their classmates (see the quotation from school staff R1 above).

A second reason why school staff referred to students' age – particularly when considering grade retention for students that were close to turning 18 or had already done so – was because retaining them would mean that these students would have to remain in education after the end of compulsory education, which is perceived to increase their chances of leaving school early:

> R4 (School A, staff): "Many youngsters do not feel at home, or they think they can do anything they want, but then feel they cannot cope anymore, or are too old, or some other reason. Some will go to other schools, some stop making an effort at school, but many of them get lost when they leave."

> Interviewer: "Do you encounter problems related to early school leaving at this school and who are these students usually?"

R5 (School C, staff): "Yes, that is a problem! Actually, when students enter this school, they are already 'above their age' [too old for the grade]. This means that they have already turned 18 years old when they are in the third grade [normally this would be 14-15 years old]. We have hardly any students who are at the 'right' age. This means they still have to pass the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh grades. Those students finish secondary education when they are somewhere in their twenties – that is still a long way off, especially for some kids who stop along the way [and leave school without qualifications]."

Age, then, appears to play a key role in the struggle that school staff believe students encounter during their school careers. As R5 notes, age becomes increasingly important as students progress through their school careers. This may be because age is assumed to relate to delays in educational careers, which is believed to increase the risk of early school leaving among the 'kids who stop along the way'. Because of the importance of age in students' educational decision-making processes, school staff often refer to age – along with other factors – and the time a student must remain at school in order to obtain educational qualifications during evaluation procedures and when giving advice to students:

R6 (School C, staff): "We consider students' age during exam deliberations and student councils. We are told and asked to do so [by the school principal and other supporting school personnel]."

Interviewer: "How? And do you make a distinction between general and vocational tracks?"

R7 (School C, staff): "I think that it is especially the case in the last two years of secondary education when they are enrolled in technical tracks. For example, Commerce or Administration and Languages – those students can easily be reoriented towards Office [a vocational track]. We give them a B certificate [reorientation towards another track/field of study] when going from the fifth [penultimate] to the sixth [final] year of secondary education, instead of a C certificate [repeating a year] because we think that they really can continue [their education – albeit in a less highly regarded track] but only if we think their attitude is ok. If we think that their attitude is not good enough to be in the sixth year, they receive a C certificate [and have to repeat their year]. So, in each case, we consider the student's age, but it is their attitude which should provide the opportunity to succeed in the sixth year; if not, we give them a C [and they have to repeat their year]."

R8: "Yes, it's about 'not being willing' or 'not being able' because when you really feel that students are not willing [to make an effort at school], we go for a C certificate, but if we really feel like this is about a person who is not able but who puts in a lot of effort at school, who really has a good attitude towards learning, it does play a role."

R9: "In the end, you have to judge whether they will be able to cope with the next year and whether they are enrolled in the subsequent year, but a particular attitude that results in poor achievement results in that year will not lead to success in the following year."

During this focus group discussion, school staff stated that age is frequently taken into account during evaluation procedures as it has an influence on students' chances of obtaining educational qualifications within a reasonable timeframe. School staff often start from the idea that the likelihood of students' obtaining qualifications decreases when they have to stay in school for many more years – especially when compared to their peers or when they have already turned 18 and compulsory education has ended. Consequently, school staff sometimes suggest that students switch to a certain educational programme or track (often one that is less highly regarded) that will allow them to combine work and studying and/or reduce the time they have to stay in school to get their qualifications – as opposed to having to repeat a year. During such debates, school staff weigh the benefits and costs of grade repetition against the switch to less academically demanding tracks. As grade repetition raises the age at which a student finishes school, it is perceived to be accompanied

by a loss of study motivation and higher chances of leaving school early. By contrast, students that progress to the next year but change to a different field of study or track do not lose a year (in terms of age when finishing school) but they do graduate from less highly regarded tracks (Van Praag et al., 2015; 2017).

