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Feeling at home in school: Migrant youths' narratives on school belonging in Flemish secondary education

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Abstract

In Flanders, students with a migration background are highly overrepresented in the lower-status vocational and technical tracks, experience more grade retention and school and track mobility and have a higher risk of leaving school early than their native peers. The authors aim to shed light on the complexity of school belonging and its significance in these young people's pursuit of a diploma. The analysis focuses on the lived experiences of three young individuals and reconstructs their trajectories from their point of view to illuminate their perceptions on school belonging while they (tried to) navigate their way through secondary education. Their narratives reveal how a sense of school belonging is crucial yet difficult to find. Experiences of exclusion and struggles to claim specific educational spaces as places where they 'belong' often result in feelings of being an outsider rather than a valued member of the school community. The journeys through secondary education are mostly recounted as trying to find a '*good school*' where they could '*fit in*'.

Keywords

School belonging, migrant youth, educational trajectories, early school leaving, school mobility, exclusion

Introduction

Over the past decades, the issue of school belonging has received increasing attention in educational research debates and has been found to be crucial for students to function and achieve well in the school environment (for reviews see Juvenon, 2006; Osterman, 2000). Students who feel little or no connection to their school are more likely to suffer from a range of negative emotions and behavioural problems, tend to show lower school engagement and are more likely to be absent from school and to leave school early (Juvenon, 2006; Finn, 1989). Although there is a general agreement that feeling a sense of belonging to the school context plays an important role in students' educational, psychological and social wellbeing, little is known about students' lived experiences of belonging (Halse, 2018). Furthermore, studies that explore the importance of school belonging for children and young people with a migration background remain relatively scarce (DeNicolo et al., 2017). Indeed, as pointed out by Murphy and Zirkel (2015), research typically studies school belonging as a universal construct that carries the same meaning and impact for all students without taking into account that this may, in fact, vary between different groups of students. In this same line Halse (2018: 3) rightly emphasises that 'what belonging involves (. . .) is not straightforward in a world of increasing racial, religious, ethnic, cultural and language diversity in schools, cities, societies and nations'.

In this article, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of school belonging by focusing on the experiences of young people with a first- or second-generation migration background in mainstream secondary education and alternative learning arenas (i.e. part-time vocational education or second-chance education for adults) in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking semi-autonomous region of Belgium, fully competent with respect to its educational system). We analyse the role of school belonging in the educational trajectories of this particular group of students through three case studies. By listening to these young people's voices by means of qualitative fieldwork and highlighting their points of view through the analysis of their narratives we aim to shed light on (a) what school belonging means to them, (b) how they understand and experience belongingness in concrete educational settings and (c) how this influences their educational trajectories. Gaining a better insight into what contributes to – or obstructs – feelings of belonging to the school environment for young people with a migration background is important because, although they form a large and growing part of the student body in Flemish schools, particularly in urban areas (Unia, 2018), the educational statistics continue to tell a discouraging tale. Administrative data from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2018) show they experience more grade retention and leave education early at a

much higher rate than their native peers. Based on the students' home language we see that 57% of those who do not have Dutch as their main home language have experienced at least 1 year of grade retention whereas this drops to 26% among the students whose home language is Dutch. The rates of early school leaving furthermore show that 23.6% of the former leave school early versus 7.7% of the latter. Also, school and track mobility rates are higher among the group of students with a home language other than Dutch. Data indicate almost one in three of the students that change school in the course of a school year do not have Dutch as their main home language, whereas they make up 13.5% of the entire secondary school population (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2017). International data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) corroborate this trend and show that, compared to the other regions and countries, Flanders has an educational system with one of the highest achievement gaps between native students and students with a migration background (Jacobs and Danhier, 2017; Unia, 2018). This gap seems to persist over time, as it affects both first generation migrants as well as Belgian-born children of migrants (the so-called second generation) (Jacobs and Danhier, 2017; Unia, 2018).

As protagonists of their educational experiences, the cases of Souhaila and Youssef (both born in Belgium, with a Moroccan background) and Lorena (a first-generation migrant originally from Angola) allow us to better grasp the complexity of school belonging and its significance in these young people's pursuit of an education and a diploma. By paying attention to these individual stories, we aim to illuminate their lived experiences in a structural context in which schools often continue to be places where existing inequalities are reproduced rather than tackled.

The importance of a sense of belonging in educational contexts

Belonging is considered a basic human need and crucial to general individual wellbeing. According to the 'belonging hypothesis' of Baumeister and Leary (1995), people have an inherent need to form positive and lasting social attachments. Because individuals develop a sense of belonging through interactions with other people in particular institutional, sociocultural and political settings and circumstances, belonging is seen as a relational and highly contextual concept (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). For young people, a key setting in which such interactions develop and take place is school, given the huge amount of time they spend there and the important role schools usually play in their lives. In the literature, multiple terms are used to refer to belongingness in the context of schooling. Next to school belonging

other terms include, for example, school attachment, sense of relatedness to the school and school membership. However, the underlying understanding behind these different terms is generally 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and valued by others in the school social environment' (Goodenow, 1993: 80). A growing
body of research has looked into the effect of school belonging on a range of educational outcomes, using mostly quantitative methods and approaching it as a psychological state of wellbeing (DeNicolo et al., 2017; Halse, 2008; Saraví, Bayón and Azaola, 2019). Overall, these studies suggest that when students' need for a sense of school belonging is met, this will positively influence their educational achievement and their participation in the schooling institute (e.g. Cemalcilar, 2010; Faircloth, 2009; Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000) and be beneficial for students' more general psychological and social wellbeing (e.g. Anderman, 2002; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Juvenon, 2006; Osterman, 2000).

