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The reasoning behind the envisioned educational trajectories of young people from Finnish and immigrant origins

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ABSTRACT

Transitions from one level of education system to another and from education to work are structured by socio-economic and institutional structure factors, while at the same time they are appropriated by individuals in their biographical constructions. Patterns to career trajectories are also dependent on social class, immigrant origin and level of academic achievement. This paper elaborates the ways young people are envisioning their post-comprehensive trajectories in Finland. Based on an analysis of qualitative interview data ($n = 113$) with immigrant- and Finnish-origin youths in the final year of their comprehensive education (ninth grade), patterns of envisioned educational trajectories are identified and the reasoning behind them recognised. The analysis introduces six possible envisioned educational trajectories, based on combinations of envisioned educational choices and occupational destinations. They portray the multiple relational aspects and intertwining processes of the decision-making processes, but also underline the nature of them as self-made reasonings of skills, stress, friends, life management and aspirations. Study guidance and counselling should support the decision-making processes as a part of the holistic life-design process.



KEYWORDS

Educational trajectories;
youth of immigrant origin;
youth of Finnish-origin;
post-comprehensive
education

Introduction

The issues of educational achievements and choices, and the social positions they make available to a person in life, are classical questions in the sociology of education. Transitions from one level of an education system to another and the trajectories from education to work, “are structured by socio-economic factors and institutional structures of formal education, while at the same time, they are appropriated by individuals in their biographical constructions” (Walther, Warth, Ule, & Du Bois-Reymond, 2015, p. 351).

Typically, young people now face a set of transitions which are more de-standardised, individualised and fragmented than previously. In late modern societies, it is said that young people must confront new risks and opportunities in their journey towards adulthood (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). One important factor for a young person making educational choices is the distinction between academic and vocational types of education. In the Nordic

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countries, the distinction is manifested during upper-secondary education in the division between vocationally and academically oriented programmes and institutions.

Trends in education policy affect students' transitions. For instance, since the late 1990s in Finland, vocational qualifications have offered general eligibility to pursue higher education. Nevertheless, the dual model of vocational and academic programmes at the upper-secondary school level still exerts an influence on individual educational trajectories: Only 3% of new students admitted to universities had completed a vocational upper-secondary school programme. On average, a quarter of the students at universities of applied sciences have completed vocational upper secondary, but the proportion of students with vocational backgrounds varies from field to field (Nylund et al., 2018).

Despite longstanding equality policies, young men and women in the Nordic countries commonly choose educational routes in accordance with class positions and gendered subjectivities, even though they have equal opportunities to choose otherwise (Pihl, Holm, Riitaoja, Kjaran, & Carlson, 2018). According to Hegna (2014), young people's educational aspirations reflect their subjective perceptions of personal capabilities and external opportunities, which are influenced by personal and societal characteristics such as gender, immigrant origin, and social class. These variables, among others, are apparent in educational trajectories, in which young people face the multiplicity and contradictoriness of their social contexts (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). They choose subject positions (de Haan & Leander, 2011, p. 320; Holland & Leander, 2004) according to their understanding of their abilities and opportunities and construe *horizons of actions* – i.e. constellations of the options that are visible for them from their individual and structural positions (see Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

From the viewpoint of this article, immigrant origin is one significant component of horizons of actions. In addition to integrating the migrant population into the new society, it offers social-mobility opportunities for individual migrants and their children (Mäkelä & Kalalahti, 2020). Hence, the promises of education are often present in many immigrant-related studies that address *educational optimism* – high educational aspirations that prevail among immigrant background youth and their families (Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011; Raleigh & Kao, 2010). Because the high educational aspirations are not easily achieved, youths of immigrant origin often confront their education from contradictory or paradoxical positions (Kalalahti, Varjo, & Jahnukainen, 2017). Immigrant-origin young people face multiple expectations and prejudices when they position themselves, for instance, within the working classes (Reay, 2001) or within the global transnational middle classes (Ball & Nikita, 2014).

The decision-making processes and intertwinement of individual positions remain an under-studied and unresolved question. In this article, our focus is on immigrant origin and social class as possible determinants of envisioned educational trajectories. With 113 interviews with comprehensive school students in the ninth (and final) grade, we looked at how young people link their choices and destinations and if they take social class or immigrant-origin positions within them. We have focused on the intertwinement of gender and migrant background elsewhere (Mäkelä & Kalalahti, 2020), so here we outline the analysis based on immigrant and class origin interpretations.

Choices and destinations within educational trajectories and transitions

According to Banks et al. (1992), *educational trajectories* – as patterns to a career – are dependent on the background characteristics of the young people, such as social class,

immigrant origin and the level of academic achievement. In addition to these, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) emphasise the historical context, for it is also apparent that the likely trajectory through education and employment can vary due to changes in educational provision and the labour market. Nevertheless, trajectories are not solely structural. In terms of agency, the development of life-designing skills is based on tangible experiences, which include significant others (Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2010).

