Facing uncertainty yet feeling confident: Teenage migrant girls' agencies in upper secondary school transitions

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the transition from comprehensive school to the upper secondary level from the viewpoint of migrant background girls. Emphasis is on understanding the *bounded agency* and the ways in which gender and family background are expressed in the modalities of the agency. Previous studies show that ethnic minorities have more difficulties in school, and they continue to higher education less frequently than the majority of students. We are interested in the aspirations of migrant background girls (n = 34) concerning their post-comprehensive transition. Our focus is on the experienced agency during the last year of comprehensive school. Our research questions are: What kinds of modalities do migrant background girls use when considering their educational choices? How do these modalities reflect their bounded agency? The study shows that although the experienced agency is universal among the age group, there are specific ethnic and gender connotations.

Keywords: bounded agency, migrant background, gender, post-comprehensive transitions, educational choices, youth

Introduction

Education intertwines with migration in two overlapping ways. First, education aims to integrate the migrant population to the new society, and second, it aims to offer social-mobility possibilities for individual migrants and their children. These promises of education are often present in many immigrant-related studies that address *educational optimism* (Raleigh & Kao 2010) – high education aspirations that prevail among immigrant background youth and their families (e.g. Hao & Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011). Because these high educational aspirations are not easily achieved, the migrant background youth often confront their education from contradictory or *paradoxical* positions (e.g. Kalalahti et al. 2017; Salikutluk 2016; Tjaden & Hunkler 2017; Kao & Tienda 1998). Young people must balance between the attitudes, aspirations and achievements that they and their families possess – for example, between *idealistic* (wish-like aspirations free from constraints) and *realistic* educational aspirations (noticing restrictions) (Salikutluk 2016; 2013). In this article, we focus on the *experienced agency* of migrant background girls that is present within these positions.

Although our focus is on individuals, we set the analysis in a certain opportunity structure by analysing the agency in the Finnish education system. Finland is a relatively young and homogenous country in regards to migration. Historically, migration came from the neighbouring countries of Russia and Sweden (mainly from the 19th century onwards when Finland's defined borders first appear in history), but migration *to* Sweden and North America has been larger, especially in the 20th century. Finland also has its own ethnic minorities, the Sami and Roma people (Martikainen, Saari & Korkiasaari 2013). From the 1990s onwards, migration has grown. The proportion of people with a foreign background in Finland's population has increased

from 0.8% to 6.2% over the last 25 years [i.e. from 1990 to 2015 (Statistics Finland 2017)].

The Finnish education system's general features are a nine-year comprehensive education, followed by upper secondary education and then tertiary levels of education, both of which have two tiers (vocational and academic tiers). The significant feature of the Finnish education system is that there are no dead-ends in the educational path. The possibility to change from vocational education to academic (or vice versa) at all stages of the education system is guaranteed (Ministry of Education and Culture: Education system in Finland). A previous international study (Crul 2007) has shown that when the education system segregates quite late (as it does in Finland), it protects the students from dropping out of education. In Finland, the number of school dropouts in basic education is low (Rinne & Järvinen 2010; Järvinen & Vanttaja 2001).

However, school performance (lower grades) and the level of education (continuation to higher education) are lower for migrant children than the majority group. The reasons behind this trend include: 1) 'environmental' factors: the whole societal system in a given country, living conditions (and the attitudes to immigration), the quality of the schools, the neighbourhood, the ethnic group and the social capital, and 2) family factors: socioeconomic background, resources available, language possibilities and attitudes towards education (Heath, Rothon & Kilpi 2008; Kilpi-Jakonen 2012; Teräs & Kilpi-Jakonen 2013).

Studies from the Nordic contexts have highlighted that below-average school performance makes it difficult for the migrant background youth to attach to education (Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011; Lindblad 2016; Lundahl & Olofsson 2014). Nordic studies also show that the choice-making processes are affected by family background factors (ethnicity and socioeconomics) (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé & Meckl

2018; Hegna & Smette 2017). Nevertheless, so far in Finland, the research conducted on migrant background students has not concentrated on the gendered effects – especially migrant girls have been omitted from the research focus. The few previous studies of migrant girls have focused on a specific ethnic group (Helander 2002; Niemelä 2003). Tuuli Kurki has also (2008) studied migrant girls during the transition to upper secondary education with an ethnographic approach. She concluded that although the girls did not identify as Finnish or even thought that it would be a desired outcome of integration, their view on education was very positive and their families supported them in their achievements (Kurki 2008, 43–44).

In all, the previous studies exemplified above have provided much information on family background factors and ethnic identities affecting educational expectations. Research done on acculturation and psychological adjustment of young immigrant people (Makarova & Birman 2016) emphasise the multiple ways in which the educational systems might maintain these youths' marginalized statuses with institutional discrimination. Migrant background (Makarova & Birman 2016), national orientation (Makarova & Birman 2015) and self-identified ethnicity (e.g. Madsen et al. 2016) intertwine not only with educational outcomes but also with psychological well-being and loneliness, although there is variance between different national origins and generations (Kilpi-Jakonen 2012; Makarova & Birman 2015). 'Assimilative pressure' can turn into acculturative stress if the ethnic minority students 'experience discrepancies when comparing themselves to mainstream students' (Makarova & Birman 2015, p. 321). Especially in the Finnish context, the immigrant youth have been found to express cynical attitudes towards school, which may follow from the lack of institutional support and may lead to difficulties in school attachment and integration (Salmela-Aro, Read, Minkkinen, Kinnunen & Rimpelä 2017).

