

From Crisis to Commons? Exploring the Potential of the Commons Via Two Secondary Education Case Studies in Flanders



Juno Tourne , Rudi Roose , Jochen Devlieghere , and Lieve Bradt 

Abstract Education in Flanders—the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium—is currently facing what many describe as a crisis, marked by quality erosion and social inequalities. These issues have brought about a highly politicized and polarized debate that has led to a sole focus on achieving cognitive test outcomes, sidelining the importance of equity and social justice. In response to this, a growing number of academics and practitioners are actively exploring alternative educational frameworks, with the ‘commons’ framework gaining prominence in this context. This chapter delves into the implementation of two commons-based projects within secondary schools in Flanders, highlighting the challenges faced in implementing commons principles within traditional educational settings. These challenges include resistance from teachers entrenched in the existing educational culture, the tendency to consider the commons as an individual responsibility rather than a collective commitment and the risk of instrumentalizing the commons by prioritizing outcomes over the participatory process. While commons-based initiatives face substantial hurdles within the current educational landscape, they offer a useful alternative horizon that challenges the status quo and may help bridge the gap between educational ideals and reality in Flanders and elsewhere.

Keywords Secondary education · Social inequality · Commons · Neoliberalism · Case studies

1 Flemish Education in a State of Crisis

Education in Flanders—the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium—has found itself at a crossroads, facing what many perceive as a crisis, dubbed "in decay" and "deathly ill" by prominent figures in newspapers, politics, and public discourse. The pride of Flanders—the educational system that propelled Flanders from a modest region

J. Tourne (✉) · R. Roose · J. Devlieghere · L. Bradt
Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
e-mail: juno.tourne@ugent.be

to a thriving knowledge economy post-World War II—has now become a source of concern [16]. Quality erosion tops the list of problems—with the declining scores in PISA rankings (reading literacy, mathematics, and science) and the TIMSS poll (mathematics and science) being cited constantly [17]. Besides that—although much less unanimously problematized—there is the fact that socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils score significantly worse on these tests—even more so than in other countries [17]. This educational divide is further compounded by high rates of grade retention among vulnerable young people—where those from the poorest decile are five times more likely to fall behind than their wealthier counterparts [16, 19]. Similarly, early school leaving rates disproportionately affect children from socioeconomically vulnerable families, who are almost ten times more likely to exit the educational system without a qualification [19, 20]. Additionally, vulnerable students are often directed toward lower-regarded educational tracks, with only 10% of the poorest young individuals attending general education compared to 88% of the wealthiest [9, 19]. These numbers show us that many vulnerable young people experience social exclusion in relation to education [12, 20, 28]—which encompasses both their physical absence in education, as well as their exclusion from meaning-making processes in education or the lack of a connection with education [25]. This highlights a noticeable ‘misfit’ between vulnerable youth and the educational system [18]. Education, rather than eradicating inequalities, currently perpetuates and legitimises them.

While Flanders has grappled with these (in) equality issues for years, it is only in the wake of declining academic performance that alarm bells have begun to ring loudly. Amid these pressing challenges in Flemish education, the ongoing debate is highly politicized, polarized, and fraught with imaginary contradictions, such as: equity versus excellence, wellbeing versus knowledge, and so on. The prevailing perspective contends that education has become too soft, the bar is set too low and there is too little of a focus on knowledge—referred to condescendingly as ‘fun pedagogy’. Focusing too much on the ‘bottom half’ has led to too few opportunities for the ‘top half’, leading to the alleged levelling of Flemish education [4, 6]—or so it is claimed. New, more comprehensive, and tighter attainment targets—alongside stringent monitoring through standardized tests slated for implementation by 2024—should provide relief in the coming years [7]. In this shifting landscape, the value of (so-called) meritocratic excellence has emerged as the winner, supplanting the emphasis on equity and social justice [2]. This is palpable in the current Flemish policy plan on education, which conspicuously avoids addressing the issue of social inequality—in which Flemish education nevertheless stands out. These choices are far from neutral but reflect a distinct neoliberal vision of education in which quality primarily entails achieving generally favourable outcomes on cognitive tests assessing knowledge and skills deemed vital to the knowledge economy [13]—a phenomenon known as the human capitalisation of education. The Flemish education minister does not shy away from this fact, as evidenced by his policy paper that—quite literally—describes students as ‘capital’ and teachers as ‘asset managers’ [26].