Transitions within educational systems and from school to work in the late modern age (see Giddens, 1991) are not only seen as being linear and homogeneous, but also as being reversible and fragmented with uncertain perspectives and having a considerable number of options. In a broader societal context, the emergence of new lifestyles and the erosion of traditions and normative frameworks have accelerated the process of individualisation: the self becomes a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991; see also Cuconato & Walther, 2015). To a certain extent, but not completely, the educational *standard biographies* common in the Fordist era, have been replaced by choice-driven *elective biographies* (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Educational standard biographies have been described by the lack of reflexive choices and patterns that are linear, predictable and connected to familiar spheres of life, whereas elective biographies are built as a reflection of available choices and their reasoning (Grytnes, 2011).

Horizons of actions concerning educational trajectories can also be contradictory. For instance, arguments have been presented from an extensive body of research that students of immigrant origin generally hold favourable attitudes towards education despite their under-performance (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Salikutluk, 2016; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009). Mickelson (1990) has approached this paradox by conceptualising the multi-layered nature of educational beliefs with the distinction between two belief systems. In the first belief system, young peoples' views on education take the form of *abstract attitudes*, based on the common comprehension of education as the vehicle for social mobility and the panacea for the relief of poverty and unemployment, among other things. The second system, *concrete attitudes*, is grounded in the different realities that people experience. Concrete attitudes reveal young peoples' perceptions of conceivable returns on education in a certain opportunity structure.

Drawing on Mickelson (1990), and D'hondt, Van Praag, Van Houtte, and Stevens (2016) we emphasise that young peoples' abstract and concrete attitudes converge, but there might be a gap between them especially among young people with immigrant origins and working-class students, who possess doubtful concrete attitudes and confident abstract attitudes (see also Kao & Tienda, 1998). Whereas abstract attitudes cannot predict achievement behaviour, concrete attitudes towards education shape the actual choices they make during their school career. The inconsistency between these belief systems may cause career indecision (D'hondt et al., 2016; Kalalahti et al., 2017).

In this article, we have adapted the concepts of abstract and concrete attitudes as analytical concepts of *choice* and *destination* that the young people express in the future they envision. Drawing on Walther et al. (2015), we see choice and destination as central factors in the identification of various patterns of trajectories: current choices concerning the transition to upper-secondary education, and envisioned destinations in further education and work.

Transition policies within Finnish opportunity structures

The Finnish education system consists of 9 years of non-tracking and non-streaming comprehensive school. The basic school (*peruskoulu*) starts at the age of seven and lasts until the student has either completed all nine grades or has spent 10 years at school. After comprehensive education, students apply for entry to upper-secondary education, which is a dual system in Finland. The two types of upper-secondary institution are general upper-secondary schools (*lukio*) and vocational upper-secondary schools (*ammattikoulu*). Both these tracks last for 3 years, and successful completion provides access to tertiary education. Vocational students may improve their eligibility for further studies by taking general upper-secondary school courses and the general upper-secondary school matriculation examination. Students apply for entry to upper-secondary schools during the ninth grade via a general joint application (*yhteisvalinta*).

Higher education in Finland has a dual structure, provided by universities (*yliopisto*) and universities of applied sciences (*ammattikorkeakoulu*). Both tracks have their own profiles. Universities emphasise scholarly research and instruction, whereas universities of applied sciences adopt a more practical approach. Since the implementation of the Bologna process, all bachelor's degree holders can now qualify for further academic studies. Only universities award licentiate- and doctoral-level degrees.

There are also options targeted especially at immigrant-origin youth. For instance, they can participate in pre-vocational preparatory education for immigrants to improve their language skills and other abilities according to an individual study plan. There are also preparatory studies for general upper-secondary education. These studies take one academic year and the language of instruction is either Finnish or Swedish, Finland's two official languages.

According to Walther (2006), 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 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, p. 124). In terms of Walther's typology, Finland and the other Nordic countries can be categorised within the *universalistic transition regime*, which is commonly based on the comprehensive school system and post-comprehensive routes that equally guarantee access to tertiary education. Counselling is widely institutionalised through all stages of education, training and transition to employment. Most "second chance" options aim to (re-)open access to the regular and recognised options, rather than adapt to low-status careers (Walther, 2006).

In the Finnish context, the transition to upper-secondary education is a high-stakes situation. Generally, the school performance of Finnish students is considered to be similar, but differences between immigrant-origin students and the majority population are larger than in other OECD countries and other Nordic countries (Harju-Luukkainen, Nissinen, Sulkunen, Suni, & Vettenranta, 2014). Similar to other Nordic countries, below-average school performance, among other things, makes it difficult for the immigrant-origin youth to attach themselves to education (Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011; Kalalahti et al., 2017). The risk of youths with immigrant origins to be positioned outside education and the workforce is four to five times higher when compared with

Finnish-origin youths (Myrskylä, 2011). Moreover, they end up being early leavers from education and training more often than Finnish-origin youths do (Larja, Sutela, & Witting, 2015).