It is important to note that students are not usually involved in these evaluations and school staff's perceptions of each student's future, as well as of their attitudes and behaviours, may be subject to social, gender and ethnic biases (Boone & Van Houtte, 2011; Vanlommel et al., 2017). Furthermore, as illustrated by the extract from the focus group discussion above, advice and decisions made by school staff during evaluation procedures are based not only on the students' actual age and the fact that they may be older than their peers, but also on the level of 'maturity' reflected in the students' attitudes and behaviours. That is, in order to estimate the feasibility of students' finishing school successfully, staff members make judgements about how 'mature' they are and how much effort they are willing to put into their education. The older they are, the more experience in life students are assumed to have, and indeed the more mature they are assumed to have become, which should affect their approach to education (e.g., less deviant school behaviour). 'Maturity' was brought up by the respondents not only in relation to student evaluations at the end of the school year, but also as regards everyday school life, for example, when reprimanding students. R10 (student, School C), for instance, said "*I have heard this [argument] a couple of times. My grades are good but they tell me that I am absent too often. So they say, 'you are 18 years old, you are not obliged to come to school anymore*". This example suggests that school staff expect a greater sense of responsibility from young adults. Although school staff expect more 'maturity' from their older students, the concept of maturity is rather hard to define and the meaning attached to it may vary. Nonetheless, its importance in everyday school life and in decision-making processes that influence students' educational careers is often taken for granted and rarely questioned or regulated. As a consequence, there is a grey zone in which students may be treated differently based on particular features (e.g., socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity) and associated stereotypes that could influence school staff's perceptions of age and maturity. This is particularly important in an educational context that does not have standardised tests – as is the case in Flanders – and in which school staff members can decide at the end of the school year whether a student will pass that year and/or should be reoriented towards another career. Our findings indicate that – at least in the later years of secondary education – these evaluation procedures rely not only on students' results, school staff's ideas about the students' abilities, interests and future opportunities and the effort they are perceived to put into school (Stevens & Van Houtte, 2011; Stevens, 2007), but also on the students' age and perceived level of maturity. As a consequence, the inclusion of age and maturity during evaluation procedures may lead to conflicts and misunderstandings between school actors and students, as they interpret maturity differently. Additionally, the reliance on concepts such as perceived maturity during student evaluation procedures may be subject to social bias and therefore lead to the creation or reproduction of educational inequalities.

The role of age according to students

Although age is widely seen as an indicator of maturity, there is much individual variation in the levels of maturity among adolescents and the development of students during adolescence (e.g., gender differences in psychosocial maturity, Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000). Accordingly, students' expectations vary widely with regard to mature treatment in school by both their classmates and school staff, and may not necessarily be in line with the staff's own ideas about maturity. Nonetheless, it is clear that adolescents' individual development and their personal expectations about mature treatment by those in their social environment affect their experiences in school. These expectations are in fact so dominant that they guide young people's educational decisions, often having long-term consequences for their future careers.

First, the data analyses reveal that the students in our sample expressed a need to be surrounded by classmates with a similar – or at least not lower – level of maturity. Current educational practices (i.e., 'track' system and organisation of classes) group students together by age and

perceived levels of maturity, which creates even more homogeneous class groups by age. The homogeneity of these class groups, and especially the lack of variation in age, may ultimately become/feel exclusionary for students who are older than their peers, which fortifies their perceptions of their classmates' lack of maturity and may strengthen their wish to be treated in a more mature way. This feeling was reported by students at Institution B, who opted to enrol in adult education because they felt that the students in general secondary education were too young – they saw them as 'kids':

> Interviewer: "When you arrived in Belgium, did you think about going to a regular secondary school?"
>
> R11 (Institution B, student): "I tried, but it wasn't possible. Too many kids!"
>
> Interviewer: "You did go at a certain point?"
>
> R11: "Yes, I was learning Dutch and going to secondary school at the same time. But too many kids, I couldn't do it... I was twenty... and I had to start in the fifth grade, come on!"