As such, we tend to agree that Flemish education is in crisis—albeit for different reasons. While we acknowledge the vital role of knowledge transfer and effective

education in empowering the most vulnerable youth, the exclusive emphasis on these aspects increasingly neglects other roles of education and overlooks the contextual challenges faced by vulnerable students. Such a unilateral neoliberal perspective thus risks deepening this existing ‘misfit’, further alienating (vulnerable) young people, and perpetuating inequality and social injustice within the educational system and beyond. Our concerns are shared by others. Many academics and practitioners are also critical of the narrowing focus in education. They advocate for alternative perspectives and approaches—with the commons recently gaining much traction in this regard—that can steer education towards achieving equality and social justice. Our case studies reflect this resistance, as both third parties’ school leaders actively sought alternative methods to reshape education and address the existing misalignment. Both school leaders proposed initiatives that were already in progress and which they identified as rooted in an alternative educational vision and aligning with a commons perspective. These projects aimed at incorporating commons-related concepts—mainly shared governance and peer-learning [14]—into the school environment. Unlike some proponents of the commons who advocate for the complete abandonment of traditional schooling [10, 15], our approach thus focuses on investigating the potential to reimagine and reconceptualize existing educational institutions as commons-based entities. We embrace the commons as an alternative framework of principles and practices and explore practical steps that attempt to counter the prevailing trend of educational narrowness. Our approach unfolds through monitoring the implementation of these two distinct projects, analysing them through a commons-oriented lens and exploring both challenges and opportunities for such an alternative framework to take shape within the current educational climate in Flanders.

2 Implementing Shared Governance and Peer-Learning: An Overview of the Case Studies

Even prior to the ascent of neoliberalism, Flanders’ educational system exhibited market-like characteristics due to its strong reliance on the constitutional principle of educational freedom [2]. This freedom encompasses two types: passive freedom—which guarantees parents the right to choose their children’s education and is often blamed for the high segregation in Flemish education—and active freedom—which allows individuals and organizations the freedom to provide education. Consequently, a substantial portion (70%) of Flanders’ schools, including the ones in our case studies, fall under the category of ‘free education’. This category encompasses government-aided education organised by private entities—of which 99% are Catholic [5]. To secure funding, these schools must adhere to specific educational structures mandated by decree, follow a curriculum with predefined attainment targets and development goals, undergo supervision by the educational inspectorate,

engage in local consultation platforms, embrace principles of participatory decision-making, and enforce a complete smoking ban—meaning they are not necessarily markedly distinct from true ‘public’ schools in practice. Secondary education starts at the age of twelve and comprises four main tracks: general education, technical education, vocational education, and artistic education (which is relatively marginal in terms of the number of students) [23]. The system is highly hierarchical and selective in nature—(in) famously known as the ‘Flemish cascade system’—in which technical and vocational courses become, through their negative prestige, the directions for those who fail in the education system [22]. This track-switching phenomenon—prevalent predominantly among vulnerable students—frequently results in diminished motivation and feelings of inadequacy [24]. The third parties in our research—both Catholic secondary schools situated in the same metropolitan area—are located at the so-called ‘lower end’ of this cascade system, meaning they are often a second or even later stop in the educational path of young people. The first school—hereafter referred to as school A—is a school for technical and vocational education, specialising in subjects related to mechanics and electricity. The school is known as a ‘concentration school’ in which most students have a low SES and belong to an ethnic minority. For context, 84.9% of the students do not speak Dutch at home, 75.3% have a low-educated mother, 69.5% receive a school allowance and only 22.5% are in the expected grade for their age. The second school—school B—is a school for technical education, which specializes in courses related to business and economics. In the past, the school used to be a school of mainly affluent pupils, but in recent years the school has seen its composition change to a more diverse student body. At the time of our research, 49.1% of students do not speak Dutch at home, 42.2% have a low-educated mother, 54.9% receive a school allowance and 52.8% are in the expected grade. These distinct profiles—combined with the school leaders’ aspirations to do things differently—offered intriguing and varied contexts for our research.