Aim, data and methods

In this article, we report on our analysis of 113 interviews with either immigrant- or Finnish-origin youth in the ninth (final) grade of their comprehensive education. At this *fateful moment* (Giddens, 1991) the joint application for upper-secondary education had been completed, but the results on admission are not yet available. Our research questions are:

- (1) How do young people link educational choices and occupational destinations in their envisioned educational trajectories?
- (2) Do they express their social class and/or immigrant origin within this envisioning?

Instead of investigating the differences between distinct groups of young people (e.g. by social class, immigrant origin), our aim is to comprehend the influence of immigrant origin and social class within narratives of envisioned educational trajectories and shed light on the disparity between choices and destinations. In general terms, the interviews consisted of 54 young people of Finnish origin and 58 of immigrant origin, comprising 66 girls and 46 boys. Twenty-six youths were first-generation immigrants: nine of them were born in Eastern Europe, two in Western Europe, seven in Asia, four in Africa, and one in South America. Three students did not tell us where they were born. Of the interviewees, 32 were second-generation immigrants. There were 12 young people of African origin, 10 with an Eastern European origin, nine with an Asian origin, plus one of Oceanian origin.

Our data were collected as a *selective sample* (Palinkas et al., 2015) from eight lower secondary schools, located in major urban municipalities (in the six largest cities in Finland). The aim of the sampling was to include both immigrant- and Finnish-origin students from different socio-economic families. Hence, the sampling was targeted at (a) schools with relatively high proportions of immigrant-origin students but (b) representing different socio-economic composition in terms of parental education level, and the number of schools was increased until the sample was large enough for group-sensitive analysis (Heckathorn, 1997). In all, the proportion of non-Finnish speaking students was above 10% in all the selected schools, compared with the 5% average in all Finnish municipal schools, and the schools were located in different socioeconomic neighbourhoods (five of the schools are located in neighbourhoods with an above-average proportion of highly educated people and three schools in neighbourhoods below on this measure) (OSF (Official Statistics of Finland), 2015).

The interviews were held at schools during the school day. They lasted from 30 to 60 min. Participation was voluntary, and the students were told that they could stop the interview at any time. The researchers asked some opening questions on themes of choice and destination, but the students were free to talk about their experiences without any tight structure. To protect the anonymity of the students and schools, we have not revealed their names, gender

or specific locations. We aimed also to avoid any unnecessary categorisations between different immigrant groups.

The analysis was undertaken in two stages. The first, content analysis, focused on understanding students' decision-making whilst applying for entry to upper-secondary education. All informants were categorised according to their envisioned educational choices and occupational destinations (see also Holmberg et al., 2018). The dimension of *choice* links previous experiences and the imagined futures via assessment of interest and skills with regard to the type of education or training. As an analytical dimension, it does not indicate "free" choice, but instead reflects the degree of one's own preference in relation to structural opportunities and constraints. All in all, choice represents the result of decision-making processes embedded in relationships, communication and negotiation (Walther et al., 2015). Operationally, upper-secondary choices were broken into categories based on the choice between general and vocational education, and the determination of choice.

The dimension of *destination* – articulated in terms of succeeding in education, training and work – has a distinctive future orientation. In the broadest terms, it can be associated with an imagined adult life. According to Walther et al. (2015), a dual-meaning is involved: First, destinations reflect how individuals make use of structural opportunities (family resources, institutional regulations of access and available support, for instance). Second, they are built on subjective ambition, motivation and imagination. Operationally, the dimension of *destination* was divided into categories by the *specific occupation* (nursing, for instance) or a *broader sector* (healthcare and social services, for instance) and the qualifications required.

The second stage, thematic analysis, aimed at modelling the young people's envisioned trajectories and reasonings to general patterns and analysing the expressions of social class and immigrant origin expressed in them. Aspired educational choices and occupational destinations, as articulated in the interview data, were placed into six typological patterns of envisioned trajectories, and the reasoning, as well as expressions of social-class or immigrant-origin positions, were read from these patterns. Table 1 shows the prevalence of each pattern according to immigrant or Finnish origin.

The outcomes are presented according to the six patterns of trajectories. Although the young people especially expressed their positions in social classes or immigrant families in some patterns, they were not expressed in all of the patterns. Therefore, we did not always mechanically name the immigrant background or social-class of the young people in the excerpts but indicated them within the text when developing the interpretation. Further, we have not constructed clear-cut social-class categorisations (based on economic or educational levels, for instance), but we sought manifestations of economic and educational positions from the interviews instead (e.g. young people

Table 1. The patterns of envisioned educational trajectories by immigrant or Finnish origin (n = 113).

