

## Diversified transitions and educational equality?

Negotiating the transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs

**Mira Kalalahti**

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Educational Sciences, ORCID: 0000-0003-1254-9351

Contact corresponding author: [mira.kalalahti@helsinki.fi](mailto:mira.kalalahti@helsinki.fi)

**Anna-Maija Niemi**

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Educational Sciences, ORCID: 0000-0002-5133-2086

**Janne Varjo**

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Educational Sciences, ORCID: 0000-0003-2528-4241

**Markku Jahnukainen**

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Educational Sciences, ORCID: 0000-0003-0040-9191

### ABSTRACT

The focus of this contribution is on the *targeted transition practices* of career guidance and on the *opportunity structures* they frame for young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. By analysing curricular documents and interviews with representatives from the local education authorities, such as administrators, principals, guidance counsellors and special education teachers ( $n = 16$ ), we aim to examine critically the options provided for these groups of young people. We conclude that targeted transition practices do not recognise enough the heterogeneity of young people, and can therefore be limitative and exclusive.

**Keywords:** *educational transitions, career counselling and guidance, opportunity structure, immigrant background, special educational needs*

### Introduction

One of the key principles of the renowned Finnish education system is that after nine years of compulsory basic education, all young people should have an equal opportunity

Manuscript received: 20.04.2018. Manuscript peer-reviewed: 15.10.2018

©2020 M. Kalalahti, A.-M. Niemi, J. Varjo & M. Jahnukainen. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0 License. ISSN 1891-5949, <https://noredstudies.org>

Citation: Kalalahti, M., Niemi, A.-M., Varjo, J. & Jahnukainen, M. (2020). Diversified transitions and educational equality? Negotiating the transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 40(1), 36–54. <https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v40.2127>

to undertake high-quality upper-secondary education and training. The same educational opportunities should be available to everyone irrespective of their ethnicity, migration background, age, gender, wealth, disability or place of residence. It is evident that during basic education, the support and safety net generally works well: the standard deviation of learning outcomes between students is small, and only 0.5 per cent of students leave without completing their (compulsory) basic education (OSF 2015).<sup>1</sup>

After nine years of basic education, the Finnish system diversifies into two non-compulsory branches and tracks students into either general upper secondary schools or vocational upper secondary institutions. Both these tracks generally last for three years, and successful completion provides access to tertiary education either with a vocational diploma or a Matriculation Examination certificate. The transition to upper secondary education is a high-stakes situation in which educational opportunities diversify according to certain background factors, e.g. special educational needs and/or Finnish language skills.

Since the late 1990s, vocational qualifications have offered general eligibility to pursue 'higher education', which in Finland comprises a binary system of research-oriented universities and vocationally-oriented universities of applied sciences. Nevertheless, the dual model of vocational and academic programmes at the upper-secondary school level has an influence on individual educational trajectories, because only three per cent of new students admitted to universities had graduated from a vocational upper-secondary school programme. On average, a quarter of the students at universities of applied sciences have vocational qualifications, but the proportion of students with vocational backgrounds varies from field to field. (Nylund et al. 2018.)

Our research interest derives from the fact that although the stakes in transition are high for all young people, they are not equal for all. Transition to upper secondary education has been recognised as containing risks, especially for students *with special educational needs* and students *with immigrant backgrounds*,<sup>2</sup> who have been reported as having difficulties in becoming attached to the mainstream educational pathways. When comparing these groups with other students, they face a considerably greater risk of dropping out of education, becoming early leavers from education and training, or remaining in various short-term training programmes (Kirjavainen et al., 2016;

---

1 However, it is important to note that even though the compulsory basic education covers the education of all students, there are also other separate special needs education arrangements directed at students regarded as having "more severe educational needs". Those arrangements include special schools and special classes within the comprehensive system.

2 By "students with immigrant backgrounds" we refer to children and youth who were born abroad or have parents who were born abroad. Although these young people might be Finnish by nationality, they often lack equal educational opportunities and are considered a group that "targeted trajectories" are typically aimed at. Similarly, "students with special education needs" as addressed here comprise a group of young people who have been given intensified support or special support within the Finnish three-tiered support model.

Larja *et al.*, 2015; Myrskylä, 2011). For young people with special educational needs it takes longer to get into and complete their upper secondary studies, and typically they continue their education in vocational education rather than in general upper secondary education (Niemi & Mietola, 2017). Overall, learning difficulties, limited linguistic skills and inadequate support influence the transition outcomes into the upper secondary education stream (Kalalahti *et al.*, 2017; Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011; Myrskylä, 2011; Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2008).

To promote equality in educational opportunities, a wide range of *targeted practices* aimed at supporting the educational transition have been developed within the Finnish education system. These include additional and preparatory teaching, for instance: a curriculum-based ‘additional 10<sup>th</sup> grade’ (after the compulsory 9<sup>th</sup> grade, see Jahnukainen, 2001); ‘preparatory education and training for vocational studies (VALMA)’ (see Niemi, 2015); and a new specific programme called ‘preparatory education for general upper secondary education (LUVA)’, the aim of which is to promote immigrant youth’s transition to general upper secondary education. There are also several adult education courses for immigrants and young people that offer classes in the Finnish language and opportunities to complete basic education after the age of 16 (see Kurki *et al.*, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we focus on the features of guidance and support practices targeted at groups of students with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. These young people are guided more often than average to post-compulsory education through additional and preparatory teaching, since they are considered to lack the skills needed for upper secondary education. Therefore, we focus here on *targeted transition models*, referring to those practices of guidance and counselling aimed specifically at students with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. Firstly, we use documentary analysis to examine the official aims and “*climates of normality*” (see Walther, 2006, 135) set for counselling and guidance in the national core curricula. Secondly, we analyse how these aims and “*climates of normality*” are expressed in interviews undertaken with the local educational authorities (guidance counsellors, principals, administrators and teachers). The overall aim is to analyse the *opportunity structures* that are constructed, in other words, what options and official aims and local practices are opened up or blocked for young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs.

