

doi:10.24834/educare.2020.4.8

Youth on the Move: Tendencies and Tensions in Youth Policies and Practices

Kristiina Brunila & Lisbeth Lundahl (Eds.)

Helsinki University Press, Finland, 2020

<https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-3>

206 p.

The anthology *Youth On The Move*, edited by Kristiina Brunila and Lisbeth Lundahl, addresses what they identify as one of today's most urgent social problems: the problematic and uncertain transition from school to work and to higher education nexus. The backbone of the book is the key analytical concept of "transition machinery" being put into play in analysing how youth are governed in specific ways. The anthology's study cases are collected from the European community context of Nordic welfare states – represented by Sweden, Finland, Iceland – and the UK (pre-Brexit).

The collection of individual studies is both well motivated and well researched. The articles shed light on and problematise discrepancies and tensions between positively framed educational and unemployment programme intentions and policies, and the lived reality of youth in different study contexts. The various studies all display an in-depth knowledge and intriguing choice of material focusing on the emerging societal and market trust in policy and strategies. The overarching and highly motivated aim is to challenge and change the characteristic field of education, work and unemployment – wherein most young people's lives are taking place today.

The reader is invited on a journey into age-, class-, gender- and ethnicity-driven perspectives of youth studies in line with the chosen research gaze. However, the reasons for this particular research gaze might, perhaps, have been more openly accounted for, transparently pronounced and problematised as the informed choice of the editors and authors.

The book is divided into two parts and contains eight chapters. The first part – Young People’s Trajectories and Agency, in chapters 1-5 – presents and discusses young people’s experiences and their perspectives on the future. The second part, Young People’s Transitions – Policies and New Forms of Governing, is devoted to policies and official practices. Giving voice to and enabling young people’s narratives to stand at the fore of research and policy of education and vocation, the book offers a much-welcomed contribution to the field of youth studies.

In Chapter 1, *Young Citizenship – Academically High-Achieving Middle-Class Students in Transitions Talk about Participation*, Maria Rönnlund studies upper-secondary students’ discourse on participation in school and society. Rönnlund starts out from a narrative of Nordic historical educational tradition of enabling democratic participant citizenship. This narrative background is juxtaposed to a late modern discursive construction of an individual, market-oriented, neo-liberal youth subject of today. Rönnlund concludes that the societal dominant discourses significantly shape an ideal subjectivity of personal responsibility and self-regulation, thereby shaping future educational outcomes and failures. These discursive ideals partly correlate with the student discourse of a self-responsible, participative youth agency. This analysis of middle-class students further shows that assumed privileged and “low-risk” youth groups are facing powerful discursive ideals that condition and govern their educational and occupational possibilities for participation in a complex educational and societal setting.

In Chapter 2, *Social Background and Labour Market Careers of Young People – A Comparison of Two Cohorts of Finnish Young People not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)*, Tero Järvinen explores and problematises educational level in relation to occupational position and labour market career with regards to socioeconomic background. A comparison is made between different cohorts of 16-18-year-olds before and after the great recession of the early 1990s. The results underline that the consequences of school dropout are not socioeconomically distributed

equally. Järvinen accentuates social stratification as being the strongest factor. The willingness to take on education possibilities, and the lack thereof, is explored with Bourdieu's theoretical concept "habitus" (long-lasting dispositions), showing how the life histories and lived identity of youth are closely connected to socioeconomic background. Further, these outcomes change over time due to an economic recession. As Järvinen points out, the intersectional correlation between gender and ethnicity is of relevance, but it is left out in the study mainly because of article space. Järvinen's argumentation comprises a healthy self-reflective criticism.

Johanna Rosa Arnardottir – in Chapter 3, Transition from School to Work: Icelandic Young People in NEET – examines Icelandic 16-34-year-olds in transition from school to work by using the notion of NEET (not in employment, education nor training), quantitative methods and statistics to research social exclusion and assumed vulnerability. The study results show that despite poor Icelandic youth transition, the unemployment rates there are among the lowest in the western world, particularly among the low-educated. The reason behind the figures is the lack of job opportunities, rather than a lack of commitment to work. Even parental educational level is insignificant in the study. The study results are compared to other international studies, which seemingly correlate with Arnardottir's findings.