	GUSE ^b and university	GUSE and university of applied sciences	GUSE without destination	VET and tertiary education	VET and work	VET without destination	Total
Finnish origin	18	8	8	2	10	7	53
Immigrant origin ^a	20	4	4	13	9	10	60

^aBy immigrant-origin youths, we refer to (1) first-generation immigrants, who were born abroad, (2) second-generation immigrants, whose parents were both born outside Finland and (3) youths from mixed-origin or multicultural families, that is, a family consisting of a union between a person with immigrant origins and a native Finn (cf. Rumbaut, 2004).

^bGeneral upper-secondary education.

positioning themselves within working-class occupations or young people explaining about their wealth or parents' education). To illustrate the social-class positions we indicated the occupation or education level of parents and immigrant origin, when significant for the interpretation.

Empirical results

General upper-secondary education leads to different trajectories

Choosing general upper-secondary education entailed three patterns of envisioned trajectories: to achieve academic aspirations at university, to aim for entry to a university of applied sciences, and choice without a destination.

Academic aspirations leading from general upper-secondary school to a university

Typically, the youths who chose a general upper-secondary school to get into a university were looking for “better-than-average” or “high quality”, operationalised as good reputation or a grade point average in admission or academic or international specialisation, such as an International Baccalaureate (IB).

In addition to the excellent success in comprehensive education, the trajectory consists of a considered and controlled match of one's own ambitions and the options available. The combinations of choices and destinations are thoroughly deliberated and reasoned, as this well-performing young person verbalises:

A: I've been thinking that I want to be a lawyer. So, I'll go to Turku law school.

Q: Why Turku?

A: It is more difficult to pass the entrance exams in Helsinki. Well, it's also difficult in Turku, but still. (#430)

As a premise, institutions providing upper-secondary education are not considered to be similar or equivalent. Hence, the academic status and specialisations of general upper-secondary schools (emphasis on certain subjects and the selection of foreign languages, for instance) gain importance and become criteria of choice, as the previous young person (#430) continues:

[...] At that school you just can't avoid the English language. I liked that. I want to be proficient in English. I might move abroad one day. (#430)

In many cases, the trajectory is quite long. In addition to the far-reaching vision of a distinguished profession in the future, the trajectory had often started at the beginning of compulsory education. Typically, when discussing their applications for access to upper-secondary education, the interviewees saw the role of their parents more subtly, the *éminences grises* of the issues on choice and destination. Their parents were often highly educated, as for this young whose father was a manager and whose mother worked in administration. She was studying in an English-speaking class.

Q: How did you end up at a primary school emphasising the English language?

A: It was not my decision, really. My mother sent me. (#166)

Also, the spatial scope of the trajectory in this pattern is extensive. It involves international elements such as periods of studying, training and working outside Finland. Obviously, the envisioned trajectories of the youths reflect their parents' life biographies and social class. In this respect, immigrant- and Finnish-origin families are alike: in general, the parents of young people aiming at linear academic trajectories are university-educated and very mobile, but from both immigrant and Finnish origins. Many Finnish-origin families have had a wide variety of experiences of living and working abroad, hence the horizon of actions is not restricted only to Finland. In a similar vein, the idea of studying and living in their parents' native countries is just one option among several for some youths of immigrant origin. Yet, not all immigrant-origin young had these international experiences or options.

It is possible to consider that the group of young people on the trajectory from general upper-secondary school via university towards distinguished professions represents a particular academic *elective biography* (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), built on a reflection on the choices widely available, and their reasoning. The mobile young people seem to represent the *global middle class*, which is able to operate across national borders (Ball & Nikita, 2014) and to produce cultural capital via mobility. These young people are better-off students who possess *mobility capital* (Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006) and discuss naturally the Socrates and Erasmus programmes, as well as internationally prestigious universities.

It is nevertheless important to note that within the same trajectory, there is a more local route to the same prestigious educational and occupational destinations. Instead of mobile aspirations, some of the interviewees, of both Finnish and immigrant origins, emphasised locality and proximity – both in terms of geography and culture. The conscious choice of local general upper-secondary school in one's own neighbourhood can also represent the first step towards the academic professions, as this immigrant-origin young pupil illustrates:

I don't know. This is a decent place, and the school is ok. I have not thought about going away. All schools are more or less the same. The same subjects and all, you know. (#366)

The local version of academic elective biography becomes comprehensible within the context of the Finnish opportunity structure which emphasises universalism and schools of equal quality. It is based on the sentiment that all general upper-secondary schools are equally good and that they are also like each other. Thus, there is no need to aim for far-off places. Although travelling and visits abroad were present in the future aspirations of many young people, only those with great amounts of cultural, social and economic capital envisioned their life biographies as linear educational trajectories with transnational experience.