In the context of Flanders, several studies have looked into specific determinants of feelings of belongingness in school. Van Houtte and Van Maele (2012), for instance, analysed the influence of teachers' trust in their students on school belonging. Their findings showed that in the hierarchically tracked educational context of Flemish secondary education, students in lower status vocational and technical tracks have a lower sense of school belonging than their peers in higher status academic tracks because teachers in the former have less trust in their students than those in the latter. Other studies (Nouwen and Clycq, 2019; Nouwen et al., 2019) focus on student-teacher relationships and more particularly perceived teacher support. These studies found that although teacher support is important for all students' sense of school belonging, and for their valuing of education more generally, it is especially crucial for ethnic and religious minority students. If these students experience negative relationships with their teachers, their sense of school belonging decreases significantly. In this same line, D'Hondt and colleagues (2015) found that experiences of victimisation, particularly ethnic victimisation, by their teachers had a negative influence on ethnic minority students' sense of belonging. Their study furthermore demonstrated a similar effect when these students felt victimised by their peers. Some research has also analysed the influence of school and class group composition on feelings of school belonging. These studies found that ethnic minority students' sense of school belonging is higher when at least some of their peers also have a migration background (Van Praag et al., 2015) and that for ethnic minority students a higher ethnic diversity in the school population is associated with, amongst other things, a higher sense of school belonging (Demanet et al., 2016).

Although these empirical findings highlight the importance of students' relationships with teachers and peers in developing a sense of school belonging, particularly for students with an ethnic minority or migration background, as argued before it remains less clear how belongingness is experienced, and how this influences their educational trajectories. To shed light on these issues, we approach the notion of school belonging as a multidimensional and dynamic process rather than a simple state or possession, drawing on insights from broader debates on belonging, which we elaborate on below.

Conceptual approach to (school) belonging

In a recent review study, Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) highlight the diverse ways in which the notion of 'belonging' is perceived and made sense of in contemporary research across different disciplines. Despite the fact that the concept lacks a universal definition (see also Antonsich, 2010), the authors conclude that overall 'belonging' is best understood as 'an entanglement of multiple and intersecting, affective and material, spatially experienced and socio-politically conditioned relations that are context-specific' (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016: 242). Belonging, in other words, is a complex and multidimensional process that is intrinsically relational. Cuervo and Wyn (2014: 903) argue that the 'metaphor of belonging' is particularly helpful 'to understand young people's efforts to be connected to people, places and issues that matter to them'. As such, they challenge the notion of belonging as a fixed status and instead emphasise its dynamic nature and multidimensional character that not only involves connections to people (e.g. teachers and peers) but also to places. The relevance of place to understand belonging is also highlighted by Antonsich (2010) who coins the notion of 'place-belongingness' to describe what happens when individuals find a place where they can feel 'at home'. Crucial in this conceptualisation is that 'home' is not understood as the 'domestic(ated) material place' but rather as 'a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment' (Antonsich, 2010: 643). This notion of 'place-belongingness' is particularly relevant when studying belonging in the context of schooling as students not only construct relationships with different actors but may also seek a sense of attachment to the specific school(s) they attend as well as to more symbolic spaces such as a school community or an educational track.

Relationships and attachments, however, do not exist in a social vacuum and are influenced by dominant perceptions about particular social spaces and groups (Saraví et al., 2019). Consequently, the way specific educational spaces or groups of students carry social prestige or are negatively stigmatised may impact students' sense of school belonging. This also relates

to the ‘politics of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010), that is, the processes that make it possible to belong, which rather than a personal issue is a social matter that often involves the construction of boundaries separating ‘us’ (the group that due to its social positioning has the right to grant belonging) from ‘them’ (the group that desires to belong) (Antonsich, 2010). A personal feeling of being ‘at home’ can thus be facilitated or constrained by broader processes of inclusion and exclusion. In this context, scholars argue that school belonging is about more than merely a state of psychological wellbeing and call for a broader understanding of the notion that also pays attention to the way in which institutional forces and practices work to include and exclude particular groups of students from specific educational spaces (see e.g. DeNicolo et al., 2017; Saraví et al., 2019). As highlighted by Cuervo and Wyn (2014) when approached as multidimensional and dynamic, the ‘metaphor of belonging’ can contribute to unravel processes of inequality, as especially those who are the most disadvantaged in education often work the hardest to belong.