In school A the primary focus was on establishing ‘shared governance’ by reviving the dormant student council. The case study ran from 1/10/2022 till 30/06/2023—a full school year—and involved 25 pupils from all tracks and grades in the school (with ages ranging from 12 to 20). The council was mainly run by two teachers, although management was also sporadically involved. The student council convened on four occasions. The first two gatherings featured an extensive discussion—led by the two teachers—in which input was sought on the topics of: school organisation, school regulations, sanction policy, and the physical school environment. The pupils could—and did—raise problems and make proposals regarding these issues. During the third meeting, two tables were set up to showcase all the ideas and suggestions from the previous sessions. Each student had the chance to select the idea they considered most important and present it to the attending vice principal. Subsequent discussions centred on the feasibility of these proposals, exploring what could or could not be implemented and the reasons behind those decisions. The fourth session focused on practical work, in which students got the time to flesh out three proposals that were selected by the teachers: activities during the break, playground improvements, and initiatives for non-native newcomers to the school. Additionally, there were

weekly meetings where the involved teachers gathered to discuss the student council. School B implemented an initiative that focused on both ‘peer-learning’ and ‘shared governance’, creating a shared educational process through the implementation of ‘the challenge’. This project was set up by an external city-subsidized educational organization and had the goal of providing a steppingstone for students to attain qualifications and enhance their prospects in both their educational journey and future endeavours. In a nutshell, the project worked closely with one third-year class of 22 students (with ages ranging from 13 to 15) for a whole school year (01/09/2022–30/06/2023) around the themes of ‘wellbeing & motivation’, ‘learning & studying’ and ‘educational career’ through both student-level-, class group- and school-level-initiatives. They intentionally chose a class group characterized as challenging, where the students faced difficulties not only in terms of academic performance but also in their interactions with teachers. The project was carried out by 3 workers from the external educational organisation (of which one was the main executor) and led by two teachers—the two class mentors—although all teachers of the class (10+) were involved. The principal was sporadically involved and kept up to date throughout the process. The central goal was to work together with the class group and teachers towards ‘a challenge’, which could be anything and was determined through mutual agreement. In this instance, the students decided on the organisation of an escape room. The class was split into two groups, with each of the groups making an escape room for one another in which the intention was for the young people to take control of most of this process themselves. Activities were typically organised weekly or biweekly and ranged from class group activities, collaborative exercises, pro-active discussion circles, motivation puzzles, supervised study moments, working together on the ‘challenge’, and so on. But also, collaborative parent-teacher conferences with the students, mentor talks among the students and the teachers, and so on. The workers from the external organisation and teachers came together every couple of months to discuss progress and follow-up. On the one hand, our research employs the ethnographic fieldnotes and pedagogical documentation gathered during the case studies. On the other, it makes use of interviews and focus groups that were conducted with all groups of actors involved in the case studies separately—the school leaders, the teachers, the external organization, and the students—at both the beginning and the end of the case studies. The evaluation process involved triangulating this data and analysing it through a commons-oriented lens. We identify and illustrate three main dilemmas—centred around the central concepts of the commons: community & the common good, young people as commoners, and commoning practices. Building upon these insights, we delve deeper into the possibilities and challenges facing the application of commons principles in current secondary education within the context of Flanders.

3 Putting Commons Principles into Practice: Insights from the Case Studies

3.1 *Community & The Common Good—Isolated Practices vs. School Culture*

One initial dilemma that consistently emerged during our exploration of these commons-based projects in education was the feasibility of implementing the commons—or even just commons principles—as isolated practices within schools when they clash head-on with the established school culture and the wider school community. Because—despite the visionary aspirations of both school leaders and the external organization involved—this dissonance between ideals and reality posed challenges that ultimately remained unresolved in both projects. Right from the outset, it was glaringly apparent that the prevailing school culture in both of our case study schools diverged significantly from the foundational principles of a commons-based framework. Most students held a pretty dim view of their school experiences. One student's candid admission encapsulated the collective sentiment: "I hate school. I'm just going to be honest: I hate school. In the morning, in the afternoon, after school... all the time" (Student–School B). They portrayed school life as boring, time-consuming, excessively focused on academics and characterized by passive learning, consistently conveying the feeling that they were expected to behave like robots. On top of that, they felt constrained by rigid rules, harsh disciplinary measures, and the sense that they were expected to conform unquestioningly—often likening the school to a prison. In addition, students felt that their voices were not heard, and their opinions carried little to no weight within the school:

"No, your opinion means nothing here at school"

"No, they don't care about that"

"No, really not at all"

"No, you try to say something... they don't care"

(Students - School A)

Accordingly, most teachers in the school were in favour of traditional hierarchical structure of the school. Their discourse often using neoliberal language focused on performance, reflecting the deep-rooted ideology within the educational system. When asked about increased participation for students in the school, for example, one teacher argued:

I think partly yes. When it comes to accommodation of the school or what there is to eat. But when it comes to teaching and the classroom: no. It's not like that in society either. If you start working, you don't tell your boss: 'no, no, no. I want to start working for you, but this and that and that of my job should be different'

(Teacher—School A)

Consequently, the introduction of these commons-based initiatives faced considerable resistance from a cohort of teachers, resulting in significant roadblocks for

these initiatives. In school B, for example, the principal selectively chose teachers for the involved class group. Intentionally excluding those whose views clearly did not align with the project and selecting two of the most enthusiastic teachers whose perspectives did align with the project as class mentors and leaders of the project. Nonetheless, collaboration with the rest of the teachers remained challenging, as hardly any educators attended informational sessions or updates related to the challenge and many of them expressed dissatisfaction with the implementation of various initiatives stemming from the challenge or with the challenge as a whole. Even seemingly small proposals were met with skepticism—"all those unnecessary games" & "students should just sit, shut up and listen" (Teachers—School B)—and eventually abandoned. An illustrative incident occurred during one of the only times a teacher (apart from the mentors) was involved during a session of the challenge. A session was installed with one of the teachers who had several issues with the class group—referring to them as "impossible" and "manipulators"—in an attempt to work on this relationship. The teacher's authoritarian approach—which involved a lot of yelling at the pupils to: "sit in the right seat, put away their gum, put their backs against the backrest of the chairs, be quiet, listen, make no comments, and put away their mobile phone" all in the first two minutes of the class—immediately derailed the entire session as the pupils were not participating at all, but rather actively resisting. It became clear that there is no point in actively engaging reluctant teachers who do not agree or support the project and its vision as this often had counterproductive effects. Ultimately, the tense situation remained unresolved. To alleviate tension, the challenge sessions were split between two groups of students, shifting the project's focus primarily to student-level and class-group initiatives, with school-wide initiatives fading into the background. This shift garnered criticism not only from the mentors and the principal but also from the students themselves, who believed that the project should have involved teachers more in addressing systemic issues:

"I think it was because we were the worst class and to make our behaviour better."

"I'm going to be honest; I think the problem is often laid on us but not on the teachers. Because we are not paying attention, because we are not doing this or doing that. But teachers also must do their jobs and must explain things well."

"We really should have sat down like this with the teachers themselves and be able to tell them what the problems are and how it can be better"

"Yes, and how they can teach better. Because we just sit there, and they yell at us."

"And also help teachers more to see the good and not always assume the bad with us"

(Students—School B)

Ultimately, both projects had limited reach, confined mainly to class sessions or student council meetings, while remaining at odds with the broader school culture. Prompting us to question the potential impact of such projects when the wider school environment remains oblivious to or resistant to these principles. The students in school B, for example, agree the peer-learning project led to a better connection with the class group—indicating that they "can work better together", "have more friendship" and "are a better class group"—but that their relationship with the schools and the teachers remains unchanged, leading them to conclude that "school is still

as hateful as ever” (Students—School B). A first central challenge thus revolves around the effective engagement of both students and teachers as commoners and the incorporation of a shared commons vision into the school culture and among all members of the community.

