Looking beyond primary barriers: Support workers’ perspectives on school dropout among students with a migration background

Lana Van Den Berghe, Aline Pouille, Stijn Vandevenlede & Sarah S. W. De Pauw

To cite this article: Lana Van Den Berghe, Aline Pouille, Stijn Vandevenlede & Sarah S. W. De Pauw (2022): Looking beyond primary barriers: Support workers’ perspectives on school dropout among students with a migration background, Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, DOI: 10.1080/15313204.2022.2094519

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2022.2094519

Published online: 06 Jul 2022.
Looking beyond primary barriers: Support workers’ perspectives on school dropout among students with a migration background

Lana Van Den Berghe, Aline Pouille, Stijn Vandevelde, and Sarah S. W. De Pauw

Department of Special Needs Education, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

ABSTRACT
Worldwide, students with a migration background are over-represented in statistics of early school leavers. Too often, educational inequalities are attributed to culture as the primary barrier to successful educational outcomes. This group tends to be regarded as potential dropout students, culminating in stigmatization and stereotyping biases. This qualitative study evaluates the perspectives of support workers using 15 in-depth interviews that reveal influencing factors. These results highlight that for many of these students, “education indeed can become secondary” in light of the many struggles and structural barriers they face. The need for a more holistic perspective on the challenges faced by students with a migration background throughout education is emphasized.

INTRODUCTION

Each year in Europe, an average of 10% of students leave school without a degree. This group is labeled as “early leavers from training and education,” comprising young adults from 18 to 24 years of age who have not completed upper secondary education (cf. International Standard Classification of Education level three – i.e., high school) and who are not involved in further education and training (Eurostat, 2020). Foreign-born students, and students who speak a foreign language at home, are over-represented within this group (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018). Multiple studies have now shown that, on average, first-generation migrant students perform worse at school than students without a migration background (labeled as “native students”). On average, second-generation migrant students show better outcomes compared to the first generation, but they still perform worse than native students (De Paolo & Brunello, 2016). In this study, the term “students with a migration background” (Kaye et al., 2017) is used. The conceptualization of “students with a migration background” – also referred to as “migrant students” – comprises students with first- and second-generation migration backgrounds – including official residents, asylum seekers, refugees, and unaccompanied minors – who participate in the formal education system of “the host country” (Pouille et al., 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given its strong importance for society, school dropout has received a lot of research attention. In this literature, much attention has been directed toward quantitatively identifying risk factors, showing that gender, parental involvement, social class, and ethnicity are key predictors for educational outcomes/achievement (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017; Timmermans et al., 2018). However, this literature warns that these risk factors – such as ethnicity, gender, and social-economic status (SES) – do not

KEYWORDS
ethnic minorities; educational achievement gap; educational inequity; school attendance; school dropout
combine in a simple additive manner. Rather substantial interactions among them lead to school dropout, particularly between ethnicity and SES on the one hand, and between ethnicity and gender on the other (Strand, 2014). Hence, school dropout is increasingly seen as a complex, cumulative, and long-term process of school disengagement that is influenced by a myriad of interconnected risk factors on both the individual and the environmental levels (cf. Ecological Framework of Human Development; Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018).

Studies on drop-out rates demonstrate important gender effects, with boys being much more likely to drop out of school than girls (Osman & Özer, 2020). Moreover, these male-female dropout rates appear not to have changed significantly over the last 30–35 years (Vlaanderen Onderwijs & Vorming, 2021; De Witte et al., 2012). Multiple potential explanations for this gender bias have been given in the literature. First, girls are assumed to be better equipped than boys with social and behavioral skills – such as self-discipline and higher positive educational aspirations – to fit within educational expectations (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017). In addition, boys are thought to be influenced more by aspects such as academic failure and low grades, which may be considered significant factors that push students to drop out of school. Also, research has indicated that boys in late adolescence tend to have more labor alternatives than girls do, so that employment is a stronger pull factor for boys than for girls (Van Praag & Clycq, 2020).