## Theoretical framework

Our theoretical approach is based on the firm idea that national education systems provide various *opportunity structures* which include ‘different problematisations,

---

3 Most instruction at the upper secondary level is provided in Finnish or Swedish (about 5%), since Finland has two official languages. A few educational institutions provide all or at least some instruction in a foreign language, most commonly English. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018, [http://www.oph.fi/download/146428\\_Finnish\\_Education\\_in\\_a\\_Nutshell.pdf](http://www.oph.fi/download/146428_Finnish_Education_in_a_Nutshell.pdf))

mechanisms and solutions to issues in education policy and governance' (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). They are typically formed by the inter-relationship between family backgrounds, educational pathways and labour market processes. Drawing on Roberts (2009), we presume that instead of lack of aspiration or other individual qualities, the root sources of inequalities and imbalances in systems of education and work can be found in the structural opportunities within which different groups of young people are supposed to act reflexively and make the choices considered to be 'right and suitable' for them.

Social structures offer opportunities, but also risks, within the education and employment systems. Conceivable educational gains and losses are not equally distributed, which means that the opportunity structure is not the same for all people. Instead of a common, uniform structure, national systems of education and employment are constructed from a variety of opportunity structures for different minority groups (Zacheus, Kalalahti & Varjo, 2017). It is also important to note that problematisations in opportunity structures for different groups of young people and their education are not the same. Different groups can be considered to have distinctive challenges even within the same nationally guided education system.

Our approach also recognises opportunity structures in connection with wider socio-spatial constructions. According to Walther (2006, see also Soler-i-Martí & Ferrer-Fons, 2015; Pohl & Walther, 2007), the complex systems of socioeconomic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns that form the structure of the journey from youth to adulthood can be understood as *transition regimes*. Drawing on the work of Esping-Andersen (1990), the notion of *regime* relates to "existing institutional settings that have a history structured not only by conflicts and interests of specific social actors but also by the set of values and interpretations which they constantly reproduce" (Walther 2006, 124).

A *universalistic transition regime* is characterised by an extended public sector and a wide variety of counselling and activation policies, traditionally typical in the Nordic countries. A *liberal transition regime* – as in the United States and Great Britain – values individual rights and responsibilities more than collective provisions. Self-responsible individuals are conceived as entrepreneurs of their own labour force. Walther (2006) also distinguishes between an *employment-centred regime* and a *sub-protective regime*. Arguably, the educational success of some immigrant groups may be explained by using a regime theory, by looking at how individual aspirations are intertwined with the characteristics of educational systems.

Since it has been argued that youth transitions have become more prolonged, diversified, unstable, uncertain and fragmented (Pohl & Walther, 2007; Walther 2006), the features of transition regimes also portray the nature of the opportunity structures. In terms of Walther's typology (2006), Finland – and the other Nordic countries – can be categorized as having a universalistic transition regime, which is commonly based on the comprehensive school system (basic education) and post comprehensive routes of general and vocational education that equally guarantee access to

tertiary education. Within this regime, social protection is effective, and counselling is widely institutionalised throughout all stages of education, training and transition to employment (Soler-i-Martí & Ferrer-Fons, 2015; Walther, 2006). Nevertheless, due to common trends of decentralisation and marketisation, the Nordic countries also show evidence of increasing social and ethnic divisions, a disquieting trend that is more clearly visible in Denmark and Sweden (Lundahl, 2016).

A universalist regime also involves integration of students in need of special support in ordinary classrooms (Lundahl, 2016). The viewpoint of the transition regime highlights ‘climates of normality’ (Walther, 2006). For instance, in this study, the nature of targeted models often addresses ‘disadvantaged youth’ (Pohl & Walther, 2007). Pohl and Walther have portrayed how the focus of transition policies is mainly on education and supportive policies (activation measures) aimed ‘towards regular and recognized options’, instead of rolling back occupational aspirations (Pohl & Walther, 2007, 545).

Nevertheless, according to Zacheus, Kalalahti and Varjo (2017, see also Niemi *et al.*, 2019), Finnish education policies have failed to recognise diversity within and between different groups of young people with immigrant backgrounds or special educational needs. The solutions to issues like underperformance seem to be uniform and simple, grounded firmly in language acquisition and offering ‘second chances’ or additional options for access to regular and recognised educational pathways (see also Walther, 2006). As Soler-i-Martí and Ferrer-Fons have argued (2015, 93), the general forms of youth transition regimes “define the position that young people as a group lay in the system of social relations”. Hence, our analysis draws on features of the Finnish universalistic transition regime through which individual educational paths are generally emphasised and where counselling is an institutionalised part of the education, yet we hypothesize that these paths are framed by various opportunity structures and positions.

## Research frame

Our research task (and corresponding data) is twofold. First, we introduce the official aims set for study guidance and counselling in the national core curricula of basic education, preparatory training programmes and general and vocational upper secondary education. We analyse (1) how is the opportunity structure for *the young people who are guided through the targeted transitions* constructed in the national core curricula? Second, using interview data from representatives from the local education authorities who govern educational transitions (teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and administrators), we analyse perceptions of the structural options and obstacles that frame educational transitions. We ask (2) how do the local educational authorities construct opportunity structures for young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs? and (3) how do these constructions reflect the national core curricula?