What motivates this research from the premises above is the still quite limited knowledge on the individually experienced opportunities, obligations and limitations concerning educational transitions in the Finnish educational system, where the educational policies have just recently begun to meet the diversity of pupils at a larger scale. Our aim in this article is to deepen the knowledge about the *agency* experienced during the educational transitions with a larger group of informants than before and a methodological tool of modalities that can reveal more insights of the different agency possibilities the girls had available. We focus on the agency of migrant background girls during the last year of comprehensive school and give insights into their *bounded agency* experienced during educational transitions.

Bounded Agency

The social structures, such as ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic position, have a significant impact on the agency, and it is important to look at the structures and agency simultaneously. Previous studies (see e.g. Rudd & Evans 1998) show that there can be quite a discrepancy between the individual viewpoint and the larger social patterns and structures. Karen Evans, in her study of young adults (2002), used a concept of bounded agency – situations in which individuals manifest a sense of an agency, while, at the same time, a number of situational boundaries or barriers circumscribe and prevent the expression of that agency.

An agency is constructed with ongoing and reflective negotiations with other people – most often with parents, peers and teachers (Yoon 2012, p. 972). An agency needed in educational transitions is 'socially situated – influenced but not determined by structures and emphasizing internalized understandings and frameworks as well as external actions' (Evans 2002, p. 261). Bounded agency, as a conceptual tool, helps us

to understand the ‘interfusion of agency and structural influences’ (Evans 2002, p. 261). The dynamics of the agency are differentiated and complex because the individuals subjectively perceive frames for action and decisions change over time with structural foundations, such as gender and ethnic background. Evans (2002) concluded that the social relationship structure experiences and interlocks with personal constraints, while external influences and constraints turn into modes of the agency through a process of internalization.

Our focus in this study is especially on the intersection of gender, ethnicity and agency. As Beverley Skeggs (2004) has noted, individuals and groups of people get positioned, and they position themselves in different cultural dispositions based, for instance, on their gender, class and/or ethnic background. These positions are then valued differently in the society and by the society. These categorisations are built in a global context, but they affect people in the local settings – for instance, the categorisations of Finnish and immigrant people come to reality in classrooms across the country. Educational policies and, even more, the actors in this field (teachers, other students) base their actions to these categorisations and justify differences and inequalities between people with them (Gordon & Lahelma 2004, p. 69). A post-colonialist critic has pointed out that women of colour/third-world women (or today more so Muslim women) are positioned often to a helpless, uneducated and culturally oppressed place. In the case of Muslim women, the veil, tight family attachments, patriarchal hierarchy and (visible) religiosity are often connected to the position that society offers them (Hirsiaho 2007, pp. 244–245). Migrant background girls and their agency, participation in society, is often seen as a concern of (Western/Finnish) society. This reflects the embedded cultural notion of gender equality in Finland and shows how narrow the category of a (Finnish) female agency is. Migrant background girls must

balance between their own ethnic groups' concepts of women's roles and positions and the Finnish culture's demand for active participation (Honkasalo 2012, p. 269). These two are not always in conflict, but in situations with a real discrepancy, the struggle to find a valid compromise can be a burden for a young person.

In the Finnish school system, gender equality is highly appreciated, at least in official documents and curriculums. However, gender differences are apparent in the school reality. For instance, different subjects are still considered as female-oriented (such as home economics, handicrafts) or male-oriented (such as mathematics, physics), and schools can (unintentionally) reinforce some gendered identities (stereotypes of 'good girls' and 'active boys') that can affect the students' academic success. These culturally internalized views of 'appropriate' behaviour for males and females affects both the teachers and students in the classrooms (Gordon & Lahelma 1992, p. 319; Høgheim & Reber 2017; Legewie & DiPrete 2012). Buschor et al. (2015) found that the decision of girls who chose to major in science in higher education was rooted in their early learning experiences, and the study then concludes that these non-traditional gender-based career decisions are therefore part of a long socialisation process connected to social context: available support, role models and positive feedback (Buschor et al. 2015, p. 754–755). Hence, the gender-based differentiation between females and males follows easily to upper secondary education, higher education and further to the labour markets. Divisions are most visible in the vocational tier, which has female- and male-dominant occupational fields (Kurki 2008, p. 34; Reisel, Hegna & Imdorf 2015, p. 7). Young female students tend to choose occupations that are traditionally seen as suitable for women, mostly in the fields of social work or healthcare (e.g. practical nurse, nurse, social worker and youth worker). Career

decisions are often made according to the idea of occupations appropriate for her/him. (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000; Kurki 2008.)