The Flemish educational landscape and the position of students with migration backgrounds

In Flanders, students normally enter secondary education at the age of 12, after 6 years of primary education. Secondary education lasts 6 years, thus students typically finish at age 18 – the age compulsory education ends. However, students enrolled in the vocational track are required to follow a seventh ‘specialisation year’ if they want to obtain an upper-secondary level diploma. In the case of migrants who arrive in Flanders between the ages of 12 and 18, 1 year of full-time reception education for non-Dutch speaking newcomers (OKAN) is required before they can enter mainstream secondary education. The curriculum of these reception classes focuses predominantly on Dutch-language acquisition (Ravn et al., 2016). Not all secondary schools offer reception education, so students often change school when they transition from OKAN into mainstream secondary education. Flemish secondary education is characterised by a system of early tracking that sorts students into different educational pathways already in the first year of secondary education. Although an upper-secondary diploma allows students to access professional and university level higher education, regardless of the educational track they graduated from (academic, technical, vocational, and – a relatively small – arts track), it is especially the academic (and arts) track that prepares students for higher education. Mobility between the different tracks almost only occurs in one direction resulting in a de facto hierarchical structure in which the academic track finds itself at the top and the vocational track at the bottom. Moreover, the educational tracks carry different levels of social

prestige with the academic track being the most highly esteemed and the vocational track the least (Stevens and Vandermeersch, 2010; Van Praag et al., 2017). Because Flemish schools are typically organised around specific tracks and provide most of their education within either the academic or the technical and vocational track (Van Houtte, 2006) and the free school choice principle furthermore guarantees (to a certain extent) that students or their parents can choose the school they (do not) wish to attend, the educational landscape is also very segregated along socioeconomic and ethnic lines compared to other educational systems (Jacobs and Danhier, 2017; Nouwen and Vandenbroucke, 2012). Although research shows that ethnic school composition does not have a significant effect on its students' academic achievement (see e.g. Agirdag et al., 2011), schools that have a high concentration of students with a migration background are commonly associated with low quality and enjoy little prestige. This perception is widespread and both non-migrant and migrant families tend to prefer to send their children to schools where the share of students with a migration background is relatively low (see e.g. Nouwen and Vandenbroucke, 2012). In the case of the latter, these more prestigious 'white' schools – that typically only offer the academic track – are seen as 'good schools' with discipline and high levels of achievement that may lead the way to upward social mobility (Clycq et al., 2014; De Rycke and Swyngedouw, 1999).

In theory, students (and their parents) are not only free to choose their school, they can also decide in which track they enter the first year of secondary education and subsequently continue or 'stream down' based on their educational performance. However, studies show that in practice school staff orient students with a migration background much more often to lower-status tracks than their native peers, even when their educational performance is the same (Spruyt et al., 2009; Unia, 2018) and similar practices occur along lines of students' socioeconomic backgrounds (Boone and Van Houtte, 2013). Consequently, students with a migration background are highly over-represented in the lower-esteemed technical and vocational tracks. Moreover, research indicates that students with a migration background are often seen by school staff as having deficient Dutch language skills, low educational motivation and counterproductive attitudes to 'succeed' in education (Clycq et al., 2014; Stevens, 2012; Van Praag et al., 2016). Although the idea of equal access to and progress in the various tracks and schools feeds into the perception of Flemish education as a system based on the meritocratic ideal of individual effort and talent, the ethnic and social stratification processes show that in reality students with a migration background are often perceived less 'capable' and better fit for lower-status tracks than native students. This does not only affect these students' educational

chances but may also influence how they think of themselves as students and where in this educational landscape they think they are considered to 'belong' (or not).

Data, context and methods

This article draws on data that were collected over a 2-year period (2015–2016) in the framework of the large-scale European research project 'Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe' (RESL.eu). As part of this project, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 34 young people in a large city in Flanders with a high number of inhabitants with a migration background. The respondents were purposefully selected based on their educational status at the start of the fieldwork: 16 youngsters were enrolled in technical or vocational tracks in mainstream secondary education, nine attended an alternative learning arena (i.e. part-time vocational education or second-chance education for adults) and nine had left education without an upper-secondary education diploma. In total, 20 of the respondents had a migration background and were either Belgian-born children of migrants (so-called second generation) (n=15) or had migrated to Belgium alone or with their parent(s) during childhood or adolescence (n=5). Although these young people had multiple countries of origin (seven in total), the majority (n=14) had a Moroccan background and they all came from families with lower-educated parents who mostly held low-income jobs or were unemployed. In this article, we analyse the role of school belonging in the educational trajectories of this particular group of young people by focusing on three cases. This case-study approach (Merriam, 2009) allows us to provide a rich and holistic account of how our cases' trajectories progress over time and to explore why these trajectories evolve the way they do. Reconstructing these trajectories from their points of view also helps to shed light on how their sense of belonging changed from one educational setting to another and what contributed to this change. We focus on Souhaila, Youssef and Lorena as information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) whose stories are particularly illuminating for our purposes. As second-generation migrants, Souhaila and Youssef highlight the educational struggles of young people that are born and grow up in Belgium but for whom schools continue to be places where they do not necessarily feel they 'fit in'. As a first-generation migrant, Lorena's account illustrates the impact of migration and additional obstacles of late entry into Flemish schools.