Academic aspirations leading from general upper-secondary school to a university of applied sciences

The envisioned route from general upper-secondary school to a university of applied sciences shares similarities with the previous trajectory but the pattern typically includes less prestigious options in the joint selection system and the lack of competitiveness. The general upper-secondary choice might be seen as a way to escape the need to commit oneself to a certain vocational field, "to buy more time". The preferred schools were

typically located in nearby suburbs, to minimise the geographical or cultural distances. The choice of general upper-secondary school is a self-evident, naturalised fact:

I have always thought that I would go to a general upper secondary school anyway ... (#423).

When discussing their envisioned trajectory to a university of applied sciences via general upper-secondary school, the interviewees typically followed their parent's occupations (university of applied science or previous college qualifications) or mentioned the implicit or explicit wishes of their parents. In particular, the parents of immigrant-origin students often seemed to prefer the choice of general upper-secondary school – or the other way around, to avoid vocational schools. Young people from these families try to unravel the immigrant paradox with the *academic engagement* (see Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009) leading reachable educational trajectories.

In all, the envisioned trajectory to a university of applied sciences via general upper-secondary school is less detailed and focused than the one via vocational upper-secondary school. Whereas the youths choosing vocational education talk easily about specific associate professional occupations as their destination, the ones with the preceding choice of general secondary school, more often comprehend their destination as a certain, but often quite vague field at a university of applied sciences, like this young person:

Q: What interests you at a university of applied sciences? Do you already know what degree programme you will take there?

A: Not sure yet. Something related to technology, perhaps. (#271)

One explanation for this could be drawn from the all-embracing nature of general upper-secondary education, which is commonly considered to be less binding than vocational education in terms of future options. It is articulated like this young person illustrates, as a means to postpone decision-making, to “buy time”:

Nothing interested me, really. So, I thought I'd go to general upper secondary school first and see what happens after that. (#434)

Simultaneously, the envisioned trajectory to a university of applied sciences via general upper-secondary education clearly lays emphasis on certain employment and guaranteed earnings, which are likely to happen domestically in Finland.

There are many good technology-related degree programmes. It is easy to find a job afterwards, I've heard. Smooth transition to employment is important. (#86)

Choice of general upper-secondary school with no plans for further education or employment

The orientation uniting young people applying for general upper-secondary school with no plans for further education or employment was more or less *the lack of vocational orientation and postponed decision-making*. Upper-secondary education was commonly seen as a place to postpone the occupational decision-making for the transition to tertiary education or employment.

Nevertheless, there were two distinctive orientations within this group. There were young people who were following their artistic or sports-related ambitions. They put effort into searching for schools that provided subjects like music, drama or sports.

Typically, they were ambitious in these areas, but were not ready or willing to take their artistic or sports-related activities as basis for their adult occupations, such as aiming to get into the art academy. They typically followed their parents' occupations on handicrafts or arts, but their families were also typically highly educated, like this young person whose parents worked as a gardener and engineer:

I'd like to do music in the future. Still, I am not sure if I want to do it professionally. We'll see. (#334)

These young people had already been in drama courses, music schools and bands, and so on. Although the academic orientation was not the most important factor behind the choice, they often did well in academic subjects, and dealt with the application process as a competition. Upper-secondary choice was very much an active process, shared with friends. Nevertheless, their envisioned trajectories were indecisive since the decision-making process was mixed with artistic or sports-related ambitions and general upper-secondary education. The processes of career decision among these young people were complex decisions between their talent beliefs and future goals (see also Jones & Parkes, 2010).

There were also young people who did not outline any future within and beyond the general upper-secondary education. Applying for upper-secondary education was portrayed as a norm or way to prevent dropping out of education, like young people in the following excerpt (#410). This young person came from a family in which both parents were in working-class occupations. The excerpt illustrates how parents leave the decision-making to the young, but expect them to continue in education in any case:

My parents just wanted me to have a place somewhere, not to be left empty-handed just hanging around. (#410)

Apparently, this group of young people commonly made their decisions with pragmatic reasoning – often making “safe” decisions with parents or study career counsellors for whatever upper-secondary schools they were sure would accept them, or in which they had friends or siblings, often located close to home. Pragmatic reasoning among some young people with an immigrant origin often followed reflections on adequate Finnish skills or unfamiliarity with the educational routes.

Although some of these choices without clear educational or occupational aspirations were aimed at entry to the labour market after upper-secondary education, this envisioned trajectory can be characterised as *indecisive*. “Buying time” in the general upper-secondary education without any detailed aspirations means that choices within upper-secondary education may not construe a consistent path to tertiary education with favourable subject choices and specialisations. Prolonged indecisiveness might affect post-secondary choices, but also disturb the career decision self-efficacy and decision-making process (e.g. Choi et al., 2012; Osipow, 1999) of these young people.