A second risk factor is parental education: higher levels of parental education are associated with higher parental involvement, which is, by extension, associated with their children’s higher academic achievement (De Boer & van der Werf, 2015; Timmermans et al., 2018). Multiple scholars have attributed this difference in parental involvement to unequal access to institutional resources, such as schools, where parental involvement is higher among “native parents” who share culture and lifestyle with the school’s culture (Seyfried & Chung, 2002). Based on data from several OECD countries, Dustmann et al. (2012) attributed the gap in test scores between students from different ethnic backgrounds to achievement differences in the parents’ generation. Indeed, research has shown that students with a migration background are at higher risk for early drop-out due to a less favorable SES (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018; Lüdemann & Schwerdt, 2013), as they are over-represented in lower socio-economic groups (Emmen et al., 2013; Heath & Cheung, 2007; Mesman et al., 2012). However, several authors warn not to simplify the complex process of early school leaving and drop-out by blaming it merely on poverty and SES (Artiles, 2011; De Paolo & Brunello, 2016).

Researchers have shown that a tendency to attribute educational differences to culture can be seen as a primary barrier to successful educational attainment (Shankar et al., 2020), followed by individual and family attributions such as (parental) motivation toward education (Portes, 2005). Similarly, Triplett and Ford (2019) define this hypothesis as a longstanding bias in the discourse around race and education, because empirical research shows that so-called “ethnicity-effects” are often limited when studies control for other variables such as gender or socio-economic status (Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

Societal stigma and the prejudice that migrant and ethnic minority students are less prone to achieve high educational goals may impact their chances in education (Miller & Maiter, 2008; Triplett & Ford, 2019). While studies have shown that immigrant populations often value education highly, the stigma and implicit bias that students with a migration background are more likely to fail in school are primarily attributed to individual aspects such as being unmotivated (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Valencia, 2002). This leads to what Artiles (2011) calls “the racialization of abilities”: the devaluation of students with migration background before they have even gotten a chance to prove themselves. These mechanisms of stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion due to structural inequalities (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017; Pouille et al., 2020) have all been documented as important explicit and implicit processes affecting early drop-out and school leaving (Peguero et al., 2015; Triplett & Ford, 2019).

To date, most studies have empirically observed risk factors for school dropout on various levels (e.g., students, families, schools, and community) to develop prevention and intervention strategies for students “at-risk” (Fornander & Kearney, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018).
From a methodological perspective, quantitative research predominates the dropout literature, most often applying standard logit or multivariate models to determine risk factors for dropping out (Rumberger, 2004). By isolating the multiple dimensions of school dropout, the interdependence and reciprocal effects of the influencing factors may be partly missed (Rumberger, 2004). Students characterized with examined risk factors are expected to be potential dropout students, which could result in the stigmatization and stereotyping of students (De Graaf & van Zenderen, 2009; De Witte et al., 2012). Furthermore, focusing on these predictors of early school leaving has resulted in stereotypes such as the typical image of the unmotivated, masculine, colored dropout student (De Paolo & Brunello, 2016).

Several authors have pointed out the importance of approaching early school leaving among students with a migration background from an intersectional and more holistic model to understand the complexity of the dropping out process (Strand, 2014; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Qualitative studies are particularly useful for conveying why people make certain choices (Nowell et al., 2017), which tallies well with the nature of the dropout process (i.e., a complex interplay of multiple factors). For example, numerous studies have shown the importance of the protective role of social workers, or a positive student-teacher relationship, in preventing students from dropping out (Osman & Özer, 2020). Although they are considered to be important actors in students’ social networks (Joseph et al., 2012; Jozejwicz, 2008), perspectives on the professionals who support students’ school careers are essentially lacking.