Souhaila and Youssef are both children of Moroccan immigrants and grew up in one of the most densely populated areas of the city, in a neighbourhood with relatively high rates of unemployment and inactivity that is home to a large number of people with a migration

background, mostly of Moroccan origin. Souhaila's father used to be a construction worker but was retired by the time of our fieldwork. Youssef's father was unemployed and received a disability allowance. Both their mothers are housewives. Lorena was born in Angola but joined her father in Portugal at age 3 (her mother and brothers stayed in Angola). At age 16, she moved to Belgium together with her father, stepmother and younger half-siblings. In Belgium, Lorena's father started working as a car mechanic and her stepmother as a cleaner in a hotel. At the time of the first interview Souhaila, Youssef and Lorena were 18, almost 20 and 21 years old respectively. Souhaila was studying in the fifth (i.e. next to final) year of the technical track of mainstream secondary education. Lorena and Youssef had left school early respectively 2 and 3 years before the first interview. Lorena was continuing her education in second-chance education for adults whereas Youssef was not attending any educational institution but was trying to obtain his diploma via the central examination commission, which allows obtaining an upper-secondary education qualification via a system of self-study.

Souhaila, Youssef and Lorena were interviewed twice with 9 months to 1.5 years between each interview. As interviews were carried out in the context of a larger project on early school leaving, they touched on a range of topics (educational trajectories, aspirations, social networks, work experience, leisure activities and so forth). The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. For the purpose of the study for this article, we focused on the sections of the interviews that relate to the youngsters' educational trajectories and particularly their experiences in secondary education. To analyse the data in detail we used thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), allowing us to focus on the content of the youngsters' narratives and pay attention to '"what" is said rather than "how" or to whom', reporting events and experiences rather than the aspects of the 'telling' (Riessman, 2008: 53–54) This allowed us to identify important themes while paying attention to the contextual details of their experiences and keeping their stories intact. Guided by our conceptual understanding of 'school belonging' as a multidimensional and dynamic process, the analytical procedure involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, inductive coding and identifying themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Although each of their accounts is unique, the three cases are illustrative of key issues that we found across the larger sub-sample of research participants with a migration background. However, it is important to note that our purpose is not to generalise, but rather to interpret and highlight individual experiences and meaning-making processes, and explore what the stories reveal about how school belonging (or a lack thereof) functions in these youngsters' educational trajectories.

Findings

Souhaila and Youssef both began their first year of secondary education in the academic track. Souhaila entered a school that offers courses in all educational tracks not far from the neighbourhood where she lived. Youssef started in a prestigious school that only offers courses in the academic track in another part of the city. '*You never know where you're going to end up, so it's best to start high*', he said, to justify his choice. His reference to 'starting high' echoes the double hierarchy embedded in the hegemonic imaginary of Flemish secondary education in which – as mentioned earlier – the academic track is not only considered the most desirable form of schooling, but specific schools also enjoy a higher status than others. As noted in previous research, for students from middle-class families going to the academic track and academically oriented schools is usually an almost automatic and taken-for-granted educational path (see e.g. Seghers, Boone and Van Avermaet, 2019). For Youssef, this was clearly not the case. Contrary to a sense of entitlement to academic education inculcated in the dominant middle-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), Youssef expressed his entering in the academic track and the high-prestige school as an ambition to '*start high'*, a conscious decision that was intertwined with doubt about whether he would be able to remain in that track. Indeed, his statement also shows how the possibility of 'downward mobility' was part of a reality he took into account. The fact that the academic track was not considered a taken-for-granted educational path is also visible in the account of Souhaila, who realised early on that the door to this track could be easily shut even before she would have had a chance to enter. She remembered the year she repeated in primary education as a choice she made because she was convinced that not repeating would have meant her teachers would have oriented her immediately towards the vocational track. Whether repeating a year was actually her own choice, or she would have been oriented to the vocational track if she had continued to the next year, remains unknown. Despite this, the way Souhaila reflects on this event illustrates a lived experience of educational transition that, similar to Youssef, is constructed from a particular social position that does not predispose her to 'belong' to the academic track. In other words, she recalls this year of grade retention as a strategy to keep the door to the academic track open.

Lorena's entry in Flemish secondary education came at a much later stage than immediately after primary school. Having lived in Portugal since the age of 3, she received all of her education there until she came to Flanders at age 16. In her experience, she was doing well at school in Portugal. She was trying to get good grades so she would have several career options when entering university. '*I didn't want to limit my options*', she explained. When she arrived in Flanders, she first went to compulsory reception classes for non-Dutch speaking newcomers

(OKAN) for 1 year before she continued her secondary education. After OKAN, she could start in the 4th year of the academic track that was closest to what she had been studying in Portugal and, like Youssef, she enrolled at a prestigious school. As a newcomer to Flanders and the Flemish educational system and with the educational capital acquired in Portugal, she initially entered Flemish secondary education with an imagined 'sense of belonging' to the academic track.