The consistency of vocational upper-secondary school choice and decisiveness of occupational aspirations

Vocational upper-secondary compels young people to choose not only between academic and vocational studies, but also between different vocational tracks leading to

specific occupations. The vocational trajectories were categorised in three patterns, taking different positions on tertiary education and occupation.

From vocational upper-secondary school to a university of applied sciences

This envisioned trajectory consists of young people who apply for entry to a vocational upper-secondary school, then to a university of applied sciences, in order to work as technicians and associate professionals in the future. Nursing and engineering are the most typical destinations within this category.

The typical reason for choosing vocational upper-secondary school is the sentiment that general upper-secondary school – and the mental picture of over-demanding and laborious academic studies involved – just wouldn't be the right choice for oneself. An enormous workload, stress and tightly scheduled exam weeks were considered to be avoidable. The interviewees described in detail the ways in which they came to realise that their personal qualities were not the right kind that studies at general upper-secondary school would require. This young person reflected the individual abilities and skills and envisioned very consistent educational trajectory to work:

For many years, it was like, I would go to the general upper secondary and that's it. No problem. But then I thought, that I don't like studying that much. I would rather go to work as quickly as possible. I love working. (#435)

In this situation, *working* and *doing* become opposites for *studying* and *reading*. In the absence of the latter, the former becomes important. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the target of this trajectory is not based on a brief period of vocational education and quick entry to the labour market; the interviewees also aspired to undertake higher education.

As articulated in the interview data, the reasonings are commonly connected to parents and the expectations they hold for their offspring. Under these conditions, the reasoning for applying first for entry to undertake vocational education and then continue to a university of applied sciences is an attempt to compromise between personal preferences (and sometimes constraints) and external pressures – to combine practical and academic aspects of the envisioned educational trajectory. Based on the same reasoning, the dual qualification programmes, including both a basic vocational qualification and a matriculation examination diploma, become potential options after completing comprehensive education. The young immigrant-origin youth from the previous excerpt (#435) continues her reflection:

[...] so I was thinking I'd go into vocational training. But then there was my family. Everyone in my family had completed the matriculation examination and they thought I should complete it too. But then I heard about the dual qualification programme. Luckily, my career guidance counsellor mentioned it. I was, like, I'll take it. My family liked it too. It is good to do things, not just study. (#435)

The conceivable trajectory from vocational education to a university of applied sciences challenges the common presumption on general upper-secondary education as the only, taken-for-granted pathway to tertiary education and later associate professional careers. Following our previous mixed-methods analysis (Holmberg et al., 2018), this trajectory typically seems to be discovered by youths of immigrant origin, like the young person

(#435) in previous excerpt, who was born in East Asia and whose parents were well educated and employed in teacher and interpreter professions.

Additionally, we argue that the reasoning for an envisioned trajectory leading to tertiary education through the vocational training or dual qualification programmes provides well-reasoned patterns for elective biographies. More than just reasoning the choices and destinations consistently together these young people constructed their choices as the logical outcomes of subjective realities, in which their choices were bounded by their own aspirations of working and doing, their studying difficulties and their (immigrant-origin) families' aspirations (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009).

Quick labour market entry via vocational upper-secondary school

This envisioned trajectory includes short, practical and targeted vocational education, and after that, goal-oriented and swift transition from vocational school into a worker's occupation. In general, the envisioned trajectory involves strong goal-orientation. The envisioned life biographies are built around steady work and adequate earnings. Education is given instrumental value. It is considered to be a short and temporary stage in one's life biography, meant only to lay the foundations for something "real" and stable – work:

Q: What would you like to do as a grown up?

A: Go to work. (#112)

The premise is the comprehension of one's own only moderate educational achievements and limited interests in books and reading at the comprehensive school. Moreover, it is likely that these conditions will remain the same throughout secondary education, and therefore the grades from general upper-secondary education would at best be modest. Thus, the rationale is based on the idea that a vocational diploma would be more valuable in the future than a mediocre general upper-secondary diploma.

The reasoning for transition from vocational education to work of the young people in this excerpt is articulated as an end-product of a longer process of discovering one's own strengths and interests in terms of employment:

I'm not that good at school. General upper secondary school would be too difficult for me. I thought that I don't want to have below-average grades. A bad diploma from general upper secondary won't do me any good. (#412)

This envisioned trajectory requires a strong commitment – typically from a formative age – to a specific occupation. Palpably, the strong goal-orientation involved indicates that there is no time to ponder one's interests anymore. In this respect, the choice of vocational upper-secondary education is a real high-stakes situation, as the next young person illustrates:

Last summer I was working in a janitorial service company. I started thinking that this could be a decent job. It's, like, what I want. (#401)

The strong and early commitment to workers' occupations is typically based on several aspects of life biographies, and parents (with their occupational preferences and choices) become especially important. For instance, the young in the previous excerpt (#401) was following and attaching to his father's occupation as a porter. Yet, it is important to note that parents are not just simple role models or mechanical actors of

reproduction. In some cases, working-class parents aim to guide their offspring to pathways that are more academic than their own were.