In Chapter 4, Winding Paths through School and After – Young Swedes of Migrant Origin Who Failed in Upper Secondary School, Michael Lindblad and Lisbeth Lundahl study the life histories of young adults (21-23-year-olds) not finishing upper-secondary school and with first generation immigrant parents. The Bordieuan careership theoretical approach contributes to a more nuanced imagery of the common media and political discourse characterized by sole negativism of individual school difficulties, failure and the participants' later life outcome related to "immigrantness." This perspective is constructed out of Said's notion of a dichotomic otherness of ethnicity, culture, gender and class dimensions. It is conducted in order to see beyond this power grid of historical public narratives that emerge to shape young adults' personal career narratives.

In line with previous research, the analysis demonstrates that employment and school-to-work transition difficulties negatively impact early school leavers to a higher degree. Those effects are related both to the length of educational and labour market establishment and the complex and

insecure processes experienced by the respondents in the study. The resulting transition narrative patterns of Swedish youth with an immigrant background are to a degree ambiguous. One pattern indicates young people quickly attaining unskilled service jobs, which is also a reason for school failure. The other is a fragmented transition pattern of unemployment and limited choice alternatives. Yet, another element showed a gradual development of labour market career and an expanded action horizon. Importantly, the study brings to the fore institutional support for young Swedish adults of migrant origins. Lindblad and Lundahl highlight the need and possibilities for enhancing agency and successful transitions for these Swedish young adults. This is connected to the required further research into more flexible, targeted and individually adapted youth schemes as an institutional support. Beyond the nuanced perspective, the study suggests possibilities of how to approach issues related to the experiences of young Swedes of migrant origins early school leaving.

Chapter 5, written by Amera Masoud, Tuuli Kurki and Kristiina Brunila, is entitled 'Learn Skills and Get Employed' – Constituting the Employable Refugee Subjectivity through Integration Policy and Training Practices. This study analyses discursive structures and conditions as a means of understanding refugee subjectivities as a common homogenous "not-yet-employable" identity in Finnish society. They examine successful integration of refugees as a part of the 'transition machinery'. Finland is a relevant study case as it is has been noted as one of the most discriminatory of the 28 EU member states, according to a recent pole. Previous research is further limited in scope in terms of exploring refugee's own perspectives on integration. Consequently, Masoud, Kurki and Brunila's study is an important contribution to critical knowledge on policy and training programme practices governing refugee subjectivity.

The study concludes that Finnish employability discourse defines refugees as having the perpetual option of considering themselves as either being a burden or as being employable citizens. This ideal is held as a truth whether or not refugees demonstrate skills and competence. "Consequently, the focus is on 'fixing the unemployed' rather than 'fixing the causes of unemployability'." The study problematises these dominant measures and indicators of integration discourse.

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours in Chapter 6, *Young People and Transitions in Upper Secondary Education in England – The Influence of Policy on ‘The Local Opportunity Landscape’*, study youth in upper-secondary education as within a system in great transition. This stands in contrast to the tendency of previous research to focus on transitions of what happens after education, particularly concerning the vulnerable, low attainers or, the often highlighted, high attainers. With attainment being the educational “currency for determining progression,” Hodgson and Spours emphasise middle attainers as being at risk of becoming “the new education ‘precariat.’” Thus they argue for a better organized local opportunity landscape, as opposed to market or centralized top-down solutions.

The study, based on three (previously conducted) research projects over ten years, contributes to an understanding of the effects of a number of changes and reforms, in particular for middle attainers, within the school system. The argument is that to succeed in transition from school to work, one needs to adapt to in-system changes and transitions. This clearly motivates the relevance of study. The contribution is welcomed in its focus on middle attainers and significant new transitions taking place within a system. The suggestions for a locally organized landscape deserve a more thorough account in order to fully convince as an argument.