In this section, we follow the three youngsters after this initial entry in mainstream secondary education. While their educational journeys start at different places and evolve in different ways, a common thread running through their stories is how they experienced their trajectories primarily through their (dis)connectedness to the various schools they attended.

Souhaila: 'In other schools, it's like Moroccan teachers are Belgianised!'

Souhaila's first years in secondary education were a journey of going back and forth between two schools. When the school she first entered became *'too difficult'* she decided to go to another one only to change back to her first school after she finished the year successfully but with a formal warning for her behaviour (meaning that more 'bad behaviour' could lead to expulsion). In her third year, back in her first school, Souhaila was still in the academic track but fell ill and was absent for some time. She had missed too many classes and was told to repeat the year. She decided to go back to her second school and exchanged the academic track for the technical track. Souhaila noticed how the school policy had changed as teachers no longer gave '*silly [formal] warnings*' for '*stupid little things'*, and continued her education without further interruptions and at the same school, concluding that she was '*very happy to be there'* insisting that *'the teachers are totally different than in other schools'.*

At first sight, this trajectory seems a consequence of the school's academic level ('too difficult'), her behaviour (a formal warning) and illness resulting in 'underperformance' (grade retention). Yet Souhaila's account also shows how this 'school hopping' came to an end once she found herself in a school where she developed a sense of belonging. That is, her attachment to the place played a decisive role in 'stabilising' her educational trajectory. There is a general agreement in the literature that student-teacher relationships play a fundamental role in the construction of students' sense of belonging in schools (e.g. Faircloth, 2009; Juvenon, 2006; Nouwen and Clycq, 2019; Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012; Van Praag et al., 2015). In line with these findings, Souhaila considered the relationships with her teachers as central in her

sense of belonging in her current school, and contrasted this with negative experiences in her former school:

> [In my previous school] it's like you realise that they're your teacher, it's like they're above you or something. You can't say anything! The teacher always has the final word.

Furthermore, Souhaila felt that in her current school the teachers were approachable and inflicted a feeling of trust:

> The teachers here, if there's a problem or something, they're there for you. You feel that they're open to you to talk to them. If there would be something with your studies, or something you can't do, or homework you can't make, or a test or. . . You can say that without being afraid, let's say.

This overall less hierarchical and more caring relationship Souhaila experienced with the teachers allowed her to feel more comfortable, respected and supported as a student. However, crucial in contributing to experiencing the school as a place where she 'fitted in' was not only the interpersonal relationship with her teachers but also how she experienced the place as more welcoming towards students with a migration background than other schools. In her current school – a neighbourhood school that predominantly attracts students of migrant origin – it was specifically a more open attitude to using the home language in the school environment that made Souhaila think of the school as *'exceptional*'. The short interview extract below, in which she describes how in other schools 'Moroccan' teachers are 'Belgianised' in the sense that they take over the attitudes of 'Belgian' teachers and reprimand or punish students for not speaking Dutch, is illustrative of the monolingual ideology that reigns in Flemish schools and society more generally (see e.g. Agirdag, 2010; Clycq, 2017; Van Der Wildt et al., 2017).

> I think that in another school a Moroccan teacher wouldn't be able to be herself. And here they can be themselves, (. . .) while in other schools it's like they're Belgianised, you know what I mean? They're behaving really rough towards Moroccan students. (. . .) That happened a lot to me in the other school. But here it's really not like that. (. . .) If you would speak Moroccan in another school, Moroccan teachers would react the same way Belgian teachers do, like 'we speak Dutch at school!' While in this school, even Belgian teachers wouldn't say that.

'We like to speak our language', Souhaila continued, and the fact that she could do so – instead of being reprimanded for it – contributed to a greater sense of belonging and an overall more positive schooling experience. *'It's only little words'*, she added as if wanting to assure that it did not intervene with her also speaking Dutch. In that sense, Souhaila's relief to be able to exchange those 'little words' with her peers seems to be more about not being silenced for speaking a language that is a fundamental part of who she is and how she communicates yet is typically treated as unwelcome (and thus devalued) in the school environment, than about (not) speaking Dutch. In other words, she felt respected and recognised as a student who does not *only* speak Dutch. Van Der Wildt and colleagues (2017) found that when teachers display more tolerant practices towards multilingualism, this has a positive effect on the sense of school belonging of students with non-monolingual-Dutch backgrounds in Flemish schools. Souhaila's experience speaks to these findings and shows that not completely prohibiting the home language from the school setting contributed to her feeling more included and accepted.

Souhaila's account exemplifies how negative schooling experiences can be turned around when encountering an educational setting where students can experience positive, supportive and welcoming relationships with their teachers, as well as with their schools. It was particularly her connectedness to the school environment that allowed her to stay engaged in education and by the time of the second interview, at age 20, she was about to graduate and planned to enrol in higher education. Whereas Souhaila found a place that she considers unique in the way it made her feel a valued member of the school community *('I wouldn't know where to go if I get kicked out of here'* she said), Youssef was less lucky. While trying to make his way through different educational tracks and schools he continuously ended up feeling like an 'outsider' and by the time of the first interview, he had left school early.