In this interview, the respondent suggested that it was his classmates' younger age that made him decide to switch to adult education. Overall, the young adults we interviewed mainly referred to school cultures being characterised by the age of the students enrolled, which roughly determines their level of maturity/childishness.

Second, respondents reported feeling that they had been treated in an 'immature' way by the school rules and school staff. This perceived immature treatment of students should be taken seriously, as adolescents' school experiences and motivation to achieve have been related to their perceived developing opportunities (Eccles et al., 1993). Yet, no clear definition exists for the concept of maturity and what it actually entails. Moreover, our data suggest that particular groups of students are extremely sensitive to being treated in a way that they find too 'childish'. Looking at the examples given by our respondents (e.g., not being allowed to go to the toilet or chew gum, being punished for talking in the classroom, for playing with a smartphone or for arriving too late) reveals a broader critique of the educational system and prevailing school practices, and particularly of the organisation of everyday school life according to very strict rules and practices, which are often described as childish or even ridiculous:

> R12 (Institution C, student): "I was going to School X. I was going there, 1st or 2nd year of secondary school. Starting year – after that year you had to choose a track, modern sciences or something. When I was going there, wow. For example, 'Oh I hear noise in the corridor', I go to the corridor, I go to the toilet, I also buy a drink downstairs and hide it. 'What were you doing?', 'Oh yes, I had to go to the toilet urgently'. 'Don't do it again'. Ooh, that would not have been possible at School X. A note just like that, or a sanction. Or straight to the principal."

For these adolescents, it was difficult to understand what this set of school rules and practices characterising the educational system actually stands for, and so they often referred to it as 'immature' or 'childish'. Furthermore, when discussing 'maturity', adolescents often seemed to connect these rules and practices with maturity and age rather than with societal issues and prevailing school cultures. The interview extract below reveals an interplay between the student's own school attitude, the lack of obligation to stay enrolled in school, the enforcement of school rules and treatment by teachers:

> Interviewer: "When teachers are less childish, what do they do exactly? They talk differently to you?"
>
> R13 (Institution B, student): "They talk normally. At school, the teacher was screaming constantly. Kids who didn't want to listen. Now [in adult education] everybody listens."

R14: "I think that I am more motivated now because I chose it myself. And also there aren't as many rules. You don't have to ask for permission if you want to leave the classroom to go to the bathroom, that's not a problem at all. Much more loose, easy-going. And the most important thing is that everybody is here because they are motivated – they want to come to school."

R15: "It's much more adult."

Interviewer: "What does that mean then, more adult?"

R15: "More easy-going, like he said – if you have to pee, you can go and pee. Everybody is here because they want to be, I think. You're not obliged to come here. [It's] better."

Interviewer: "And in regular secondary school, what did it feel like then?"

R15: "Oh, our education system sucks. I mean, you used to be obliged to go until the age of 16, now all of a sudden, they've raised it to 18 and everybody just has to go along with it. While some people are just not suited to mandatory schooling until the age of 18, taking classes they're not interested in at all. They become tired of school. It's also dealt with in completely the wrong way." (…)

R14: "All these rules. They should not treat you like children, like for example: 'no smartphones in the hallways or on the playground', or, I was already smoking back then and that wasn't permitted. Those are the things that bothered me. And detention after school of course!"

Interviewer: "Are there no rules here?"

R14: "Actually, there really are no rules, but everybody behaves… just like themselves. The teacher doesn't really talk about real rules, but everybody behaves a bit more 'normal'."

Interviewer: "How do people behave?"

R14: "Because the people here are adults. You come here to learn, and not to play."