Our analysis integrates two research projects. The *Transitions and Educational Trajectories of Immigrant Youth* study focuses on the transition from basic (lower

secondary) to upper secondary education. Utilising a longitudinal and participatory design (observations, interviews, surveys) the project presents a comprehensive picture of the variety of educational trajectories possible for youth of immigrant origin. The *Employability, Education and Diversities* study investigates support practices, guidance and inclusion in upper secondary education and in the transition to further education and the labour market by means of ethnographic fieldwork, with a special focus on student counselling, support practices such as special education, and on Finnish-as-a-second-language classes. The integrated data provide insight into transitions from lower secondary education (grades 7–9, the final years of compulsory basic education) to upper secondary education (a dual model with academic and vocational tracks, commonly for three years), as well as transitions from secondary education to tertiary education and the labour market.

Our analysis was twofold. First we undertook documentary analysis of the national core curricular documents of basic education (NBE, 2014a), preparatory and additional teaching (NBE 2014b, 2015a, 2016a), as well as upper secondary education (NBE, 2015b, 2016b). The national core curricula are drawn up by the Finnish National Agency for Education. In general, they include the objectives and core content of the various subjects, as well as the principles of pupil assessment, special-needs education, pupil welfare and educational guidance. The principles of learning environments, working methods and paradigms of learning are also addressed in the core curricula. In terms of our analysis, whilst setting the official aims for guidance and counselling concerning educational transitions, they frame the opportunity structures. This *documentary analysis* was an iterative process, combining elements of content analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Our second analysis was of the interview data. Interviews ( $n = 16$ ) were conducted with representatives from the local education authorities – teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and administrators – from lower and upper secondary education. Following the principles of the *key informant technique* (see Tremblay, 1982), the interviewees were selected according to their institutional position, due both to their role within the structure of municipal guidance and counselling, and to their direct access to the information on educational transitions. They all worked in the same city in southern Finland, which is one of the largest municipalities in Finland. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven guidance counsellors, four principals, two municipal administrators, and three teachers. Interview data and analysis were strengthened with participatory observation (at a lower secondary school) and ethnographic observation notes (at a general upper secondary school) focusing on student counselling. The interviews were conducted as individual or group interviews and topics such as students' educational pathways and transitions, support practices, diversity and educational equality were discussed. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The analyses were divided among the researchers as two sets – basic education and upper secondary education data – and summarized in two phases. The documentary

analysis preceded the interview analysis, and led the interview analysis to four themes. The structure of the results follows these research stages. We first introduce the outcomes of the documentary analysis, and after that, the outcomes of the interview analysis with four thematic sub-chapters. Finally, we sum up the argumentation.

## **National core curricula and the orthodoxy of the upper secondary transitions**

Education and educational transitions are comprehended here (in Bourdieusian terms) as fields where the viewpoints of different actors – teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and administrators – are encountered. Moreover, these viewpoints also encounter policy alignments and objectives derived from the current education policy context (see e.g. Troman *et al.* 2006). In this first empirical section, we analyse how the opportunity structure of *targeted transitions for young people* is constructed in the national core curricula.

According to Simola (2015), education policy documents, such as the curriculum, include serious authoritative verbal acts of experts who speak as such and who thereby express the ‘official truth’ on schooling – and the educational transitions involved. They are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, 49). In that sense, curricular documents articulate the orthodoxy of educational transitions, among other things. Simultaneously, they also provide a point of reference for a multi-voiced state of heterodoxy of guidance counsellors, principals, administrators and educators. Bourdieu (1977; see also Simola, 2015) uses the concepts of *doxa*, *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy* in analysing the production, reproduction and transformation of discourse and its limits in social formations. At any given historical moment, they form *heterodoxy*, a field of possible opinions. Some actors aim to establish *orthodoxy*: to legitimate their view on educational transition as the truth, for example. Outside monolith orthodoxy and multi-voiced heterodoxy exists *doxa*, the universe of the undiscussed or undisputed. *Doxa* represents the prevailing symbolic order and the ‘natural’ state of affairs that we take for granted (Bourdieu, 1977; see also Simola, 2015). In the following paragraphs, we briefly describe the guidelines and main objectives of guidance counselling on the curricula of those educational programmes listed above.

### **Preparing for educational opportunities – basic education and additional teaching**

*The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014* (NBE, 2014a) portrays the forthcoming educational transition straightforwardly as a transition from basic education to upper secondary education. Upper secondary education consists of two streams: general upper secondary education and vocational upper secondary education and training. Both forms are basically three-year study programmes (with options for some individualisations within each programme), and they provide eligibility for access to higher education. In the core curriculum for Basic Education, the continuum is articulated as being linear and individualistic, and the aim of guidance is to support students

to make choices based on their 'abilities, values, premises and interests'. The transition from compulsory to upper secondary education is considered to be challenging, especially for students with special educational needs, and it therefore requires cooperation between professionals working at those two levels. Guardians should also be informed of, and involved in, the process.

The 10<sup>th</sup> grade refers to an extra year of basic education. This extra year is intended for those young persons without a place in post-compulsory education or who need additional time to decide on their future (NBE, 2016a). When contrasted with the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NBE, 2014a), the aims are, again, individualistic, but targeted somewhat differently. The key concept here is 'knowledge of the work force' which, in concrete terms, means that the aim of guidance is to offer students the opportunity to become acquainted with a range of occupations, and to be better prepared to deliberate about various education and career options. The scope of options is wider: the *National Core Curriculum for additional tuition in Basic Education* (NBE, 2016a) also recognizes preparatory training as one of several options after compulsory education.