Research on the school performance of migrant background youth has shown that girls usually outperform boys (Kilpi 2010), as do girls among the majority students. There might be gendered traditional roles of girls and boys – girls are expected to behave well and to be obedient, and boys are expected to be more active. The system then rewards the 'girlish behaviour', which results in good grades and success in school, leading more often to higher education. However, cultural/ethnic norms can prevent girls from applying for further education if it means, for example, leaving home and moving alone to another city (Feliciano & Rumbaut 2007).

Besides the gendered bounded agency, we aim at enhancing the understanding of other ethnic-related background factors. Economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) can affect children's educational paths. The parents' levels of education, socioeconomic status, health (both physical and mental), language skills and migration history are associated with their children's school performance. Families with a cultural repertoire that resembles the school system have an advantage when the children are already socialized into this cultural sphere at home (Alitolppa-Niitamo 2004; Hällsten & Szulkin 2009).

Definitely not all, but some migrant parents lack the necessary language skills, have a lower educational background, are unemployed, have a lower income level and do not understand the Finnish education system. The lack of parental guidance can lead to lower school achievement. If children have seen their parents struggle/fail to get a job, it can lead to a refusal to invest time and effort into studying, which does not in the end bring success. On the positive side, the effects might include parents encouraging their children to study further because good education can be seen as protection against

stratified labour markets (Erikson & Jonsson 1996; Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011). Young migrants and especially young women might also confront career indecision due to the career-related and gender-related barriers that their parents have encountered (such as gender discrimination and potential work-family conflicts) (Lopez & Ann-Yi 2006; Poon 2014). Overall, the effect that family background has on educational decision-making processes has multiple dimensions because migrant families evaluate the costs and benefits of choices from different possibility structures. The understanding of these evaluations is in the core of this article.

The Study

The data consist of 34 interviews that were conducted in 2015 with 15-year-old migrant background girls during their last year of basic education. The interviews included questions about the girls' experiences and views about their educational paths, future plans, racism, worries and social lives. The interviews were mainly conducted in Finnish, but in some cases when the students had not been in Finland very long and were in English-speaking classes, the interviews were conducted in English. We chose to use Finnish or English as the interview languages because proficiency in Finnish/Swedish or English is a prerequisite to entering a Finnish comprehensive school. In cases where it was the second language, it may have had some minor effects on the language usage. However, the interviews were rich in material, even if not grammatically correct all the time.

The data are part of an ongoing follow-up study *Transitions and educational trajectories of immigrant youth* which follows 445 students for three years after comprehensive school. Data were collected in eight comprehensive schools (five schools in the capital city area, including Helsinki, Vantaa and Espoo; three schools in

Turku, which is the sixth-largest municipality/city in Finland). The schools in these cities were chosen because of large immigrant student populations. According to the 2015 statistics for the capital city region, the immigrant population in Vantaa was 16%, Helsinki 14%, Espoo 14% and Turku 10% (Statistics Finland 2015).

The migrant background girls selected for this study include: 1) first-generation migrants (born abroad), 2) second-generation migrants (parents born abroad) and 3) mixed-origin youth (one migrant parent born abroad, one native-Finnish parent) (see e.g. Ramakhrisnan 2014; Rumbaut 2004). All the participants in the sample completed a survey questionnaire that included background information, among other things. Table 1 portrays the background information of the girls analysed in this article.

Table 1. [here]

Although the group is very heterogeneous in its origins, it is discussed here as a group of migrant background girls. However, the aim is to see *how* the migrant background is expressed in the modalities of educational choices – not to analyse it as one unison 'migrant' expression because one rough categorisation is too simplified to capture the multifaceted nature of the whole group.

We will look at the agency through six different modalities and the theory based on semiotic sociology (Greimas 1966/1979). The analysis was based on the concept of *pragmatic modality*, which, in broadest terms, defines the relationships between actors. Greimas's pragmatic modality consists of four main modalities: *having to, being able, wanting, and knowing how* (Greimas 1987; Sulkunen & Törrönen 1997). Jyrki Jyrkämä (2008) has further developed the modalities in the field of gerontology, and Virpi Vaattovaara (2015) and Jaakko Hilppö (2016) have used it in the field of education. Their developed modalities of the agency are: 1) *to be able* (the subjects' physical and

psychological abilities), 2) *to have to* (necessities, obligations and boundaries), 3) *to have the possibilities* (the alternatives that are possible in a given situation), 4) *to feel* (emotions, valuations and values), 5) *to want* (motivation and goals) and 6) *to know* (skills and knowledge) (Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen & Rainio 2016; Jyrkämä 2008). As an analytical tool, modalities are a suitable way to analyse the structure of bounded agency with its social relationships, structural experiences and personal constraints because they help to recognize both the subject (e.g. the feelings, values, motivations and life goals one has) and the surrounding society (e.g. obstacles, boundaries, support available). Age, gender, family background and ethnicity all have an effect on how the modalities manifest themselves in a given situation.

Our research questions are: What kinds of modalities do migrant background girls use when considering their educational choices? How do these modalities reflect their bounded agency?