Youssef: 'I always used to go to school to learn something'

As mentioned, 'starting high' was Youssef's goal and he entered the first year of secondary education in a prestigious school where he started studying in the academic track. Given the socio-ethnically segregated educational landscape, these 'prestigious' schools that only offer the high-esteemed academic track tend to have a student body that predominantly consists of people with native middle-class backgrounds. For Youssef, attending such a 'high-prestige' school thus entailed entering a predominantly 'white' middle-class setting. When students who are not a part of this dominant group enter these spaces, they may experience exclusion along socioeconomic or ethnic lines by their peers (see e.g. Van Praag et al., 2015) but, as underlined

by Murphy and Zirkel (2015), they may also feel a more general uncertainty as to whether they are perceived to 'belong' in such educational spaces. Indeed, Youssef considered these 'prestigious' schools as places for 'people with money' and not for 'people like him':

> I think if you, if you, like, have no money, you can't do anything there in that humaniora [old name for academic track, commonly associated with prestigious schools]. Really, take it from me. I went there, you can't do anything there. (. . .) Honestly in the humaniora, there were rich babies. They come to school with €100, €200 pocket money. (. . .) For them, we're way too low of course. (. . .) We were just regular people, you know what I mean?

As this quote illustrates, Youssef experienced his social class position as someone with 'no money' as a social boundary between him and his middle-class peers and the high-prestige school he was attending. As pointed out by Antonsich (2010) a sense of belonging to a place can transcend a feeling of attachment to a physical location. Indeed, Youssef was not only unable to connect with his peers and school, but also had difficulties to claim a sense of 'belongingness' to a more general imagined space of the '*humaniora'*. Ultimately, Youssef concluded that he *'didn't feel at home there anyway. No, no way. I already knew that since the beginning'.* For Youssef, his ambition to 'start high' thus came at the cost of feeling marginalised and out of place. At the same time, he also started to feel like an outsider in his neighbourhood and among his friends, most of whom attended (lower-prestige) schools in the area, and felt he could no longer relate when they talked about their experiences at school:

> [We ask each other] 'how was school?' [And my friends say] 'yes, I have a fun school!' What are you going to say? 'I am sitting there [at school] with my tie [part of the school uniform] and it's not fun', and this and that?

Struggling with what Thomas (2015: 42) describes as 'the uncomfortable experience of unbelonging', Youssef's high educational aspirations were not sufficient to develop a sense of entitlement to exist and feel 'at home', in a 'prestigious' school that offered the high-esteemed academic education he was seeking. In the end, after 1 year, Youssef returned to his neighbourhood and started his second year of secondary education in a less prestigious school in the technical track. Yet, leaving this educational setting in search for a sense of belonging did not result in him entering a place where he felt he 'fitted in', but rather turned into a journey of multiple school changes while continuously streaming further down on the ladder of educational prestige until after 6 years he found himself in the fourth year of secondary

education, entering the vocational track. Contrary to what this journey might suggest, Youssef always considered himself a student who was invested in his education: *'I always used to go to school to learn something*', he said. His positive disposition to education and eagerness to learn, however, remained largely unrecognised in the different schools he attended and did not translate into meaningful relationships with his teachers or the schools. Youssef tended to talk about his experience mostly in terms of 'the school and the teachers' versus 'him': *'the school, that's one team. And then [they are] against you, [who stands] alone'*, he explained. When he arrived at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder of educational prestige and started studying in the vocational track, he did not only lack feeling a member of the school community but also noticed that his goal to '*learn something*' was no longer fulfilled because the level was '*too low*' and he began to cut class:

> Youssef: 'Mostly I just didn't go to school'.
> Researcher: 'And how did the teachers react? Did they try to motivate you in one way or
> another?'
> Youssef: 'No. Sometimes they said like *"why do you often not come to school?"* And I was just honest and said *"I'm not learning anything".*'

A constant sense of exclusion led to alienation and eventually disengagement. He started to *'stumble down'* further and ended up in part-time vocational education. However, he only remained there for a short period of time because he felt even more out of place. *'No, that was just too easy'* he recalled, *'I was there in class with 30-year-old boys. I really didn't belong there'.* Finally, Youssef just stopped going to school altogether and left without an educational qualification. Underlying Youssef's narrative is a feeling of frustration resulting from a continuous sense of not being able to feel 'at home' in a hierarchically stratified and socio-ethnically segregated educational system in which the institutional forces obstructed him to transform his high educational aspirations into actual learning and educational achievement. The boundary he experienced between him and his white middle-class peers in the high-prestige school – that had led to his exclusion from the highly esteemed academic education he was seeking – was ultimately replaced by a boundary he constructed between him and his peers and the low-esteemed part-time vocational track. As a constant outsider, Youssef came to perceive 'school' of little value for his own education.

Youssef's educational career did not end there; however, and after being out of school for a while and with the support from staff and peers in a community-based youth organisation he had been attending since he was little, he decided to try to finish secondary education via a system of self-study, by taking centrally organised exams without having to go to school. Contrary to his experience in the formal educational system, Youssef could draw on the positive and trustful relationships he had with the people involved in the organisation. He was able to take back ownership over his education and bring the focus back to 'learning something'; however, he disconnected this entirely from participating in school life:

> It was just quickly, at your own pace (. . .) Passed this course, ok, next, next, next. . . Twelve courses, diploma, done.