3.2 Young People as Commoners—Individual Responsibility Versus Shared Commitment

A second dilemma that arose during the case studies was the feasibility of implementing the commons when students either lack the necessary knowledge and skills to participate as ‘commoners’ or display hesitance to engage with the ‘commons’. It became evident that the majority of students in both case studies initially lacked familiarity with concepts like peer learning and shared governance or embodying the role of a ‘commoner’. Their engagement with these ideas varied and many expressed reluctances. In light of the prevailing school atmosphere, it was not surprising that students in our case studies did not exhibit immediate enthusiasm for the projects. For instance, in school B, students very much had the idea that they were required to participate because they were such a ‘terrible’ class. In school A, although most students joined the student council, some did so with suspicion, doubting their ability to effect meaningful change and mainly using it as an excuse to avoid attending regular classes. Notably, in school A, despite this initial scepticism, students demonstrated enthusiasm during the initial sessions where they were encouraged to express their opinions freely. They offered a wide range of ideas, critiques, and proposals related to school organization. This enthusiasm was shared by both students and teachers, with one student stating: “I wish we could do this every week” (Student—School A). However, challenges emerged in the subsequent sessions when students were expected to take practical ownership of their proposals. The students struggled to articulate their proposals to the vice principal in the third session and had difficulty translating their ideas into concrete plans in the fourth session. This experience highlighted a critical issue: the majority of young students lack the necessary skills for peer learning and shared governance, which are not typically emphasized in traditional education settings where passive learning is the norm. The young people in school B, for example, indicated that working on the preparation of the escape room “took too long”, “was too difficult” and that they were “not able to do this”. Moreover, students held limited views of peer-learning and shared governance, often not aligning with a commons-based approach themselves. In school A, for example, students were reluctant to take an active role and did not view their participation in terms of collaborating with the teachers but rather as a one-sided act. The general expectation and sentiment being:

“Teachers should just shut up a bit and let us talk. And let us say our opinion.”

“Yes, they should just type on the computer. Then discuss our ideas together with the other teachers. And then the next pupil council say to us: we discussed that, this is what is possible, and this is what we are going to do”

(Students—School A)

In the end, while the pupils in both case studies enjoyed the opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas—and, more importantly, be heard—they remained hesitant to assume a more active role. Consequently, the practical implementation of both case studies was predominantly carried out by the adults involved. In school B, it was the external practitioner who spend many hours bringing together the different ideas of the students into a cohesive escape room and in school A, it was the teachers who eventually set out to work on the proposals. With the teachers reflecting on this as follows:

“I think that is also typical to our students that sometimes, how do you say, taking action is a difficult point. They are passive.”

“I think they are not always used to that.”

“Taking initiative is often difficult.”

“They are afraid of the responsibility. For example, I tried to set up student mini enterprises for a few years in the seventh grade, but they were so distressed by the responsibility they had to bear. So, we got rid of that.”

(Teachers—School A)

This delegation of responsibility to adults instead of nurturing students’ development as ‘commoners’—both in regular education and during the case studies—underscored the need to develop the skills and capacities for peer learning and shared governance collaboratively with students, rather than presuming their readiness. Teachers frequently expected—or rather wanted—students to possess these skills, resulting in project abandonment when these expectations fell short. This underscores the imperative of creating suitable mechanisms and providing guidance for young individuals to engage effectively in peer-learning and shared governance, while also providing sufficient space and time to take such exercises seriously. The absence of this, impeded the success of these projects. Experiences in school B, for example, emphasized the importance of—so to speak—‘setting the stage’ for effective discussions. Discussions flowed much more smoothly when we arranged chairs in a circle and established a proactive circle for group discussions, as opposed to hastily conducting classroom-style discussions. This was often absent during both case studies, as this took extra time and effort and teachers oftentimes expected students to be able to do it readily. This dynamic illustrated that while students themselves oftentimes lacked the required knowledge and skills and preferred a passive role over embracing active responsibilities, this goes both ways, as teachers quickly took over the projects. Rather than questioning and revising their own approach and working collaboratively with students to foster ‘commoner’ skills, teachers were swift to dismiss students who could or would not cooperate in the desired matter. Teachers in school A concluded that “nothing really comes from the students, so there is no point in organising another session. So, we are just going to work out some of the things on our own” and “several of these young people should not participate

further because they lack motivation”. This introduced a conditional aspect into the project—reinforcing the idea that the commons are exclusively for ‘capable’ students. In the same vein, teachers in school B were disgruntled that a class displaying disruptive behaviour was being rewarded with participation in ‘the challenge.’ They rather advocated for class council meetings to suspend or exclude such students—which ultimately led to the permanent exclusion of one student in the class. This also introduced a conditional element into the project—perpetuating the notion that the commons are reserved solely for ‘deserving’ students. A second central challenge thus revolves around embracing the commons as a collective commitment aimed at transforming each student into a commoner rather than an individual choice and responsibility of pupils.