We used theory-driven content analysis to uncover themes in which the agency was constructed. The modalities enable us to identify the structure of agency (with its influences and constraints) by recognizing the abilities, competencies, motivations and obligations that the migrant background girls expressed when discussing their educational aspirations. Finally, we elaborate on the types of agencies by portraying their connection with the modalities.

Findings

School performance

When the girls spoke about success and actions in school, they used the modalities *to know, to have the possibilities, to have to*, *to want*, *to feel* and *to be able* (see Table 2).

Table 2. [here]

To know includes the skills and knowledge that the person has (e.g. in math or in languages). *To have the possibilities* (henceforth shortened to *possibilities*) are the options and opportunities that are available in a given situation; in the data, that can, for example, mean the available support. *To have to* includes the necessities and experienced boundaries, while *to want* is connected to goals and motivations. *To feel* includes the emotions and values of the situation. Finally, *to be able*, in this context, includes some learning difficulties.

Mostly, the girls reported to have had only minor problems in school. However, there were students who faced problems with some subjects (mathematics was mentioned more than any other subject) and/or with social issues, as these two quotations show:

> Well, I'm sort of really scared of these theoretical subjects you know. Because I get kind of angry. I'm not saying I've got bad temper, but like, I get mad when I get into conflicts with the teacher. (Awale, Somalia, 2nd generation)

> I was really lively and wild and all until grade eight. When in grade seven, I went to [specific region in home country] and when I came back, then I really changed both on inside and outside in every way. […] All the teachers were like, are you really the same old Sosin? You've changed so much. You used to shout and joke around the hallways all the time and never went to classes and never did any exams, and stuff like that. (Sosin, Turkey, 2nd generation)

In these two cases, the girls expressed how problematic behaviour in the class has had negative effects on the pupils' school performances – the effect mainly being that their motivation to act (*to want*) did not ground on their school work. Sosin relates how her behaviour changed, while Awale, on the other hand, is afraid (*to feel*) that her problems may continue at the secondary education level.

Support is seen as being very important, but acquiring it seems to be very much up to the students. When they feel that they need support, they must actively ask for it (*have to*). Aynur has had some learning problems (*to be able*) that have gone unnoticed.

> I got a five in Physics in my high school diploma because I just didn't understand it at all. […] It wasn't known [that I had learning problems] because I couldn't even explain it to anybody. Only late last year it was shown that I had it. Before I didn't know how to talk about it or ask for any help. I was kind of stupid then; I should have asked a long time ago. (Aynur, Turkey, 2nd generation)

If support is delayed for a long period of time, this can affect the *possibilities* when applying for secondary education. Whereas primary effects (e.g. low school grades) hinder the acceptance for upper secondary education, secondary effects can also have harmful consequences on the self-image of the learner.

Moreover, it seems that the support available is not always sufficient. Sosin said that she would have attended supportive classes on mathematics, but in her school, this was not possible (*possibilities*) because there were only language-related classes with this kind of extra support. Awale, on the other hand, had some help at home from her older brother (*possibilities*) because, as she said herself, she did not have good knowledge in mathematics (*to know*).

For migrant students, inadequate language skills can be a constraint for post-secondary education. In Finland, students in comprehensive school with a foreign mother tongue usually study Finnish language under the subject called Finnish as a Second Language (FNBoE, 2014). Although students are studying in these separate classes only if their language skills are insufficient for the general Finnish class (FNBoE 2014, p. 118), in practice most of the girls interviewed were still studying Finnish as a second language, even though they sometimes (subjectively) had good Finnish skills.

> […] I have no problems with writing. I write Finnish really well and clear. […] If I try to speak standard Finnish, I do that well, too. (Sosin, Turkey, 2nd generation)

As Sosin says, the reasons to stay in these groups are not always language dependent.

> I'm taking Finnish as a second language classes voluntarily. I could take Finnish as well, but I said voluntarily that I want to be with the other foreigners, so that I'm not the only foreigner among the native Finns. (Sosin, Turkey, 2nd generation)

Thus, it seems that the students identified themselves with the group of mixed origins and often actively chose to stay in that group (*to feel, to want*). If the students were used to having extra support within this group, they might face difficulties in secondary education, where they must take more responsibility for their learning without such strong support.

Students are selected to secondary education mainly based on their grade point average, and the students are aware of this. In our data, the students had different aspirations for their final year of comprehensive school and their school performance before the transition to upper secondary education. Some of the students tried to concentrate more on their studies and made extra effort, with their motivation being to get into their preferred school.

> Well, I've [tried] to read and focus more on school and also in other ways. I've been a bit like, like study and stuff, you know, trying even more to improve my grades. (Arbenita, Kosovo, 2nd generation)

Others knew that they had some problems with their school performance but did not act on it. The reasons for not putting extra effort varied from a lack of motivation, to a deliberate underachievement and further on to (undiagnosed) learning problems.

> Interviewer: Do you have good average grades so that you know that you'll get into the school?