The main target group of the *National Core Curriculum for Pre-Vocational Training* (NBE 2015a) is those young people who have just completed compulsory school studies and need support and guidance in educational and vocational choice-making. The programme is directed towards vocational education and training, so it has connections with both the labour market and vocational education institutions. The focus of the training programme is instrumental: the students are guided a) to enter vocational upper secondary education, and b) to accomplish a vocational qualification. The aims of guidance are built around the improvement of learning-to-learning skills and overall support of the choices in vocational education.<sup>4</sup>

Compared to the pre-vocational curriculum, the scope of the *National Core Curriculum for Preparatory Training for General Upper Secondary School* (NBE, 2014b) is narrower. The main aim is solely to prepare immigrant and other foreign-language students for general upper secondary school by improving their language and study skills. Besides the focus on study skills, making realistic choices is given prominence. In practical terms, this means that the young person should set and reach targets that are considered to be 'possible' in terms of school achievement. The overall aim is to prepare students to study at a general upper secondary school and to participate in the matriculation examination. Matters concerning further education and employment are not emphasised, although 'preparedness towards active citizenship' is one of the aims of the training programme.

---

4 The programme is divided into two separate routes: Pre-vocational training preparing students for vocational education and training (VALMA) and pre-vocational training preparing students for work and independent living (TELMA). TELMA is targeted at students with severe disabilities.

### Dissimilar aims within upper secondary education

The *National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools* (NBE, 2016b) contains 58 statements that include the word 'guidance'. This implies that one of the leading principles of the document is to coach and guide students. Guidance is described as a holistic and long-term process, lasting from the beginning of each student's formal education until the end. There is a separate chapter on 'guidance counselling' in the document, in which detailed aims of the topic are presented. However, guidance as a way of teaching and guiding one's learning process through general upper secondary studies seems to be an important aspect. Guidance counselling is described as a multi-professional process through which the participation of the student is strongly emphasised. Moreover, a student's responsibility for their own learning and goal setting should be promoted. Guidance should also strengthen a student's well-being, growth and development. Guidance counselling concentrates on educational transitions, and students are supported in choice-making.

In the national requirements for vocational qualifications (2015b), guidance counselling is described as individual and personal. In addition, "other necessary guidance in studies" is mentioned. Overall, guidance is described as multi-professional, with the main responsibility falling on the guidance counsellor. Cooperation with students and families is emphasised as an important aspect of the counselling process. Special emphasis should be given in educational transitions, such as at the beginning of studies, and during the graduation phase. A vocational institution may also follow each student's employment or transition to further studies to help develop their own guidance practices. Special needs education is mentioned as an important part of educational supply, and it also requires the development of guidance counselling and support practices. Each of these institutions has a major responsibility for the guidance of those students who have learning difficulties, high absences, or life-management related problems. The student's own responsibility is highlighted in relation to forming and following one's own individual learning plan.

### Curricula as manifestations of diverse opportunity structures

Evidently, there is no single orthodoxy concerning the aims of educational transitions and the guidance involved. At least three orthodoxies can be discerned in the curricular texts. They are not completely disconnected from each other, but due to their various aims and scopes, they portray unique constructions on ideal transitions.

First, the orthodoxy concerning the transition from basic education onwards relies on an understanding of transition as a common, straightforward and linear path either to vocational or general upper secondary education. Every pupil is expected to make personal choices according to their abilities and interests. Students with special educational needs are articulated as the only exception from the ideal of common dual-transition to secondary education. Their routes are considered to be individual and supported in the first place.

The national core curriculum for additional tuition in basic education (NBE, 2016a), the national core curriculum for pre-vocational training (NBE, 2015a), and the execution of national qualification requirements at vocational education (NBE, 2015b) form the second orthodoxy on the aims given for educational transitions and the guidance involved. These aims can be considered both instrumental and process-oriented. Guidance is designed for the whole transition from basic education mainly to vocational education and work. The overall approach is more pluralistic and holistic. Different educational routes and special educational needs (learning difficulties, life management, for instance) are recognised and supported.

The National Core Curriculum for Preparatory Education for General Upper Secondary Education (2014b) and the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools (NBE, 2016b) are strikingly different when contrasted with the aforementioned. This third orthodoxy emphasises study guidance as a tool for supporting individual learning processes, readiness to study, and study skills. Students are supported to develop Finnish language skills adequate for studying in general upper secondary education. The conceivable educational trajectory end is the matriculation examination.

## **Local education authorities and the heterodoxy of the upper secondary transitions**

Based on the content analysis of the curricular texts, we focused our interview data analysis on four dimensions, constructing the structural options and reflecting the national core curricula: the *definition* of transition, the *overall meaning* given to transition, the *understanding of youth* in transition and the *guidance* provided to aid transition. Furthermore, we analysed these questions within four educational contexts: lower secondary school, general upper secondary school, vocational upper secondary institution and education administration with a special focus on local education authority viewpoints concerning students with an immigrant background and students with special educational needs. We present the outcomes from the interview data analysis according to the following questions: (1) how is the educational transition constructed? (2) how is the societal relevance of educational transitions understood? (3) how do local education authorities characterize young people in their educational transitions? and (4) how are guidance practices for transitions described?