When we compare the focus group discussions held with school staff to those held with adult education students, some interesting insights can be derived into how age and maturity are related to educational practices and school life. Firstly, students are expected to be open and willing to learn and to see the value of schooling. Once students themselves want to pursue an educational qualification and feel they are no longer obliged to learn (because compulsory education has ended), it becomes easier for teachers to treat their students in a more mature way and be looser as regards the 'rules'. This may also work the other way around: when students feel they are being treated in a less childish way, they are more likely to put effort into school and to be motivated. These feelings about childish treatment in school were shared by many of our respondents; however, it should be mentioned that, at the same time, students noted a gradual development in terms of their personal study attitudes and the value they attached to education over the years. At some stages of their development, they seem to be more sensitive to immature treatment on the part of schools and teachers, but as they grow older and advance in life, the value of education is approached from a more pragmatic perspective – the students realise that having qualifications matters for their careers, as shown by R13:

R13 (Institution B, student): "The mindset I had when I left school was 'I'm never going back to school in my life'. Until you start working and you notice how much you earn, then you think 'you can all kiss my ass, if I want to earn more, I will need that diploma after all'. But no, I wouldn't have thought I would be sitting here [in second chance education]. But you change when you get older [Now 20 years old]."(…)

When looking at these quotations, we can understand 'childish' treatment as being treated in a very particular, strict and inflexible way. This childish treatment may reflect how a certain hidden, silencing agenda prevails in schools. Routine disciplinary practices that categorise people as disobedient and insubordinate are felt, and, more importantly, rejected by many adolescents. In many cases, the emphasis placed on mature treatment by school actors is even stronger when compulsory education ends and young adults have more alternatives to education, such as enrolment in a wider variety of educational programmes, work and/or marriage. Because of this, the symbolic age of eighteen frequently becomes a turning point in the educational careers and decision-making processes of young people, a point at which to reflect on the next step(s) of the educational trajectory:

> R12 (Institution B, student): "Yes, I was really just fed up with it. If it had been up to me, I would've stopped school when I was 15 years old. When I was in my final year, I turned 18 and then I said 'I'm not coming anymore'."

Our analyses indicate that the event of turning eighteen, which signifies the end of compulsory education, is perceived as a crucial and symbolic point in their educational careers – one which clearly affects their reasoning. This was not the case for all youngsters, but was especially true for those who had already experienced more 'turbulent' and delayed educational trajectories or some school fatigue (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017). For example, when students already lacked the motivation to make an effort at school, their frames of reference and the alternative options began to interfere with their educational decisions and sometimes influenced their feelings about being enrolled in school:

> R16 (School A, student): "It's all the fault of the seventh year of secondary education. That's really too much. You all start together from the first year of secondary education and then, all the others stop in their sixth year of secondary education [academic and technical tracks receive their educational qualifications] and only you have to continue with a seventh [specialist] year [vocational tracks only receive their secondary school qualifications after this specialist year, when compulsory education has ended]. That is really demotivating! Because you are already there! (…) Everybody graduates, at the age you should graduate, in the sixth year, everyone, ASO [academic track], TSO [technical track], everyone is ready and then you really have to do this seventh year. That is the main reason most people quit, this seventh year, it really is too much, it doesn't work anymore".

Students compared their situations with those of peers who had already finished school and envisioned all the activities they could have been doing: studying, working and starting a family (e.g., living independently or getting married). For instance, R10 (Institution B, student) reported: "*Yes, the day after [I quit], I started working. I stopped [school] to start working. Also because I wanted to go and live alone with my girlfriend*". Because of the perceived increase in life opportunities after finishing school, adolescents may forget the long-term consequences of not obtaining a particular educational qualification. Similar observations were made by school staff, who remarked that young people who are too old for their grade are more likely to consider alternative options and be tempted by the labour market when they turn eighteen:

> R17 (School C, staff): "When their interest is gone, and some in their circle of friends have started working or perhaps already have a job, like at the post office, this is a classic one, or at least this could be the case for many students, like Hakim last year, so they leave and stop."

> Interviewer: "So, they're already partly active on the labour market."