> Polina: Well, I don't think that they're that good but maybe sufficient enough.
> Interviewer: Yeah. Well, have you made any extra effort during this last year?
> Polina: No…
> Interviewer: Have they given you information on the 10th grade option?
> Polina: Yes, but I don't want it. It would be… I've already been in a preparatory class in Finland. Actually, I should be in high school or vocational school now. (Polina, Estonia, 1st generation)

In her reply, Polina knew well that her performance was probably not good enough to get in to the school she had applied to. She showed strong motivation to enter upper secondary education and not to 'waste' another year in basic education; that is, she highly valued (*to feel, to want*) the transition from basic education to upper secondary education. However, she did not act according to her wishes and feelings; in this case, the *want* or *feel* modalities did not actualise in her agency behaviour. In contemporary society, where smooth and fast graduation and entering the labour market are strongly advocated (see e.g. Stauber & Walther 2002), an additional year after basic education is not seen positively. In addition, for migrant students, many of whom have already spent one year learning the language and preparing for comprehensive school, the additional 10th grade can really feel like too much.

Transition orientation

When talking about the post-comprehensive transition (including upper secondary school choices and the reasoning behind those choices), the girls used *to want, to feel, to have the possibilities, to be able, to know* and *to have to* modalities. *To want* was linked strongly to the educational choice, especially when the student had a clear vision of her future. In cases where the *wanting* was very strong, the *feeling* modality was also usually involved – the student had a specific value and/or feeling towards the school to which she was applying. *Possibilities* also arose in their conversations; there seemed to

be severe boundaries that limited the choices possible for them (the lack of support, language skills and practical limitations of the education system). *To be able* arose in discussions with some girls who explained that their experienced learning problems and difficulties in school had prevented them from applying to an academic tier. *To know* was connected to the information and knowledge the girls had collected themselves (i.e., from the internet and acquaintances) about professions and educational fields. *To have to* included some prohibitions on their own school choices that the girls had experienced during the transition period.

Students applying for the general upper secondary education expressed fewer exact reasons for their choices because all the schools follow the same core curriculum. In some cases, the students were applying for selective classes.

> I'm interested in the environment and natural sciences. And in that school, there were those kinds of choices that they don't have in other high schools. Those interested me the most. (Nasra, Somalia, 2nd generation)

Other reasons for choices were pragmatic and typical for any teenager. The schools closer home were preferable because then the students had, for example, a possibility to sleep a little later. Additionally, friends were another reason to apply to a specific school.

> Well, I put [school name] there, since it's close and the average grades are ok compared to mine. But then I changed it to my [third choice] because none of my friends were going there. (Mehrnoosh, Iran, 2nd generation)

In all, *to want* was connected to a specific curriculum in a specific school. It was also connected to pragmatic issues, the location of the school and social connections (friends applying to the same school). To some, this latter activated the modality *to feel* because they feared that in a new school they would become lonely.

However, some students applying for the general upper secondary schools had more fundamental reasons for applying to a specific school. For them, the reason was the inadequacy of their Finnish language, which narrowed the possibilities to only English-speaking schools.

> And for me it was an English high school because I don't know any Finnish. […] If I don't get into IB, I think I will move to Helsinki. (Mirembe, Congo, 1st generation)

Their *possibilities* were limited because only a few schools teach in English, and they are hard to access. For some, this meant a one-year delay in their studies because they had to spend one year developing their language skills or improving their grades before applying again. Although the international schools provide opportunities for non-Finnish students, they can create transitional boundaries.

Among migrant families, the general (academic) upper secondary education is often highly valued. As a variety of studies highlight (Raleigh & Kao 2010; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011), migrant parents believe that higher education will give their children better future prospects, and many migrant parents want their children to have the opportunity to obtain a higher education than they had in their home country. Furthermore, the Finnish education system is appreciated (see e.g. Rinne & Tuittu 2011) among families. In the interviews, the girls talked about their parents' aspirations for general upper secondary education ('high school').

> My parents went to vocational school. […] My dad encouraged me to go to high school and get the qualification. (Katie, United Kingdom, 1st generation)

Thus, parents also had high aspirations for their children's education. However, what they and their children both *want* and *feel* can be quite different and opposing. As a consequence, the transition is sometimes about negotiations and compromises.

Students applying for vocational upper secondary education expressed more specific reasons for their choice because the vocational education leads directly to specific professions.

> Basically, even as a little girl I always wanted to help people. And then I was like that's what I'll like be after graduation, a practical nurse. I'll continue to the university of applied sciences and become a nurse. I'm super social, and that's why I want to work with people. (Sosin, Turkey, 2nd generation)

As the quote above portrays, many of the girls wanting to go to vocational school justified their choice with an evaluation of their own identity (e.g. social by nature) or their personal feelings and likes (likes to help others). They *want* and *feel* strongly that a specific vocational field is the one for them, usually leading directly to their dream job. However, *possibilities* can be limited.