### **How is the educational transition constructed?**

The local education authorities saw the transition from basic education (lower secondary school) to general or vocational upper secondary institutions as a sharp and cross-cutting transition. They criticised the common and simplistic expectation that all students would apply through the joint application system and transfer to either (academic) general education or to vocational education during the summer break. The timeline for transitions was seen as limited, beginning slowly during the final year of basic education, and taking place rapidly during the summer between the two

semesters. In the interview data, several fragile points were highlighted in this sharply contrasted transition.

First, the image of the uniform (dual) and institutionalized one-step transition did not tally with the reality that representatives from the local education authorities described in the interviews. There are several additional routes from lower to upper secondary education, designed especially for students with immigrant backgrounds, and/or students with difficulties (often other than learning difficulties). Some of these routes are more institutionalised, having their own curricula (e.g., 10<sup>th</sup> grade and preparatory programmes), some are occasional, provided as needed. Although these alternative routes make the system flexible and nimble, the constant flux makes them haphazard and difficult to predict and guide students through. For instance, with the exception of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade programme, the other preparatory programmes frequently change names and organisation (see Niemi, 2015).

The local education authorities generally wanted transition system to be seen not only as a multiform and flexible, but also to make it more stable and predictable. The transition system is adjusted almost every year, based on an identification of certain groups of young people that fall between existing transition routes (for example immigrants without Finnish language skills or having formally completed basic education). These targeted practices are not considered adequate solutions, as they keep the system exclusive and sparse with strict and changing targeting. Since targeting goals are typically temporary, and/or selection criteria may change from one year to the next, they are also difficult to locate, as exemplified in following quotations:

H1 (guidance counsellor, lower secondary): This set of non-traditional post-compulsory options is quite a jungle, which is a bit different every year and may even change during the school year. So in a sense, for the families and young people, it is always a mess to find out what options are available at any given time.

H9 (administrator): Every now and then, one encounters a 16-year-old straight from abroad who can't speak Finnish. There is no suitable place available for that kind of young person, no place to guide them to. General upper secondary school is way too demanding without adequate language skills. Even in the case of preparatory education, there are requirements for language and previous education. It's very complicated, you know?

As the administrator describes above, a straightforward transition from lower to upper secondary school may be especially difficult for young people with inadequate Finnish language skills or special educational needs. Whereas comprehensive education aims to ensure inclusion and integration, the transition system produces clearly diversified programmes geared toward students with learning difficulties (vs. general teaching), inadequate Finnish (or Swedish) skills, and/or the lack of a basic education certificate. These programmes are also their connections to general (academically oriented) upper secondary and vocational education.

Second, the selection process for upper secondary education is clearly intertwined with language skills. The strong determinative power of language skills was an issue often raised in interviews at the basic education level. Most interviewees were of the view that this strong emphasis on language skills can leave other skills unrecognized. As the guidance counsellors pointed out, young people with immigrant backgrounds whose language skills are evaluated as ‘not sufficient’, are often guided into vocational education.

In general, the local educational authorities wished the transition to be more flexible with trial periods and sufficient language support, so that the Finnish language skills would not guide occupational aspirations so determinately:

H3 (principal, lower secondary): — Especially the capacity of the more talented students with an immigrant background might not be recognized because of their insufficient language skills, even though these skills are evolving. Our system cannot navigate this, but rather proceeds based on exactly what can be seen at the time. Then difficulties might arise and they might end up changing study places, or thinking things through again.

This same lower secondary principal also explained that many of the young people who have recently arrived in Finland lack prior comprehensive and institutionalized formal education (see MoEC, 2016). Currently they fall in between lower and upper secondary education, and end up transferring from one institution or course to another. However, our ethnographic observations (see also Niemi et al., 2019) indicate that those teachers who work with young people with an immigrant background emphasise the importance of Finnish language skills even more than administrators do. For instance, they promote stricter entrance requirements for preparatory programmes so that ‘there won’t be students muddling through the programme anymore’. It is not self-evident who the primary target group of the preparatory programme is, or which young people will benefit most from it. The teachers argue that the programme is primarily aimed at students who migrated to Finland within the last couple of years, and who wish to study at a general upper secondary school. However, our analyses show that for many students, a year-long programme is too short to acquire Finnish language skills adequate for acceptance to general upper secondary school. Several teachers argue that they would promote the inclusion of an optional second preparatory year for those students who still need extra practice in the Finnish language. As such, there is no appropriate programme targeted at students who need intensive support in language development.

Respondents from the upper secondary level indicate that the emphasis on language skills in upper secondary education and employment is complicated. Although Finnish skills are seen as a determinative factor in the transition process, studying in Finnish without adequate support and proficiency is demanding. Even if young people manage to qualify for upper secondary education, employment without proficient Finnish skills is seen as difficult to obtain. However, upper secondary education is considered

a necessity for integration into Finnish society. The local educational authorities had pondered possible solutions to this dilemma and highlighted the importance of evaluating the language skills needed in each case, not only for individual young people, but also for different educational trajectories (study programmes, occupations, etc.).

H7 (principal, vocational upper secondary institution): There is one qualification which is very popular among youth of immigrant origin, because the work is not based as much on language proficiency and interaction, it's based more on hand-eye coordination. Nevertheless, language is also necessary here – things must be documented and reported, and so on.

