Although overall the early school leaving (ESL) rate in Flanders is below the EU2020 target of 10%, large disparities remain between different educational tracks, geographical areas and social groups. The highest ESL rates are found among boys from socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority households in urban vocational schools (Van Landeghem et al., 2011; Van Landeghem et al., 2013). Pupils in the vocational track also have a higher prevalence of negative educational career experiences like grade retention, which in turn is also negatively related to academic achievement (Lamote et al. 2013).

In order to strengthen our understanding of the disproportionately high level of ESL in urban vocational schools, we build on recent RESL.eu survey data collected in the Flemish cities of Antwerp and Ghent. We use a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of the respondents’ school engagement as the main risk indicator for future ESL and relate the emotional, behavioural and cognitive school engagement to the pupils’ socio-demographic background, educational trajectory and the social support experienced from parents, peers and teachers (Ellfers et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012).

The preliminary analyses show distinct patterns of school engagement and social support levels between pupils in full-time school-based and part-time work-based vocational education. While most dimensions of school engagement and social support are significantly lower for pupils in part-time work-based vocational education, the latter show a higher sense of emotional belonging in the school and experience more support from teachers than those pupils in full-time school-based vocational education. Further analyses controlling for the pupils’ socio-demographic background and educational trajectory will further unravel these relations.