> R6: "Some really give up, their motivation is gone, and as a consequence, they have low grades. Eventually, they say: 'If I don't have a chance, I might as well stop school'."

> R17: "Also financially. We have a lot of students who are here [in Belgium] alone and they have to survive on 400 euros [a month]. That is not enough: they have to pay their rent and

live as well! So this means they have to work after school, and they often quit. This frequently happens when they have to do an internship: they are successful and the employer ask them to start, so they try to start [working]."

From these statements about assumptions and expectations based on maturity – which is believed to be intrinsically related to age – and the wider availability of alternatives to gaining educational qualifications, we can conclude that reaching the age at which compulsory education ends and incurring delays in one's educational career seem to trigger and accelerate the processes leading to early school leaving.

Conclusion

Given the importance of age not only in the organisation of education but also in the organisation of everyday life in general and of public participation in Western societies, we focussed on exposing the ways in which both students and school staff members perceive age to actively structure and shape educational decision-making processes and classroom/school practices towards the end of secondary education. Age was a recurring factor mentioned by all school actors in discussions of students' educational achievements, choices and future careers. School staff's views on students' level of maturity and age shaped teachers' expectations and were thus found to be a key factor during evaluation procedures and when formulating advice for students. Yet, views on maturity frequently differ between students and school staff members and may be subject to social, ethnic and gender bias (Boone & Van Houtte, 2011; Vanlommel et al., 2017). Thus, despite the central role that age plays in the organisation of education, there are no clear definitions of maturity or of what is expected of students; nor are there well-defined or clear guidelines about the role that age should play in education.

Our analyses showed that it was not only in school staff's expectations and evaluation procedures that age played a role; students also frequently referred to it when discussing their school, track and career choices. For students, age had an impact through the age composition of the classroom and classroom dynamics, formed the basis of how they wished to be treated by school actors, and caused students to consider alternatives to school – such as starting work and/or starting a family – when they turned 18. For many of the youngsters in our study, the lure of the labour market and the perceived requirements (e.g., having work experience) seemed to conflict with their increasing age and the fear of missing out on labour market opportunities, which often made them opt for alternative educational programmes and institutions (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017). This may be related to the changing structure of the youth labour market, in that certain jobs previously taken up by school leavers have disappeared and other jobs (and educational programmes) have become increasingly competitive. This has resulted in a higher number of youngsters leaving school after compulsory education ends (Ainley & Allen, 2010). The students we interviewed also reported feeling that they should have been more advanced in their school careers, especially when compared to peers, or should have been treated in a more mature way by school staff (see stage-environment fit approach: Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). This indicates that students are guided by their age when making educational decisions, for example if they feel that they do not fit into a particular school environment because of their age. Additionally, the students in our study referred to age and maturity to express what they disliked about strict school rules and practices and the prevailing norms and values that characterise education. While school staff members' discourses take a more psychological approach to maturity, presuming that a child's level of maturity is the outcome of a gradual interaction between biological maturation and the environment during his or her development (Piaget, 1971), it seems that students' own interpretations of their level of maturity is more context-specific than frequently assumed by school actors (see also Eccles et al., 1993). School staff members' interpretations of students' maturity draw on the extent to which students have learnt to behave according to both the formal and informal rules that prevail in schools, based upon the dominant values and norms in society (Brint, 2006). As many students are socialised in distinct norms and values in their home environments, which may differ from those at school, this may lead to a

systematic discrepancy in the expectations of school staff and particular groups of students and may create and reproduce inequalities in and throughout education. Further research on the concept of maturity and how this relates to existing school cultures, evaluation procedures and disciplinary practices in schools could contribute to a better understanding of processes of school resistance and early school leaving. Policy makers aiming to reduce educational inequalities could learn from this study when reflecting on the nature and requirements of compulsory education, evaluation procedures, age grouping and the everyday organisation of school practices and rules.

Funding

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