Given the over-representation of students with a migration background in the statistics of school dropout, the presence of “ethnicity-effects” in the discourse around race and education when it comes to school attainment, the scarce qualitative data on this subject, and the lack of perspectives of support workers from both welfare and education as “significant others” in the lives of students, this study aims to explore the intersections of influencing factors on the process of school dropout among students with a migration background from a more holistic perspective (i.e., Ecological Framework of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981)). The central questions are: “What causes students you work with to drop out of school?” “Who are important actors in the students’ network?” and “What can be done to support these students to stay on board?”

**Methods**

**Research design, setting, and participants**

This study aims to explore the mechanisms of early school leaving among students with a migration background from the perspective of people who professionally support, assist, teach, and reinforce students – conceptualized in this research as “support workers.” A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was applied to answer the research questions.

This research was conducted in a specific urban area of Belgium (i.e., the area of the city of Ghent in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) during the autumn of 2019. Compared to other areas in Belgium, the school drop-out percentages in Ghent are quite high – 16.2% in 2018 (Vlaanderen Onderwijs en Vorming, 2020) – which has historically led to many school support initiatives. Moreover, Ghent is characterized as a city with large (cultural) diversity, as it is one of the provincial capital cities in Belgium.

The data used in this research are selected out of a qualitative dataset of research on early school leaving and contains interviews of 15 support workers who were included based on the inductive occurrence of the preconceived topic (i.e., supporting students with migration background) in the interviews. Additionally, participants had to work in schools and organizations that support students who are at risk of dropping out. To include different perspectives and to get information on different groups of students, participants with diverse job descriptions were chosen (see Table 1).
Table 1. Participant characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Organizational setting</th>
<th>Years active in the profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[30–39]</td>
<td>Student support worker in education</td>
<td>School for regular secondary education</td>
<td>[0–5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[50–59]</td>
<td>School management</td>
<td>School for special needs education</td>
<td>[+10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[30–39]</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>School for recent immigrants in Belgium</td>
<td>[0–5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[50–59]</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Youth work</td>
<td>[+10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[50–59]</td>
<td>Labor consultant</td>
<td>Employment organization</td>
<td>[0–5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[50–59]</td>
<td>Student support worker in education &amp; teacher</td>
<td>School for adult education</td>
<td>[+10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[20–29]</td>
<td>Researcher &amp; policy maker</td>
<td>Research center</td>
<td>[0–5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[20–29]</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Youth work</td>
<td>[0–5]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection, analysis, and report

Each participant was contacted by e-mail and phone to arrange one face-to-face and in-depth interview, which lasted between 1.25 to 2 hours. The interviews were recorded and detailed digital notations were made during the interviews. First, to comprehend the data more deeply, the audio records and detailed digital notations with supplemental verbatim transcriptions were read and listened to several times. Second, the transcripts were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis via NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package (Nowell et al., 2017). Ultimately, in consultation with the research team, 82 thematical codes were merged into 42 codes. Based on inductively derived themes, these 42 codes were classified using the Ecological Framework of Human Development (i.e., tier 1: the macro level, tier 2: the meso level, and tier 3: the micro level; Bronfenbrenner, 1981). This classification fits the conceptualization of early school leaving as a complex, cumulative, and life-course process of school disengagement influenced by a myriad of interconnected factors (i.e., risk factors) on both the individual and the environmental levels. To answer the research questions, a fourth theme was added to the analysis (i.e., the recommended initiatives). Some of the influencing factors classified in the different themes of the analysis could also be classified into other themes. To ensure the preservation of the interconnectedness of the data during the unraveling of the data in themes during the analysis, parentheses (cf.) were used with referrals to associated themes.

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted according to the ethical rules presented in the General Ethical Protocol of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, which is based on The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. An Informed Consent form was used to inform the participants about their rights and to ask permission for confidential data-processing and anonymous representation.