Youssef's embeddedness in the community-based youth organisation and the experiences of success each time he passed an exam, gave him a 'sense of place' that allowed restoring a sense of agency and boosted his confidence to realise his aspirations. By the time of the second interview, he had been successful in obtaining his diploma and was about to start higher education. He concluded that he should have changed to this system of self-study much earlier. Our third case, Lorena, illustrates how feeling a sense 'belongingness' in school becomes even more complex in the case of late-arrival in the educational system.

Lorena: 'Communicating with the other students, that was the most difficult'

Although Lorena was much older, her experience with the highly esteemed academic track at a prestigious school (at age 17) resonates with Youssef's experience in the sense that she almost immediately came to see it as a place for 'rich people' and not a place for people like her:

> That literally wasn't a school for me. The people there were rich, and I was like 'I really can't do this!' It was a school where people wear uniforms so that supposedly everybody is equal. But really, I saw that no one is equal.

The requirement to wear a school uniform can be considered a mandated practice of belonging (Baroutsis and Mills, 2018). Yet, for Lorena, this did not result in a sense of 'fitting in' but instead made her feel aware of her lower class position compared to her peers and only emphasised that *'no one is equal'*. Lorena's feeling of being an outsider was furthermore exacerbated by her position as a recent immigrant who was still learning the language of instruction. As she was the only student in her class in this situation, she became very insecure

about her Dutch language skills. Because the teacher did not pay any specific attention to her, she felt invisible and silenced among the large group of Dutch-speaking peers that surrounded her:

> Lorena: 'Since we were such a big group the madam [teacher] also wasn't like *"Ok Lorena, now you"*, you know what I mean?'
> Researcher: 'You felt like you were disappearing in the crowd?'
> Lorena: 'Yes. . . And I was afraid to talk. . . I'm a quiet person by nature and I was like *"Oh no! It's not my language and I will certainly say something that's completely incorrect!"*'

Very soon Lorena considered that because she *'couldn't speak Dutch'*, the academic track was *'too difficult'* for her and when she left the school after only a few weeks, she also exchanged the academic track for the technical track. Lorena's narrative reveals how the strong and confident academic identity she had developed in Portugal became almost completely invisible once she entered Flemish schools, where she became a 'deficient' student 'with a lack of Dutch language skills'. Unable to draw on her previous schooling and mobilise her educational capital accumulated in Portugal, academic confidence was replaced by insecurity and Lorena lost her sense of belonging to the academic track, even though until recently she had been successfully following a similar educational career. Language is usually an important marker of belonging and can be used to demarcate boundaries between different social groups (Antonsich, 2010). Indeed, Lorena's experience shows how as a 'non-Dutch speaking newcomer' language became a defining marker that excluded her from the group she had previously belonged to, namely, high-achieving students in academic-level education.

When Lorena started studying in the technical track in a school that was just across the street from the previous one, her experience changed entirely. This was mainly the result of the fact that in her new school she met her best friend (also from Angola) and another girl who both spoke Portuguese. Because of the shared background – and especially the shared language – she could more easily connect with them and immediately felt a greater sense of belonging. Previous research indicates that in-group membership can offer an opportunity for connectedness and allow feeling a greater sense of ease to 'fit in' even though the wider context is unfamiliar (Craggs and Kelly, 2018). This resonates with Lorena's experience who was able to develop peer-friendships, which in turn made dealing with obstacles, such as having a lot of what she saw as 'school-tired' peers who were interrupting class, less stressful. *'I didn't mind*

the class was loud', she recalled. However, as a result of school restructurings, the school stopped offering the track she was in by the next school year, so Lorena had to change school again. Her friends did not come with her and once again she found herself isolated in a class group in which the only female peers she had turned out to be *'not nice at all'* and bullied her. The experience of in-group membership in her previous school, which had contributed to a sense of school belonging by mitigating feelings of exclusion and alienation (Craggs and Kelly, 2018), had disappeared. Lorena started losing her motivation and became very homesick of her school life and peers in Portugal:

> In Portugal, my classmates were really nice, we all grew up together, we go to the same school and stay there, you know what I mean?

The initial optimism she had about adapting to a new country and the feeling that *'everything will be alright'* was replaced by a strong longing to leave:

> I was like 'I miss my home, I miss my family, my language, my food'. I missed everything and didn't want to stay here anymore. . . I just wanted to leave.