Nevertheless, parents' short educational history and workers' occupation is a significant premise for the quick trajectory from vocational upper-secondary school to the labour market. It is a matter of a working-class culture or tradition that matches some of the Finnish-origin families; this envisioned trajectory consists solely of youths of Finnish origin (see Holmberg et al., [2018]). "Finding yourselves" (Reay, 2001) from educational trajectories leading to working-class occupations seem to be acceptable reasoning for some young people of Finnish origin but is almost missing from the decision-making narratives of the immigrant-origin young people. Only Finnish-origin young people from working-class families took the subject positions of the working-classes and envisioned their trajectories through vocational training to work (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007; Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Skeggs, 2004).

Choice of vocational upper-secondary school with no plans for further education or employment

The premises for choosing vocational school without having plans concerning employment share similarities with the two vocational trajectories described above. In particular, the reasoning for choosing vocational upper-secondary education resembles the transition from vocational school to work but is made without any clear vision of the occupation. These young people portray their decision-making process as being incomplete or premature, since they lack occupational aspirations, the proficiency needed for acceptance, or sometimes they are under-age for the education to which they aspire (e.g. some vocational tracks, such as beauty care, have age limits).

Transition with no certainty of the aims leads to decisions being made with friends, family, study counsellors, or teachers. These young people seek "safe" choices, which guarantee at least some post-comprehensive education: a safe place close to home, familiar to friends or parents. In some cases, the young people are just "buying time", often aiming at the widest-ranging vocational education they could find (business, for instance). Since they lack the aspiration for a specific occupation, their joint application is spread over several unconnected vocational fields, or choices are even made to satisfy the study counsellors (applying for vocational school without no intention to begin there, for instance). The following excerpt is from an interview with a young Finnish-origin person who had severe difficulties in completing comprehensive education:

Q: So, you wanted the school to be nearby and you would feel good there. What do you feel about [vocational school]?

A: So so.

Q: What makes you feel that it is not your thing?

A: Don't know. Nothing is my thing.

Q: Have you then heard about apprenticeship training, for instance?

A: Maybe. I didn't listen, anyway. (#450)

As the processes of decision-making, these envisioned (mis)trajectories converged with the choices of general upper-secondary schools with no plans for further education or employment. There is not only some inconsistency between the choices and destinations, but the whole decision-making process is indecisive.

These fragmented transitions also typically involve intertwinements with learning difficulties and social problems. Negotiations concerning upper-secondary choices are bounded by learning and language-related difficulties, which are often a result of having inadequate language skills in Finnish, Swedish and/or in English. Logically, this trajectory was more prevalent among the immigrant-origin young people in our interviews.

In general, choice of vocational education without a clear aim often follows the history of multiple educational transitions due to migration, visits to the country of origin, moving within Finland, changing schools and special education classes, institutions or homes. Many of them have already had multiple fractioned transitions, and hence, they portray their future as being the same, if the study place is not achieved, or they voluntarily drop out of education. Finding the consistent and linear post-comprehensive trajectory was bounded with multiple overlapping structural barriers, but also belief systems, expectations and knowledge on education.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to portray the patterns and reasoning of envisioned educational trajectories of young people with a special focus on immigrant origin and social class. Continuing our previous mixed-method classifications (Holmberg et al., 2018) we construed six combinations of educational choices and occupational destinations for this article and focused on the reasonings of these choice-process narratives. To conclude, we summarise the findings under two concepts: elective and standard biographies.

Young people who envisioned linear and consistent educational trajectories to work through general or vocational education constructed their *biographies* in an *elective* manner (see Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). They reflected on their choices in accordance with their abilities and ambitions, and their transitions leading to tertiary education or work were carefully pondered and reasoned. These elective trajectories were envisioned within three educational routes: from upper-secondary education to a university or a university of applied sciences, as well as from vocational education to work.

The academic elective trajectories were far-reaching, versatile and spatially extensive, concentrating not only on the upcoming specific post-comprehensive transition. These envisioned trajectories were often transnational and were prevalent among young people of both Finnish and immigrant origins. Since the Finnish opportunity structure is based on moderate variation in the quality of upper-secondary schools, there was also room for “local” trajectories from a nearby familiar general upper-secondary school to a university.