Results

The influencing factors on the macro level

Support workers describe how first-generation migrants and refugees – but second-generation migrants as well – are frequently confronted with difficulties such as bad housing, poverty, and unemployment. In this regard, one of the participants describes this as follows: “They live in an environment with fewer opportunities due to the inter-generational transfer of opportunities” (Interview 3, school management). These complex living environments (cf. tier 2: meso level) and the worries students and their families are confronted with, push the importance of schooling to the background.

In some communities, parents are first-generation immigrants, and their children are the second generation. But these children too are confronted with difficulties such as housing, poverty, employment. (…) Due to the complexity of the language, first-generation migration parents who cannot find their way in the system, their family travels back to their country of origin (Interview 7, social worker).

Furthermore, the support workers note that a considerable percentage of the students they support – in many cases, first-generation migrants, or students with refugee status – rely on the system of a “living wage.” This is a guaranteed minimum income to enable individuals to meet their basic needs (cf. tier 3: micro level). Students who receive a living wage and who want to take summer jobs or weekend jobs must pay a part of this living wage back to the government. Both examples – and more specifically, the contradictions within these systems – cause students to choose paid work instead of finishing school (cf. tier 3: micro level).
Every two years, the government revisits the student loans. If students have too many absences, they have to pay their loans back. (...) For many students, this system is a reason to quit (Interview 5, teacher).

During the interviews, the support workers discussed culturally-inspired gender roles and gender differences between students regarding the process of schooling, choice of education, and dropping out of school. Especially in the case of the girls, support workers believe that in some cultures other aspects are seen as primary to education, such as starting a family and getting married. Second, the support workers described cultural influences on the choices boys and girls make within education (cf. tier 3: micro level). Not all types of education are consistent with conventional gender roles within the (cultural) communities. In some cultures, for example, girls are supposed to choose professions in healthcare or education, while boys are supposed to choose construction or plumbing. This can limit the students’ intrinsically motivated choices and thus put pressure on their schooling.

Girls want to engage and study at the same time, sometimes their parents push them to complete their studies, but, in many cases, they quit education. Or, if girls must choose their course of education, becoming a police officer is not an option for girls (Interview 13, social worker).

Another important aspect, specifically for students with refugee status, is the refugee procedure – ranging from requesting asylum and living in the refugee shelter, to getting the residence permit, and eventually finding a house to live in (cf. tier 3: micro level) – which is exhausting, unpredictable, and long-lasting. For the support workers, the biggest concern is the effect of this procedure on the motivation, the prospects, and the perseverance of students to go to school. On the one hand, the student’s motivation is suppressed due to, for example, the administrative expectations of the refugee procedure. The procedure has direct and indirect effects on the students’ school careers as education becomes secondary compared to the importance of this procedure. In this regard, the refugee procedure poses major challenges for meeting basic needs (e.g., housing, and income) (cf. tier 3: micro level).

Trauma psychologists, who work in a cooperative network to prevent school dropout, push difficulties forward in terms of motivation for refugee students and unaccompanied minors. Why would they learn the language or why would they go to school if their living conditions are uncertain (Interview 12, researcher & policy maker)?

**The influencing factors on the meso level**

Some influencing aspects that are described are primarily affiliated with the structural embedding of the school system. The support workers recognize the complexity of the school system in terms of the high number of career choices, types of education, and schools. Furthermore, the goals, values, standards, and expectations within education (cf. tier 1: macro level) in the host country often vary widely compared to the country of origin. This frequently results in unfamiliar situations, causing uncertainty and misunderstanding for both the adolescents and their parents. In turn, this can result in demotivation, suspiciousness, and eventually dropping out of school (cf. tier 3: micro level).

One student completed three years of University in his country of origin. He is strongly motivated, he looks into everything about this system independently, but the system is unknown. (...) Also for parents, the school system is unfamiliar, which results in distrust: “Education is expensive, but what is my child doing at school?” (Interview 13, teacher).