Lorena continued going to school every day but stopped putting in much effort and eventually received a C-certificate (grade retention) at the end of the school year. *'It really just didn't work, with my classmates'*, she said. Instead of repeating the year, her teachers advised her to go to second-chance education for adults. She was 19 years old by that time. Adult education, with classmates that were *'very adult'* instead of *'just teenagers'*, was a welcome change for Lorena and she became invested again in her education. Although this alternative trajectory took longer than she had expected (and had been told) it would, Lorena progressed and by the time of the second interview, she only needed to finish one more course to be able to graduate. She intended to continue to higher education, although her initial aspiration to go to university had been replaced by a plan to attend more practical-oriented and shorter-term professional higher education. Lorena's trajectory illustrates how, while she tried to navigate Flemish education, belonging is 'quickly done and undone' (Halse, 2008) through her relationships with the people and educational spaces she attended. Her location as a 'non-Dutch speaking newcomer' initially placed her at the margins of the educational system and creating a sense of 'belonging' was only possible once she encountered in-group peers with whom she could connect. Her account shows how communicating – as in 'connecting' with her peers (or not) – strongly influenced

her sense of school belonging. The fact that her most positive experience involved Portuguese-speaking classmates moreover points to the importance of the home language in creating an affinity to the school environment – as we also saw in the case of Souhaila. Indeed, for Lorena *'missing her language'* became part of the spiral of losing motivation, which eventually led to grade retention and, consequently, an alternative educational route via adult education.

Discussion

Although existing research on school belonging has been crucial in revealing the important role it plays in students' educational, social and psychological wellbeing (e.g. Juvenon 2006; Osterman, 2002), it has mainly looked into the concept from a quantitative point of view that does not allow to capture students' lived experiences of belonging (Halse, 2018). In this article, we took a qualitative approach and studied young people's narratives on school belonging in Flemish secondary education. More particularly, we focused on the experiences of a specific group of young people, namely those with a (first- and second-generation) migration background. In Flanders, migrant youth are amongst those most heavily negatively affected by educational inequalities (Jacobs and Danhier, 2017). By paying attention to this specific group's 'belonging concerns' (Murphy and Zirkel, 2015), we aimed to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of school belonging and the way in which it influences their educational trajectories. We listened to the youngsters' experiences by zooming in on three cases and worked with the richness and the depth of the data in the individual accounts to analyse the role of school belonging in their journeys through secondary education. Rather than approaching school belonging as solely a psychological state of wellbeing, we departed from a notion of belonging as a multidimensional and dynamic process.

Our findings reveal the need to feel a sense of school belonging as a recurring issue in Youssef, Lorena and Souhaila's accounts. Indeed, their stories show how they predominantly recount their educational trajectories through their connectedness with the school environment, or – more often – a lack thereof. The case studies highlight the various and complex obstacles the youngsters encounter to achieve this sense of belonging, often resulting in feelings of being an 'outsider' rather than a valued member of the school and learning community. In line with the existing literature on school belonging (see e.g. Faircloth, 2009; Juvenon, 2006; Nouwen and Clycq, 2019; Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012; Van Praag et al., 2015), the experiences of Youssef, Lorena and Souhaila reveal the importance of interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers to be able to develop a sense of school belonging. At the same time, our findings also

indicate that not only students' relationships with people but also their connectedness to place matter. That is, the feeling of *'fitting in'* is also influenced by the specific educational space in which the students find themselves, both in terms of the actual school settings as well as in terms of more symbolic places such as a specific educational track or school community. In that sense, the narratives of our case studies reveal that 'place-belongingness' (Antonsich, 2010) is a crucial dimension of school belonging; yet something they are particularly struggling with. Although, in theory, access to and participation in the different educational tracks of Flemish secondary education is equal for anyone, in practice the hierarchical structure characterised by institutional processes of social and ethnic stratification seems to make it difficult to claim those spaces that are at the top of the educational hierarchy as places where they 'belong'. As migrant-origin youth from lower-income families, both Youssef and Lorena felt highly 'out of place' in prestigious schools and came to associate this feeling of non-belonging not only with the school but also with the academic track as a space where they did not 'belong', even though they aspired academic-level education. Prestigious predominantly 'white' schools are generally seen as high-quality educational spaces that may offer the key to upward social mobility (De Rycke and Swyngedouw, 1999). However, our cases show how social boundaries in such educational spaces can lead to feelings of disconnectedness and exclusion if these schools do not succeed in making students who are not part of the dominant group of non-migrant origin 'white' middle-class people feel part of the school community. The trajectories of Lorena and Youssef furthermore show that their decision to leave school early was not about leaving education or resisting to the idea of academic achievement as a way to get ahead; rather they ended up resisting school as spaces where they felt marginalised and 'outsiders', which ultimately affected their capacity to learn (see also Baroutsis and Mills, 2018). The youngsters' accounts show how their journeys through secondary education and the multiple school changes this involved were in fact to a large extent attempts to stay engaged in education and continue the pursuit of a diploma after disempowering experiences in previous schools. Although this shows these young people are active agents in their educational trajectories, which may result in them finding a school where they can feel 'at home' as was the case for Souhaila, their journey to find 'belongingness' and the efforts this requires also puts them at risk of increasing disengagement and ultimately early school leaving. In that sense, the idea of high educational aspirations as a protection against early school leaving does not seem to stand if schools fail to be spaces where students can truly feel they belong. Ultimately, the experiences of our case studies tell us that it is crucial to think about how schools and educational tracks can become more inclusive, rather than a place for a selected group.

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