> I was so sure I would go to high school, like for years I thought I'm going there. But then I thought that I don't like to study that much, that I want to get to work as soon as possible because I like, I love to work. […] So then my family was against this. […] They preferred me to go to high school. But then I heard about the double degree option. I wasn't really interested to study business and administration, but in dental technician studies [that I'm interested] the double degree isn't possible. (Hamdiya, Iraq, 1st generation)

> Kamila: At some point last year I started to think… but as a child I always wanted to be in the construction line of work or something like that, but then the plans changed somehow. […] It started to feel like those were men's jobs, so I should be looking for something else.
> Interviewer: Do you think that your family would have approved of that choice?
> Kamila: No way.
> Interviewer: If you would have decided to apply there [anyway], do you think you could have?
> Kamila: No, I don't think so, it would have caused conflicts. (Kamila, Somalia, 1st generation)

In vocational education, it is the societal structures that can primarily produce boundaries (*possibilities*) that prevent students from getting into their first choice and inevitably from their dream jobs (*to want, to feel*). Some vocational fields must limit their intake of students (e.g. taking new students only every other year) to facilitate the graduating students' employment. Moreover, those students wanting to do both general upper secondary and vocational education as a double degree might have to give up their vocational dream because not all study lines offer this opportunity. Parental support or the lack of it can also influence the *possibilities*. If parents have strong views on where their child should or should not be studying, it can make a real difference in the choices the pupil can have (*to want, to feel*).

Future aspirations

Two modalities, *to want* and *to feel*, were expressed under the theme of future aspirations. Similarly, *to have the possibilities* and *to have to* were mentioned in regards to future relationships. *To want* included future professions, living conditions and family formations; *to feel* included the emotions and values as well as evaluations related to these.

For some, the future seemed to be very distant, and thinking about it evoked emotions of fear and worry in some students. Others applied for upper secondary education to provide extra time to discover what they wanted for their future.

> Now that I'm thinking I can't imagine my future yet. It scares me to think what will happen. (Aynur, Turkey, 2nd generation)

> Well, I can't apply to vocational school since I don't know what I'll do in the future. I don't know what I'll become or what interests me […] so that's why I considered high school, I want to have more time to think. (Sahar, Pakistan, 1st generation)

Many of the girls strongly voiced that they felt they had the power to make decisions concerning their future. Independency in this matter was the norm. As Awale said when talking about her parents and their thoughts about her future profession:

> So you should choose [a profession] that you want to do when grown up – a good profession that you want. They didn't push me to anything that I didn't want myself, so that I wouldn't have any regrets in the future. (Awale, Somalia, 2nd generation)

Although students emphasized their own agency, this required negotiations with their parents. In some families, the parents had quite strong views about what they wanted their children to achieve.

> First, they wanted me to become a doctor, of course. […] Then my mom, she wants me to go to university and like, to become a curator. But then I myself want to go to work soon, like really easily. (Hamdiya, Iraq, 1st generation)

> My mom wants me to go to university after high school. […] She wants me to be a doctor. […] I want to be a doctor. […] Or a lawyer. (Mirembe, Congo, 1st generation)

In the first example, Hamdiya herself did not aspire for a career as a doctor or curator nor did she value higher education like her mother (*to want, to feel*). She wanted to be employed quickly after graduation and valued work over education. On the other hand, Mirembe shared her mother's appreciation of higher education. The girls had to adjust their aspirations to their parents' high academic expectations. However, none of the students expressed having difficulties in negotiations with their parents, even if their views were inconsistent with them. Either the negotiations were easy, or the girls expressed the active as the 'normative discourse' – the expected way to talk about educational choices.

Among the migrant background girls, future aspirations were often determined. Usually they knew the profession they wanted to qualify for and the lifestyle it would provide. Similar to most of the teenagers, these girls also saw their future as bright and full of opportunities.

> I would like to become a doctor, like so that you could help people and you could travel and buy a big house and a cool car. (Drita, Kosovo, 1st generation)

However, even when the 'upper class' lifestyle was mentioned, most of the girls seemed to want a specific profession related to their personal interests and feelings towards the quality of the work. Most of them also understood what education they would need for their dream job. Nevertheless, not all of them were entirely realistic, as can be seen from Sosin's interview. Previous she told that her dream was to become a nurse, but she also described her second dream that was in a different vocational field:

> So if I get into [name] school, I'll like graduate with a Bachelor of Business Administration or actually will continue to a BBA and from there I'll go to be a bank manager. (Sosin, Turkey, 2nd generation)

Her knowledge (*to know*) of working life and progress was quite abstract, idealistic and incoherent. In her plan, the path from vocational school to a university of applied science (reference to the BBA degree) led directly to the bank manager position with a high salary and socially valued position.

Family background also had an effect, and some specific future plans were the same as the parents had.

> My goal is to graduate from university. I also want to do a doctoral thesis like my dad. And after that I want to continue my degrees, and I want to travel. (Marisol, Bolivia, 1st generation)

‘Seeing the world’ and traveling was often a part of the future. In many respects, the aspired future followed in a Bourdieu sense (1984): ‘middle class habitus’ with a respected occupation, fairly good economical position, own house and travelling.

However, along with these aspirations came some worries and stress about the future. The girls knew that their aspirations were dependent on their performance in school, and their access to higher education already worried some of them.