Chapter 7, *Economic Worries – Therapeutic Solutions? Entrepreneurial and Therapeutic Governing of Transitions of Young People*, by Kristiina Brunila, Katarina Mertanen and Sari Mononen Batista-Costa, examines how Finnish youth are simultaneously governed and learn to identify themselves as self-responsible subjects in and through an alliance of therapeutic and entrepreneurial discourses carried by state and public organizations. In combination with a market-oriented societal development, this all constitutes a complex ‘transition machinery’ for youth transitions. The chapter is based on three separate studies: one on short-term educational and rehabilitation programmes targeting youth transitioning from school to work, another study targeting young people ‘at risk’, and the third study on Finnish entrepreneur education market-oriented discourse enabling everyday life within education.

The study shows how young people are discursively governed to view themselves in light of therapeutic and market-oriented practices and knowledge. The study focuses on an interesting and complex relation between therapeutic and market-driven practices and knowledge; moreover, it is a necessary research piece on a powerful discursive figure in our day and age. However, as a reader, I am more curious as to how these two quite different discourses have intertwined, cooperated and changed over time in order to reach this dominant governing position in youth targeted programmes by state, public organizations and market actors. I guess that is an issue for further research.

In the final chapter, Ethical and Care-Oriented, but Still Psychological and ‘At Risk’— Teachers’ Constructions of Young People’s Transition from School to Society, Sara Irisdottir Aldenmyr and Maria Olson scrutinize teacher interview descriptions of the school subject Life Competence Education (LCE). The aim is to analyse the possible futures and transitions of young people, from school to society, that stand out and are constructed in the LCE-teacher descriptions. The study highlights the psychologically discursive elements from a teacher’s perspective, in which teachers position both themselves and youth within therapeutic education discourse.

Three psychologically informed discourses are identified and analysed as operating in the teacher interviews: a psychological risk discourse, a moral role model discourse and an ethical discourse of care. The psychological risk discourse concerns well-being and the threats of contemporary society, in which the teacher serves to the psychological end of enabling self-esteem and self-empowerment through the treacherous transition from a vulnerable child to a capable adult. The discourse frames young people’s transitions in emotional psychological terms as a necessary one of vulnerability, danger and risk. The second discourse is a moral role model discourse, constituting a traditional teacher-student relationship where the student’s following of rules and good behaviour, according to the teacher norm, which qualifies for a good future as an upright, moral adult citizen. This moral role model discourse could also be viewed as interlinked to teacher resistance to the hegemony of psychological discourse in education. The third is an ethical discourse of care that positions youth as subjects of ethical care and cultivation and underlines a non-hierarchical relation between teacher-student. In that sense, it stands out as the most equal discourse of the three in terms of teacher-ethos equality. Moreover, it does not fall victim to an overall dominant psy-discourse of

education. Irisdottir Aldenmyr and Olson finish their article by warning of the potential risk in researchers appropriating a psychological therapeutical LCE discourse and in turn normalizing it within teacher education and everyday teacher practice. This last line of reasoning would have gained from further clarification and elaboration in order to fine tune the argument.

The book serves to closely examine and problematise youth transitions in a convincing manner. From several angles, the authors bridge knowledge gaps, bring many intriguing questions to the fore and offer solid interpretations of empirical findings. The book not only contributes by giving necessary research input, but also it levels critique against taken-for-granted assumptions of political, market and societal origin in discourse and practice. It would be interesting to have further comparative light shed on the issues of this Nordic, North European context of youth transition studies. A global south perspective would put these issues and questions under a very different and very interesting light.

As various youth groups 'at risk' are targeted in this well-researched book, one could also ask for further self-reflective gaze on questions and studies on the relationship between youth transition research and how research knowledge, historically and today, is being distributed and played out in and through political and societal governing of youth in transitions. This could possibly deepen our knowledge and serve to address the complexities involved in the issues and demands related to governing, education, knowledge and youth in transitions.

Pär Widén

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9906-4156>

par.widen@mau.se