Among the elective trajectories, there was also a vocational envisioning, which was aimed at entry to a university of applied sciences following the vocational route or directly to employment from vocational school. They had a clear focus on occupations based on a diploma from a vocational school or a university of applied sciences, and often considered general upper-secondary education to be too laborious or “academic”.

From social class and migrant origin perspectives, these young people with elective trajectories had “found themselves” (see Reay, 2001, p. 337–338). If, among other forms of

capital, they possessed the mobility capital (Findlay et al., 2006), the envisioned trajectories lead to the positions in the global middle classes (Ball & Nikita, 2014). Otherwise, they often constructed local educational trajectories. The variation within global and local elective trajectories produces and reproduces positions in the meritocratic competition and extends it beyond national boundaries (see also Brown & Tannock, 2009).

Elective trajectories could also lead to a working-class position. Some young people, mainly those of Finnish origin with a working-class background aimed their trajectories determinately at quick labour market entry after vocational training. Their reasoning typically followed parent's or siblings' occupations, and hence (re)constructed their working-class identities (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Archer, Hollingworth & Halsall, see also Skeggs, 2004). If the immigrant-origin young people reasoned their occupational destinations with the emphasis on "working" and "doing", they were commonly aiming at post-tertiary education occupations and negotiating one solution to the "immigrant paradox" (see also Holmberg et al., 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009).

In addition to these elective trajectories, there were many visions that aspired the *standard biographies* (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Within these visions, general upper-secondary school was seen as a norm, sometimes as a truly expected life-phase of the life biography and a way to postpone the "fateful moment" (Giddens, 1991) of decision-making. Nevertheless, these standard trajectories had their reverse side, since the reasoning often lacked the occupational destination, or the choices did not lead to the desired occupation. For instance, a group of Finnish-origin young people took the upper-secondary education as a life phase to fulfil an artistic or a sports aspiration with elective and consistent choices but struggled between their talent-based aspirations and career decisions (see Jones & Parkes, 2010).

In all, it was common for young people to make their choices for either general or vocational upper-secondary education based on quite pragmatic reasoning, to avoid dropping out of education, and to seek socially and geographically safe and familiar options. Since the destination was not clear, their preparation for the transition was typically fragmented, short-sighted and often not reasoned at all.

Young people making their upper-secondary choices without occupational destinations not only give an educational head-start to the ones making consistent choices within upper-secondary education (Galliot & Graham, 2015), but are also in a disadvantaged position in career decision self-efficacy (e.g. Choi et al., 2012; Osipow, 1999). Since career decision self-efficacy interlocks with self-esteem, vocational identity and career indecision, the prolonged decision-making process might have an effect on the post-secondary educational choices. As Vanhalakka-Ruoho (2010) has highlighted, the developing of life-designing skills is a life-long process.

Finally, we return to our overall aim to investigate the consistency (linkages between choices and destinations) of the envisioned educational trajectories to and the social-class and immigrant-origin positions. Young people entering upper-secondary education are in different phases of their career-decision process. The envisioned trajectories were not always linear constructions from one education choice to another and further to occupational destinations. These non-linearities and inconsistencies were present widely among the young people coming from all social classes and origins, as well as aiming for academic and vocational educational routes.

Yet we portrayed how the resources and types of capital were present at the envisioned educational trajectories, and interlocked with individual capabilities and aspirations. Young people with both immigrant and Finnish origins and high-aiming academic aspirations described involvement in the transnational meritocratic competition, but only if they also claimed to have mobility capital. Young people with elective vocational trajectories expressed working-class identities mainly if they were already familiar with Finnish working-class occupations. Young immigrant-origin people often showed the immigrant optimism and pondered how to fulfil the aspirations stemming from the family, but few of them had the resources to integrate them into this optimism for their choices. In other words, “real-life decision-making” had multiple relational aspects (see Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2010) and intersectional determinants (see also Nylund et al., 2018, for instance).

Hence, although the narratives reflected class- and immigrant-origin positions and negotiations with parents, siblings and significant others, they were self-made. Decisions were intertwined with reasonings of skills, stress, friends, life management and aspirations. These reasonings included multiple factors that were truly limiting the choices, such as learning difficulties and Finnish language proficiency. Following these reasonings, a considerable number of youths of immigrant origin, were applying for entry to vocational education without any plans concerning career or employment.

In terms of Nordic education policies, more emphasis on the individual choices and destinations of immigrant-origin youth – and the promotion of accessible educational trajectories for all – should be laid. In terms of the guidance practices, the decision-making processes of all young people should be treated as part of a holistic life-design process (see also Choi et al., 2012; Savickas et al., 2009; Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2010). Further, these decision-making processes are even more multi-dimensional with young people of immigrant origin due to the individual and structural boundaries making the consistency of educational choices and occupational destinations more difficult to achieve.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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