> If I don’t get in to university or a university of applied sciences, I can’t then get a job as a therapist. That worries me quite a lot. (Faisa, Somalia, 2nd generation)

This shows that many of the girls have very high expectations (*to want*) for their future, and the fear (*to feel*) of not living up to these expectations was present in the interviews.

Educational and occupational aspirations were often expressed along with the expressions concerning family formations.

> Interviewer: What scares you in the future?
> Hamdiya: I’m afraid I’ll make a mistake and get married. (Hamdiya, Iraq, 1st generation)

> Interviewer: What are your plans for the future?
> Sosin: Practical nurse and a nurse. […] I want seven children and so on. But I want to marry an Arab man, I don’t want to marry a Kurd. […] Basically, I’m only allowed [to marry] an Arab or a Kurd. I have those proper rules; I have to take those rules into consideration. (Sosin, Turkey, 2nd generation)

For most of the girls, their dreams and hopes were similar to those of any girls their age. Typically, their first interest was to find a path from school to a good job, whereas having a family came later in their future aspirations (*to want, to feel*). Nevertheless, Hamdiya and Sosin portray the two extremes – the former fearing falling in love and

getting married, and the latter wishing for a large family but only with a man from a specific ethnic background (*possibilities*).

Modalities within the agency types

The educational choices that girls make during the last year of comprehensive school have a strong effect on their life course. When girls make their decisions about their secondary-level education choices, their agency is bounded by values and norms presented in the given society. The labour force is quite gender-divided in Finland (some occupations are more female intensive and others male), and the wage levels vary – female-intensive occupations have generally lower wages (Melkas & Anker 1998; Heiskanen, Korvajärvi & Rantalaiho 2008; Wrede, Nordberg & Forsander 2010). The labour market is also starting to divide ethnically between the migrant and Finnish populations and the jobs available for them (Wrede et al. 2010, p. 275). Especially the service sector and industrial blue-collar jobs – having low wages and low educational requirements – have high numbers of immigrant workers (Forsander 2013, p. 224). Even if girls feel that they have made their choices independently, their future aspirations are affected by societal structures and cultural preferences that the teachers, hidden curriculums, friends and family knowingly or unconsciously transfer to the young girls. Occupations segregated by gender and ethnicity can lead to precarious positions in the society. Our analysis revealed seven typical forms of agency within the three previously described themes.

Under the theme 'school performance' we found two types of agency: 1) those who had made an *extra effort* to reach their goal, and 2) those who were *not bothered* to change their behaviour, even if they were having doubts about the transition. Most of the girls belonged to the group that had at least made some extra effort during their last

year of basic education. The other group knew that their school performance and qualifications did not tally with their aspirations, but they were not ready to make the extra effort to reach the necessary level of performance. We interpret this outcome as following earlier conclusions concerning young people with working-class backgrounds. According to Reay et al. (2001), working-class students seem to have some emotional constraints that affect their educational choices in almost a self-exclusion manner (p. 863). This can also affect the migrant students' motivation and self-image as students, leading to situations where they deliberately fail in school because of previous underachievement.

Within the theme of transition, we identified two agency orientations: 1) those who sought for *education*, which was used to justify the choice for general upper secondary education with a wish to later continue to higher education, and 2) *work-oriented* agency, where the educational choices were reasoned with an early and straightforward transition to working life. The girls whose agency was oriented for education usually aimed at high-level professions – for example, doctors and lawyers. The girls were optimistic for their success in their chosen educational paths and seemed to know how to achieve their goals. Work-oriented agency meant that the girls were determined about their future because they knew their vocational fields and their main goal was to obtain employment quickly. They were usually not highly motivated for education, but they were excited about being able to study work-related subjects. Some of them seemed to have doubts about their study abilities and hence felt that hands-on, work-related education was more suitable for them. This dichotomy between 'hands and brain' follows the dichotomy between blue-collar/manual jobs and academic/intellectual white-collar work. The service industry, (lower) healthcare and social work professions are (traditionally) seen as suitable for women (see e.g. Husso & Hirvonen 2012; Laurén

& Wrede 2010), and many of these occupations do not require the students to be good at 'the hard sciences', such as math or physics, that are seen (traditionally) as masculine school subjects (Lahelma 2009). In this respect, our findings follow the outcomes of Tuuli Kurki (2008). She concluded that teachers saw some girls with certain ethnic backgrounds (mostly Muslims and Somalis) suitable for the healthcare industry. Teachers seemed to relate some ethnic groups with domestic work and caregiving and similarly positioned these girls as 'natural' caregivers and therefore suitable for care work such as nursing (Kurki 2008, p. 39). Teachers and study counsellors unintentionally and gently push the girls to choose (traditionally) feminine occupations. Again, what is portrayed as an individual choice between general and vocational upper secondary education can be the mixed result of expectations, aspirations, influences and preferences.