3.3 Commoning Practices—Goal-Oriented Versus Process-Oriented

The third dilemma central in our case studies was the feasibility of implementing the commons when educational actors are more focused on the commons as an end goal rather than embracing it as a continuous process. Throughout the case studies, even teachers who were initially enthusiastic and committed to the projects tended to narrow down their scope. In school B, the Challenge project was narrowed down not only in terms of shifting its focus from a holistic approach to individual and classroom activities but also through an emphasis on qualification and achieving direct positive outcomes in terms of grades. Throughout the process, working on ‘the challenge’ was more than once derailed by more important and urgent matters, particularly related to learning and studying, as this dimension took clear precedence over ‘wellbeing & motivation’ and ‘educational career’. For example, a session was organised around the maths skills of the pupils—although set-up in a more game-like way—due to poor test results. In school A, the student council project faced a similar narrowing and instrumentalization. From the outset, it became evident that teachers had specific agendas in mind for the student council—such as ‘healthy food at school’—often unrelated to the students’ interests. This instrumental approach was quickly discerned by the students, leading to frustration and disillusionment: “They mainly wanted to let their own things go forward and our things... you know... just ignore those” (Student—school A). As the project progressed, students faced challenges in presenting their ideas to school administrators, encountering resistance and dismissal of their proposals. Most of the ideas were promptly dismissed, with the school administration emphasizing the need for improvement in various areas before considering any changes. For instance, when students requested access to their grades on the digital school platform, they were informed that this would only be possible if they got more of their parents to use the platform first. Similarly, when they suggested implementing a five-minute grace period for students arriving late before facing penalties, their proposal was met with the argument that it might lead

to even more widespread tardiness. Additionally, when students inquired about the possibility of leaving school during lunch breaks starting in the third year rather than the fourth, they were informed that it might be feasible if they adhered better to the existing system for leaving the school during breaks. These repeated dismissals and rebuttals profoundly undermined their motivation and faith in the project's value:

"We were not taken seriously at all. Because we gave a serious offer and they were like: yes, but that's not good..."

"Yes, like: 'we already know that, but we can't do anything about it'. So okay, I've been sitting here talking for nothing then"

"And that they sometimes make fun of that"

"Like: 'OK, never mind, you know the agreements, so stop'."

"Yes, they are always defending the school. You try to say something and then: No, that's not allowed, you guys know that. So why do we have a student council?"

(Students—School A)

The student council quickly lost its participatory essence, with teachers driving the process and focusing on tangible results, particularly on improving the school playground. In this instance, the teachers worked on a playground wall artwork. Despite quickly consulting students for theme suggestions—which included cars, friends, sports, money, girls, music, and religion—the teachers found these ideas unsuitable for the school wall. Ultimately, a bird-themed design, symbolizing diversity, and freedom, was chosen for the playground but was later put on hold at the last minute due to the students' critiques and lack of identification with it. In the end, the students collectively expressed their disagreement with the idea that the student council had brought about any meaningful change in the school. One student from school A exclaimed: "RED ma'am, all red! All red! Nothing but red, ma'am. A red card! They let me give my opinion, but they don't do anything with it". They also referenced the historical ineffectiveness of the student council, stating: "Over all these years we have only been able to change the starting hour from school by ten minutes. And they always keep saying that. Constantly. Only that. Nothing else they can say". When confronted with these outcomes, teachers defended their approach, emphasizing the importance of attainable objectives and adherence to certain rules.

I actually thought it was okay, particularly at the start when the ideas were more general, with the intention of progressing to concrete actions towards the end, but that's where it seemed to go wrong. Nonetheless, the playground refurbishment, which we organized ourselves, seems promising, and I believe it can make a difference.

It's important to note that some issues they raised, such as altering school start times, break policies, or allowing students outside, are challenging to approve. Their primary focus appears to be on these areas, but it's crucial to clarify that not all proposals can be implemented. We need to emphasize this repeatedly, especially concerning issues like smoking bans, limitations on students leaving school until the fourth year, or changes to school hours.