One of the most important and foreseeable factors the support workers describe is the educational language in the host country. On the one hand, the conventional educational language is usually different from the students’ mother tongue (cf. tier 3: micro level). Consequently, the content of the lessons and courses is not always clear, which presents difficulties in achieving academic success. Speaking another mother tongue primarily results in disadvantages compared to native peers, as the migrant students must learn the common language of the host country, which takes time and requires effort. On the other hand, because the language lessons are intensive, learning the language of the host
country often causes a delay before the students can even start schooling in the host country (cf. tier 3: micro level). This delay can result in demotivation to continue schooling. Especially for those whose age makes them feel like “the next stage is knocking,” where family or making a living are gaining interest.

We notice that the majority of students want to study. They come to a host country and they have a clear vision about their future. It takes time to realize that they – with language lessons and specific lessons for immigrants – will have a school delay. This is reality, their learning path is long and some of them are demotivated to persevere (Interview 6, social worker).

Finally, while having computer skills almost goes without saying in this society (cf. tier 1: macro level) and in education, for many first-generation migrants and refugee students, as well as second-generation migrants with low SES, this is not self-evident, particularly because many of them don’t have a computer available. This also forms a barrier to completing education successfully.

The influencing factors on the micro level

The support workers emphasize that parents are significant actors in students’ lives, in terms of nurture. The parents manage the household and meet the basic needs of the family, which creates the primary opportunities for their children to go to school. For example, in the case of unaccompanied migrant minors, the absence of their social network (i.e., their parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters) plays a major role. Students with refugee status are often isolated from friends and family, negatively influencing their motivation to go to school. Support workers emphasize that these students form a particularly vulnerable group, as they need to take care of themselves often overshadows the need and motivation for schooling.

It is difficult for these students, they have so many concerns on their list that come before going to school. Without family, they have to be strongly motivated to hold on to schooling (Interview 6, teacher).

The support workers describe the “culturally colored perspective” (i.e., culturally inspired values and norms) of the students themselves and their primary social network (cf. tier 1: macro level) on education and schooling. This perspective is felt to determine how students approach education, and what value they attach to qualification. For example, some of the participants argued that parents of students they support are not always convinced about the importance of education and qualification. Starting a family is – attributed to cultural values – more important than a diploma. Also, some participants argue that the students’ cultural values often conflict with the values and standards within education (cf. meso level).

Sometimes, a diploma seems unimportant to the parents. This also results in difficulties in education for their children. (…) These early school leavers are not only tired of going to school, but education and qualification are not always deemed important. This is often culturally determined and difficult to change (Interview 1, student support worker in education).

According to the support workers, for some students, religion and the development of their religious identity gets priority. One support worker gave the example of a student who was unable to choose her preferred education career because the school (cf. tier 2: meso level) did not allow her to wear her veil. Another participant talked about a case in which a student dropped out of school to go to the mosque daily. For some students, finding the balance between their religious and cultural identity (cf. tier 1: macro level) and the identity of the country they live in – the host country – is a real quest. In this light, schooling becomes secondary. One of the participants stated:

They have questions about their identity and the reasons for their appearance. They experience a duality between being loyal to their parents – who are sometimes here in this country, sometimes not – and the way things work in the country they live in (Interview 6, teacher).
**Recommended initiatives to prevent these students from dropping out of school**

According to the support workers, the recognition of acquired competencies in terms of credits within the educational system in the host country – based on employment or the students’ studies in their country of origin – is instrumental in preventing first-generation migrant students from dropping out of school. Also, the option of diploma equivalence is suggested, which allows students to validate the qualifications they have achieved in previous settings.

We have many students with a migration background. Even without a diploma, these students have competencies. For example, when a student has strong computer skills, then this student should be able to get credits for computer courses (Interview 11, student support worker in education & teacher).