Within future aspirations, three types of agencies were found: 1) An agency leaning on *realistic* aspirations, usually meaning that either the girls applied to a vocational school and wanted to enter directly to working life or that the girls had applied to a general upper secondary school and wanted to continue on to higher education with a specific profession in mind. 2) An agency concerning *idealistic* views for the future, grounded on their (or their parents) wishes and hopes, without many restrictions or constraints. A good example is Mirembe, the girl who talks about becoming a doctor even though she cannot speak any Finnish, and thus, her possibilities of getting into a Finnish general upper secondary school are really limited. 3) An agency for those whose future seemed *indecisive*. Many times, the educational path of these girls had already been quite difficult and the future to them seemed too far away. Some of these girls were 'buying time' and had applied for general upper secondary education because they felt they needed the extra three years to determine their future.

This last group especially demonstrates how important the timing of certain life events can be considering the educational and professional choices one has to make during their life course (Giele & Elder 1998). The experienced agency is insecure and fragile, and the indecisiveness that the girls expressed can lead to further difficulties in their career decision-making processes (e.g. Osipow 1999; see also Choi et al. 2012; Galliott & Graham 2015).

Conclusion

This study gives new and important insights to a research concerning the experienced and manifested agencies during one of the first key transition processes in the lives of young migrant background girls. By using the tools of semiotic sociology (the modalities of agency), the research reveals how the agency is always situationally bounded, interactional (needing other people to reflect) and can include some self-conflicting dimensions (i.e. one can 'want' and 'feel' and 'know' something, but the 'possibilities' are against the manifestation of the agency). This gives a much-needed light to the different choices made and also to the possibilities available and, hence, to the complex interplay these form together.

The first research question of this article was to discover how migrant girls spoke about their educational choices. The girls typically expressed aspirations concerning the near future (i.e. the transition to upper secondary education). Their stories were mostly concentrated on 'here and now' issues, which is in accordance with a previous study (Sanders & Munford 2008) concerning young women's life transitions. These anxieties were mostly connected to the age and life situations.

Previous studies show that the future career aspirations of migrant students (and their parents) are higher than those of the general majority (e.g. Raleigh & Kao 2010;

Hao & Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011). This outcome was also found in our data regardless of the girls' school performance and/or language proficiency. Parental push to choose the path of higher education was also present, but the girls themselves tended to highlight more of their own power and agency during the school choice process. This is in an accordance with previous studies (Hegna & Smette 2017; Kurki 2008) that conclude that individual agency and independently made choices are the normative way of speaking about the school transition.

The second research question was concerned with the bounded agency that the modalities reflected. Most of the girls expressed an agency that took a positive stand towards education, work and the future in general. Also, most of the girls had clear and realistic ideas about their future. The general upper secondary education was mostly seen as a tool to reach higher education and the vocational tier as a fast track to work life. However, there were a group of girls still indecisive about their future plans, and for them, the general upper secondary school was a time to crystallize their thoughts about the future.

To discuss generally, we address our outcomes as the two 'sets' of boundaries that we found. As Karen Evans (2002) noted, an agency is never just about the individual because different societal and situational boundaries are in effect simultaneously: The agency is bounded. First, we found the boundaries that affected the whole age group regardless of their gender or ethnicity. These include the educational structures – for example, the fact that not all vocational lines are possible as a combination for a double degree and not all vocational educational sectors accept students every year. From the individual point of view, this restricts an individual's potential agency, but from a societal point of view, this is necessary so that the labour market is kept vital and active.

The second set of boundaries were more connected to ethnic background and gender issues. That is not to say that the migrant background (or gender for that matter) is one unison issue that affects the girls' lives inevitably and in a similar way despite the context. However, there seems to be some broader lines that were common in many of the girls' stories. First of all, parents that valued general upper secondary education sometimes prohibited their children from applying to vocational schools, even though the girls voiced their opinions promoting vocational education. Secondly, in some cases the career was considered inappropriate for a girl, which led to a situation where the girl had to adjust her aspirations within parental expectations. This meant that their agency was not manifested in these situations, even though they expressed their dreams and hopes for their futures.

These negotiations reveal how the bounded agency of these immigrant girls are multidimensional: They confront the tough educational competition like all youth but also their adjustment of individual aspirations is confined with other societal and situational boundaries related to gender and ethnicity. Our study portrays how these negotiations are often decisions between work and education, described as realistic or idealistic and sometimes indecisive transitions. Most often, but not always, these negotiations actualise in putting extra effort on schooling.

As researchers, we must address the risk that when labelling our informants as 'migrant backgrounded girls', we most likely oversimplify and make too generalized assumptions about their individual characters, identities, youth culture connections, belongings to an ethnic group or other networks they might be part of. Experienced and expressed agency is always situationally connected to a place and time; one person can have different kinds of agencies in different contexts. Our study here aims to describe the agencies of girls that are connected by having a migrant background. At the same

time, we are aware that their lives can be in other respects totally different from one another. However, when considering the credibility and transferability of this study, we believe that the results represent migrant girls' decisions regarding a Finnish educational transition. The quotations from the girls show the scope of the agencies that the girls have and express and are there to ease the readers' comprehension of the topic. The analysis was conducted with respect for the girls' stories, with an understanding that the individual stories represent larger cultural assumptions that need to be outed and made aware.

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