(Teachers—School A)

Teachers—and to a lesser extent also students—were very concerned with the outcomes of the projects, rather than valuing the participatory process. As such, this process was constantly narrowed down and instrumentalized by teachers or the

external organisation. This—combined with insufficient time and space for genuine participation—resulted in tokenistic involvement rather than meaningful engagement where students' voices were truly heard. In school A, the overall sentiment among the students was that it was a “waste of time”. While a portion of students accepted the situation and mentioned that they still found enjoyment in it due to the free food, lack of class attendance, and the opportunity to express their opinions, it led some other students to become notably frustrated and intensify their resentment towards the school. One student even expressed strong anger, labelling the participating teachers as ‘dishonest’ individuals who ‘act as they please.’ In the end, we thus ran the risk of both students and teachers ending up feeling more demotivated than before. A third central challenge thus revolves around recognising the significance of a continuous communal process, valuing it for its intrinsic worth, and refraining from instrumentalising the commons while prioritising the achievement of specific objectives.

4 Commons-Based Education: Hurdles and Horizons

Our exploration of commons-based projects in secondary education has brought to the fore significant hurdles in translating commons principles into the complex fabric of the existing educational landscape, offering valuable insights for both the education system and the commons framework. First and foremost, there is a clash between commons ideals and the deeply ingrained culture of traditional schooling, with many educators resistant to change and collaborative efforts. Addressing this conflict requires a thoughtful approach to possibly engaging teachers, recognizing the fact that the commons imagine not only students but the entire school community as ‘commoners’. This is particularly crucial given the severe shortage of teachers in regions like Flanders, stemming not just from recruitment difficulties but also from high attrition rates, highlighting a disconnect experienced not only by students but also by teachers themselves. This thus necessitates equal attention to the perspectives and experiences of teachers to explore ways to create a conducive working environment and revalue their indispensable role. Additionally, our case studies have revealed a lack of familiarity among students with concepts such as peer learning and shared governance, often leading to teachers taking over projects when students do not immediately exhibit the required skills or attitudes. This highlights the need to provide comprehensive guidance for students and foster an environment conducive to genuine collaboration—with sufficient time and space to take such endeavours seriously—emphasizing the commons as a collective commitment rather than an individual responsibility. The last dilemma highlights how educational stakeholders frequently narrow the focus of commons-based projects, prioritising tangible outcomes over the participatory process. This instrumentalization of the commons rendered the projects tokenistic rather than genuinely participatory. This underscores the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value of the communal process and resisting the temptation to reduce commons-based initiatives to mere tools for specific objectives.

Once more emphasising the necessity for additional time and space in education to genuinely value these processes.

So, where does this leave us? We've illustrated various hurdles, concluding that using the commons instrumentally does not yield the desired results and could, in fact, do more harm than good when they are hijacked for certain predefined objectives. On the flip side, the commons perspective does provide a useful vantage point that challenges the existing norms and encourages us to rethink and reshape education from the ground up. Therefore, although the commons may not (yet) serve as a cure-all solution, they can certainly contribute to the ongoing efforts to bridge the gap between educational ideals and reality by offering a horizon that provides a necessary counterbalance to the status quo. In this vein, our case studies provide us with important feedback, providing several dilemmas to pay attention to and be wary of when working with the commons. Taken together, these dilemmas illustrate that responsibility for transforming education does not (and cannot)—or certainly not only—lie with pupils and teachers but extends to broader school and education policy. In essence, our studies underscore the need for schools and the education system to provide more time and space for both students and teachers, viewing collective endeavours not as a threat but as a complementary—and even necessary—aspect to knowledge transfer. Simultaneously, the case studies provide insights for the framework of the commons, which can fortify itself by taking into account these views of teachers and pupils. Critical acknowledgment and contextual implementation are imperative, recognizing that the commons cannot exist in isolation from the prevailing context. As we conclude this chapter, we advocate for a nuanced and dynamic approach that recognizes the intricate interplay of stakeholders, policies, and transformative frameworks in shaping the future of education. A future that will have to be crafted through various experimentation—an objective to which this chapter sought to add another building block.

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