Another salient aspect in preventing drop-out among students with a migration background is the development of a supportive social network (cf. tier 3: micro level). The importance of this is especially apparent in the situation of first-generation migrant and refugee students who have to rebuild their life, social network, and relationships from scratch in the host country and, therefore, often live an isolated life. A concrete action to support students is to invoke “role models” – often individuals with a migration background themselves with whom students can identify (cf. tier 3: micro level). These role models can share their own experiences, show compassion, recognition, and understanding of the students’ search (e.g., how to build a social network within the host country). The life course of these role models can encourage students to believe that they too can build a meaningful life.

We work with role models in our organizations. People who have a migration background themselves – and who studied and had support here before – come over to talk about their life and schooling. Instead of explaining all of the schooling options ourselves, for example, students can ask “experts by experience” these questions. (…) Adolescents need role models, in addition to their parents, they need real-world examples (Interview 6, teacher).

In contrast, some support workers argue that supporting students also means orienting them toward employment and going to work – instead of keeping them in school – if this fits their needs and aspirations at a certain time (e.g., affordable housing, securing an income, maintaining a family, etc.). They discussed examples in which students dropped out of school but showed strong motivation toward finding a job and starting a family and who were, overall, considered to be happy.

When we meet students again after a couple of years, yes, they’ve had a couple of jobs but they are employed. People usually think that they are lost, but this turns out to be ok. (…) To be realistic, if students no longer want to study, then we should help them enter into employment instead of pushing them to go to school. Graduation should not always be the end goal (Interview 7, social worker).

**Discussion**

First and foremost, this study emphasizes the large heterogeneity among students with a migration background. On the one hand, the results of this study highlight specific themes/challenges for specific groups. On the other hand, overarching themes that apply to the broad spectrum of students with a migration background were found as well. Regarding situation-specific challenges, the following themes stood out. First, in line with previous studies (Burn et al., 2014; Choy & Varvik, 2019; Webb et al., 2021), students with refugee status form an especially vulnerable group in education due to the far-reaching complexity of challenges linked to this status (e.g., the refugee procedure, financial issues, housing, etc. (Moinolnolki & Han, 2017)). Second, important differences between first-generation and second-generation migrant students can be attributed to the consequences of migrating from one country to another, such as language barriers, the refugee procedure, difficulties encountered due to differences in education systems across countries, and social isolation. These aspects create challenges for students to integrate into the educational system in the host country. Third, this study confirms
that first- and second-generation migrants are described as encountering specific difficulties that may harm their school career, such as having a lower SES compared to their peers, which often results in more complex living environments (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017; Timmermans et al., 2018).

As mentioned in the literature review, differences in educational achievement among students with a migration background have been attributed to culture as a primary barrier to successful educational attainment (Shankar et al., 2020). This description of the cultural perspective about education and the influence of cultural aspects on schooling is described by Verkuyten (2010) as a form of “cultural determinism.” This form of cultural determinism was confirmed in our study, as support workers used culture as an explanatory factor for early school leaving. They attributed school dropout to individual conflicts between students based on ethnic history or religion, culturally-inspired gender roles, having a “culturally-colored perspective” about education and earning a degree, and parents’ lower educational aspirations due to cultural differences. On the one hand, the latter is in line with studies showing that the educational aspirations of parents, social workers, teachers, peers, and other close relatives affect the students’ attitudes toward education (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Swank et al., 2001). On the other hand, this finding is contrary to previous research, showing that parental involvement and the educational aspirations of the parents are more associated with their educational level (cf. SES), rather than to culture as a mediator (Timmermans et al., 2018). While it is assumed that parents with a migration background have lower educational aspirations, international research shows that these parents often have higher aspirations compared to native parents because they value a degree highly for escaping less-favored social positions and for integration into the host country (De Boer & van der Werf, 2015).