Third, some young people with special educational needs seem to be somewhat lost in transition. Although the transition of students with severe special educational needs seems to be more holistically prepared (including introductory periods, co-operation between schools and service sectors), these safe-guarded transitions mostly concern vocational special education institutions. Our interviewees highlighted that young people with 'mild and moderate' special educational needs who are therefore not eligible for these institutions, are often guided to general tracks in vocational upper secondary institutions, where their support needs are not adequately acknowledged. Since the basic education authorities share the view that vocational institutions can offer these students more support and flexibility, they often guide them towards vocational education for practical reasons. General upper secondary school, where less special needs education is offered, is seen as too demanding. As previous research has shown, the educational hopes of students with special educational needs have often been redirected to educational programmes considered 'suitable' and 'easy enough' for them. This often means guiding those students to vocational instead of general upper secondary education, and more specifically, into certain fields, such as catering. (see Niemi & Kurki, 2014.)

Overall, the local educational authorities emphasized the need to recognise atypical transitions from basic education onwards. For several reasons, this transition does not take place during the first couple of months after the end of basic education. Some young people, especially those with immigrant backgrounds and special educational needs, would benefit from extended transitions, including supported introductory periods. Also, second-chance options should be promoted by offering support and making the transition from one school to another more flexible. Discretionary admission policies should be extended. Representatives of the local educational authorities emphasised flexibility as a solution for decreasing the number of young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs), instead of further developing the youth and social work services currently taking care of these young people.

### **How is the societal relevance of educational transitions understood?**

The societal relevance of transitions reflects the position of the local educational authorities. Regarding comprehensive education, the authorities (guidance counsellors

and principals) emphasized the need to find a suitable and safe place for all of their students, where these young people can mature. Although their focus was on a successful application process to upper secondary education, they also worried about whether their students would continue their studies or drop out altogether.

H1 (guidance counsellor, lower secondary): There are young people who just need time to clear their thoughts inside four walls; this might take a year or two. It's not wrong; not everybody has to continue directly with their studies. But, you need a safety net around you, people who watch that you don't spend the rest of your life inside those four walls.

Whereas work life was not yet in the sights of the educational authorities at the basic education level, guidance counsellors, teachers and principals at the vocational education institutions were strongly focused on future work. They evaluated the relevance of transition in terms of the labour force, emphasising the importance of guiding young people to study programmes where they would be motivated and prepared for the professional labour force. This strong emphasis on the labour market must also be considered in relation to current reforms in the field of vocational education in Finland, where a proportion of each vocational school's funding will be based on the student completion and employment rates (NBE, 2011).

That upper secondary education is a place to teach independence and self-direction, is an aim viewed differently by general and vocational upper secondary respondents. Interviewees from vocational education emphasised the aim to educate young people to be self-assertive and active as future employees. In contrast, general upper secondary interviewees emphasised students' abilities like learning skills, learning outcomes and preparedness for the matriculation examination. The overall aim of guidance was on the academic programme itself, without any overall societal or labour force relevance, except for abstract and general reference to *Bildung*.

H6 (guidance counsellor, general upper secondary school): All-round education and readiness for further education, obviously. But, also, supporting the development of young persons, so that they can grow into independent and mature people who can take care of themselves and each other. That's the task of general upper secondary school.

The municipal administrators had more general and societal points of view about educational transitions than their colleagues. In addition to concerns about the labour force and school drop-outs, they emphasized the need to find solutions outside conventional education routes that could help tackle the problem of young people with an immigrant background without the opportunity to learn Finnish. Nevertheless, the overall picture was that most young people should make the transition as smoothly as possible between the last semester of basic education and the first semester of upper secondary school.

## How do local education authorities characterize young people in their educational transitions?

The ways in which young people were characterized by the local education authorities adds to our knowledge of the structural frames that affect transitions. Although many interviewees highlighted that each young person is an individual and should not be seen as a “foreigner”, or “young people with special educational needs”; they expressed many typifications and categorisations in the interviews.

Finnish (not English, or their native language) language proficiency was often seen as a decisive factor regarding whether or not a young person could successfully follow an educational pathway. Immigrant youth were also portrayed as having positive attitudes towards education and having high educational aspirations, despite myriad learning difficulties. The authorities pointed out that providing guidance to young people with immigrant backgrounds could be challenging since they often had “unrealistic” educational ambitions. The authorities worried about language and cultural barriers, as well as the learning difficulties that many of these young people would have to overcome in upper secondary schools, unless the young person was independent and self-confident. Similar qualities like perseverance and self-management were also seen as necessary for youths entering upper secondary education without sufficient language skills or a basic education certificate.

H2 (guidance counsellor, general upper secondary school): And, of course, their aims might be unrealistic. A lot of them talk about distinguished professions like doctors and lawyers. So we take a look at their results and find that, for example, their grades in mathematics are too weak to even pass the requirements of a general upper secondary education. They need to get a grasp on reality.

Some of the interviewees emphasised that people typically think that young people with immigrant backgrounds are more vocationally oriented. The authorities talked about the need to evaluate individual challenges and potential, detached from (Finnish) language skills and/or special educational needs. Otherwise, young people can be guided into inappropriate programmes in the education system, where they are not motivated enough to overcome language or learning difficulties.

Generally, despite their immigrant or special education background, all the young people were understood as being equal when they entered upper secondary education, for better or worse. In principle, all the young people were expected to have adequate Finnish skills and not to have significant learning difficulties. The local education authorities from vocational education especially emphasised motivation and commitment, qualities without which the young people would likely drop out of education.

H8 (principal, general upper secondary school): Well, students are students. They all have equal rights and duties. That’s the only way possible, I’d say.

## How are the practices concerning the guidance for educational transitions described?

The last dimension of the analysis concerns the practice of guidance. First of all, the authorities from the comprehensive and vocational schools in particular were quite critical of the conditions. The flow of information between these schools was considered to be inadequate and incidental, typically consisting of bureaucratic forms and documents. Personal contact and the transfer of information concerning individual young people, were limited. Typically, students visit some vocational and/or general upper secondary schools during the final year of their basic education. In general, time and other resources for personal encounters with students were considered scarce.