When analyzing these examples of cultural determinism in more detail, it’s not the cultural differences as such that are of great influence, but rather the intersection of these aspects with aspects on a structural level (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017). For example, the question could be asked whether it is an ideological or a – school-based – structural interference when a girl is unable to choose her preferred education because she wears a veil. Furthermore, in this research, several of the influencing aspects specifically attributed to this group of students are linked to aspects of social inequalities (e.g., poor housing, unemployment, difficulties earning an income). This is in line with previous international studies that have shown the coherence between the migration background of students and additional disadvantages they are confronted with due to their less favorable SES (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018).

Overall, it can be concluded that the construct of school dropout is much more than students failing to graduate from school (De Witte et al., 2012). Some students fail to achieve academically, although they are forced to remain in school because an educational qualification is perceived to offer the opportunity par excellence to enter university or further education and training and the labor market (Laurijssen & Glorieux, 2018). In this regard, some support workers presented an interesting and somewhat counterintuitive perspective: i.e., “Is early school leaving a problem?” and “Must we push students to stay in school?” This perspective is problematic if it is based on prejudiced assumptions about migrant students, such as an underestimation of their competencies or stereotyped ideas of migrant students as trouble-makers (De Witte et al., 2012).

As this study shows, for some students, education may become secondary, as other life-course aspects become primary (e.g., housing, earning an income). The support workers maintain that the different social systems (i.e., school, peers, parents, labor, etc.) are badly aligned and even overwhelmed. According to Masten (2019), personal resilience depends on the resilience of interconnected systems. Hence, when interdependent systems are overwhelmed at the same time, the resilience of individuals can be suppressed. For the support workers, supporting the students to meet their primary needs – instead of pushing them to stay in school – is deemed to be more significant in helping them develop a meaningful life. In doing so, the support workers promote both the development of the students’ resilience (i.e., “the capacity for successful adaptation in the context of significant threats to function or development” (Masten, 2011)) and the development of the resilience of their social systems. They try to empower students to develop a social network, as isolation and lack of
a supportive social network have been found to play an important role in the drop-out processes of students with a migration background (De Paolo & Brunello, 2016). This is especially necessary among first-generation and refugee students who have left their friends and family behind.

Rather than assuming migrant students to be prone to dropping out of school due to the difficulties they encounter, the focus should be on removing barriers to education and fostering equality of opportunities. In turn, the role of the support workers could be described as “a mentoring relationship” (Sulimani-Aidan & Tayri-Schwartz, 2021), as they are significant supportive adults that are part of the students’ natural environment (Sulimani-Aidan & Tayri-Schwartz, 2021). Besides, the structural aspects of early drop-out should be addressed within practice and policy (Kyere et al., 2020). To begin with, students who drop out of school without a diploma should receive alternative opportunities to acquire an educational qualification, as this is a stepping stone toward diverse social and economic opportunities (McGregor et al., 2017). A key policy priority should be the revision and further development of the recognition of diploma equivalence and competencies acquired earlier. This is crucial to providing recognition for students’ abilities, which is motivational for starting or continuing further training and education.

Overall, the findings of this study point toward a variety of strongly interrelated intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Jozefowicz, 2008), on both the individual and the environmental levels (cf. tiers at the micro, meso, macro level). This confirms that having a migration background is not an isolated predisposition to leave education early, as is “culture” (Kaye et al., 2017; De Paolo & Brunello, 2016; Peguero et al., 2015). Results of this study enhance the understanding of the difficulties students are confronted with during their school career and the cumulative process of dropping out (Gubbels et al., 2019). Our results highlight that for many of these students, “education indeed can become secondary” in light of the many struggles they face. However, it is also emphasized that in many cases, school dropout is not simply a matter of reluctance but rather the impossibility to study due to structural barriers.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported by Ghent University, Belgium.

**ORCID**

Lana Van Den Berghe [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4566-724X](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4566-724X)
Aline Pouille [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4981-3320](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4981-3320)
Stijn Vandevelde [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9491-9509](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9491-9509)
Sarah S. W. De Pauw [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4462-2755](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4462-2755)

**References**