H2 (principal, lower secondary): And all this is connected to the transition phase from lower to upper secondary, and the form of information transfer involved. Unfortunately, in many cases, the transfer of information concerning learning issues and extended support, for instance, remains the responsibility of the students and their parents.

The aims and scope of guidance practices in the general upper secondary schools are strikingly different from the comprehensive and vocational institutions. The main emphasis in general upper secondary education is on learning and study skills, and most of all, preparation for the matriculation examination. The individual student, not the overall transition or the education system, is the focus. Interviewees from general upper secondary schools emphasised the need for more resources to guide young people, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds, not so much to support their educational transition, but to support their studies.

Administrators emphasised the need to develop practices to enhance co-operation between the whole education system and families. They stressed the need to understand the multidimensionality of young people's positions, as well the need to engage the families of students with immigrant backgrounds in order to support educational transitions. In particular, they pointed to the importance of balancing the aspirations of parents and their children with the admission criteria, so that young people with immigrant backgrounds could find programmes where they would be motivated and inspired to continue their education.

## Concluding remarks

The interviews with local education authorities provided a clear heterodoxy for curricular documents, especially in the case of basic education. They saw that the default transition from basic education onwards was often too uniform and simple, pushing alternative paths and multi-phased transitions to the margins. From their perspective, the transition from lower to upper secondary was often fragmented, non-linear and haphazard. The institutionalised common and uniform transition as portrayed in curricular texts was seen as marginalising other kinds of transitions as 'exceptional' and 'contingent'. As well as skills and abilities, individual opportunity structures were

seen as being limited by inadequate Finnish language skills and special educational needs. The heterodoxy of the guidance counsellors, teachers and other authorities reveal that the educational routes for *targeted transitions for young people* are so fixed that they do not meet the individual aspirations and competencies recognised during the guidance processes.

Although the representatives from the local education authorities took a stance against the curricular documents' orthodoxy at the basic education level, upper secondary level interviewees did not reveal any noticeable heterodoxy against the official aims. On the contrary, they merely reinforced the two distinct orthodoxies governing this dual model of upper secondary education. Whereas the pluralistic and holistic guidance provided for vocational education is designed to support the transition to work, study guidance at the general education level focuses on learning processes, readiness to study, and study skills. Reinforcement of this dualistic model works against attempts to increase the flexibility and variety of educational trajectories.

Targeted transitions in the Finnish opportunity structures must be understood within the specific nature and principles of the educational system, and the guidance counselling involved. Guidance is often formulated for groups of immigrants assumed to be homogeneous, who are most often seen as disadvantaged and who need specific support measures aimed at developing their skills in the Finnish language. For students with special educational needs, and particularly those with more severe learning difficulties, the upper secondary education options are rather limited, although dead-ends are consciously being dismantled from the Finnish education system. This means that those students may continue to study along 'detour routes' before entering education that leads to qualifications for life in the workforce or in higher education. The recognition articulation of these routes is at the core of the heterodoxy concerning educational transitions in Finland.

In our discussion on theory, we hypothesise that 'climates of normality' (Walther, 2006, 135) entail different opportunity structures for young people whose educational choices are made in the light of targeted transition practices. Contrasting curricula texts with our interviews with the local educational authorities reveals that these young people often do not follow 'regular' opportunity structures – their educational trajectory is often defined for them in terms of vocational tracks and short-term transitions to work or training. In this way, our analysis of the young people who fall outside the 'climates of normality' reveals the *doxa* of the educational transitions of young people in Finnish opportunity structures. It underlines how unseen and 'natural' transitions are designed for young people who follow the linear and smooth trajectories from basic education to upper secondary education. We conclude that to be successful, targeted transition policies need to recognise the existing diversity and plurality within the universalistic transition regime (see Pohl & Walther, 2007).

One should be aware of the mechanisms that produce and explain the transitional difficulties of students with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. Uniform solutions might not suffice to meet the needs of the rich variety of young

people with immigrant backgrounds, regardless of the volume of resources and support expended. Within their educational transitions, young people with special educational needs face various multi-professional negotiations during which the solutions for further studies are made. When trying to establish accessible educational pathways for young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs, a more systematic and student-centred consideration of their diverse educational hopes and needs that includes intertwining social dimensions is required.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant numbers 275324 and 277814.

## REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dale, R., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (2015). Discursive and institutional opportunity structures in the governance of educational trajectories. In M. Parreira do Amaral, R. Dale, & P. Loncle (Eds.), *Shaping the Futures of Young Europeans: Education governance in eight European countries* (pp. 23–41). Oxford: Symposium Books.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Jahnukainen, M. (2001). Two Models for Preventing Students with Special Needs from Dropping Out of Education in Finland. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 16(3), 245–258.
- Järvinen, T., & Jahnukainen, M. (2008). Koulutus, polarisaatio ja tasa-arvo: hyvä- ja huono-osaistuminen perus- ja keskiasteen koulutuksessa [Education, Polarization and Equality: Unequalization in Primary and Secondary Education]. In M. Autio, K. Eräranta, & S. Myllyniemi (Eds.), *Nuoret ja polarisaatio. Nuorten elinolot –vuosikirja* (pp. 72–81). Helsinki: Council of Youth Affairs, The Youth Research Network, and THL.
- Kalalahti, M., Varjo, J., Zacheus, T., Kivirauma, J., Mäkelä, M.-L., Saarinen, M., & Jahnukainen, M. (2017). Maahanmuuttajataustaisten nuorten toisen asteen koulutusvalinnat [The transition of immigrant-origin youths to upper secondary education]. *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka*, 82(1), 647–658.
- Kilpi-Jakonen, E. (2011). Continuation to Upper Secondary Education in Finland: Children of Immigrants and the Majority Compared. *Acta Sociologica*, 54(1), 77–106.
- Kirjavainen, T., Pulkkinen, J., & Jahnukainen, M. (2016). Special education students in transition to further education: A four-year register-based follow-up study in Finland. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 45, 33–42.
- Kurki, T., Masoud, A., Niemi, A.-M., & Brunila, K. (2017). Integration Becoming Business: Marketisation of Integration Training for Immigrants. *European Educational Research Journal, Special Issue: Amplifying refugee voices*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904117721430>.
- Larja, L., Sutela, H., & Witting, M. (2015). *Ulkomaalaistaustaiset nuoret jatkavat toisen asteen koulutukseen suomalaistaustaisia harvemmin* [Immigrant-origin youths do not continue to upper secondary education as often as Finnish-origin youth]. Helsinki: Statistics Finland.
- Lundahl, L. (2016). Equality, inclusion and marketization of Nordic education: Introductory notes. *Research in Comparative & International Education*, 1(1), 3–12.
- MoEC (2016). *Maahanmuuttajien koulutuspolut ja integrointi – kipupisteet ja toimenpide-esitykset* [The educational tracks and integration of asylum-seekers – problematic areas and proposals for actions]. Publications 2016:1. Helsinki: The Ministry of Education and Culture.

- Myrskylä, P. (2011). *Nuoret työmarkkinoiden ja opiskelun ulkopuolella* [Youth Outside the Labour Markets and Education]. Helsinki: Ministry of Employment and the Economy.
- NBE (2011). *Performance indicator for initial vocational education and training in Finland 2011*. Publications 2011:1. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- NBE (2014a). *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- NBE (2014b). *National Core Curriculum for Preparatory Education for General Upper Secondary Education 2014*. Publications 2014:7. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- NBE (2015a). *Ammatilliseen peruskoulutukseen valmentava koulutus* [National Core Curriculum for Pre-Vocational Training]. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- NBE (2015b). *Ammatillisten perustutkintojen perusteiden toimeenpano ammatillisessa peruskoulutuksessa* [The execution of national qualification requirements at vocational education]. Oppaat ja käsikirjat 2015:10. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- NBE (2016b). *National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015*. Publications 2016:8. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- NBE (2016a). *Lisäopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014* [National Core Curriculum for additional tuition in Basic Education]. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- Niemi, A.-M. (2015). *Erytisiä koulutuspolkuja? Tutkimus erityisopetuksen käytännöistä peruskoulun jälkeen* [Special Educational Paths? A study on the practices of special needs education after basic education]. University of Helsinki, Studies in Educational Sciences 264.
- Niemi, A.-M., & Mietola, R. (2017). Between hopes and possibilities. (Special) educational paths, agency and subjectivities. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 19(3), 218–229.
- Niemi, A.-M., Kalalahti, M., Varjo, J., & Jahnukainen, M. (2019). Neuvotteluja ja sovittelua. Kriittisiä havaintoja ohjaustyöstä [Negotiations and mediations. Critical observations on guidance counselling]. In Jahnukainen, M., Kalalahti, M. & Kivirauma, J. (eds.). *Oma paikka haussa – Maahanmuuttotilastaiset nuoret ja koulutus*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 49–67.
- Nylund, M., Rosvall, P.-Å., Eriksdóttir, E., Holm, A.-S., Isopahkala-Bouret, U., Niemi, A.-M. & Ragnarsdóttir, G. (2018). The academic–vocational divide in three Nordic countries: Implications for social class and gender. *Education Inquiry*, 9(1), 97–121.
- OSF (Official Statistics of Finland) (2015). *Discontinuation of education 2013*. Resource document. Helsinki: Statistics Finland. [http://www.stat.fi/til/kkesk/2013/kkesk\\_2013\\_2015-03-19\\_tau\\_002\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/kkesk/2013/kkesk_2013_2015-03-19_tau_002_en.html). Accessed 6 April 2018.
- Pohl, A., & Walther, A. (2007). Activating the disadvantaged. Variations in addressing youth transitions across Europe. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25(5), 533–553.
- Roberts, K. (2009). Opportunity structures then and now. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22(5), 355–368.
- Simola, H. (2015). *The Finnish Education Mystery – Historical and sociological essays on schooling in Finland*. London: Routledge.
- Soler-i-Martí, R., & Ferrer-Fons, M. (2015). Youth participation in context: the impact of youth transition regimes on political action strategies in Europe. *The Sociological Review*, 63(S2), 92–117.
- Tremblay, M.-A. (1982). The Key Informant Technique: A Nonethnographic Application. In Burgess R (Ed.), *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual* (pp. 151–161). London: Routledge.
- Troman, G., Jeffrey, B., & Beach, D. (2006). *Researching Education Policy. Ethnographic Experiences*. London: The Tufnell Press.
- Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of Youth Transitions. Choice, Flexibility and Security in Young People's Experiences across Different European Contexts. *Young. Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 14(2), 119–139.
- Zacheus, T., Kalalahti, M., & Varjo, J. (2017). Cultural minorities in Finnish opportunity structures. *Research on Finnish Society*, 10(2), 132–144.