

**Proposal for conference “Transitions, career learning and career management skills”  
Type of contribution: Paper**

**Diversified transitions and educational equality? Negotiating the transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or with special educational needs**

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**Keywords:** educational transitions, secondary education, immigrant backgrounds, special educational needs

**Intent of publication:** Australian Journal of Career Development

The focus of this contribution is on two intersectional dimensions that have their effect on the institutional opportunity structures of the young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. We discuss on inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation from the point of view of the local education authorities, such as principals, study counsellors and special education teachers.

**General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework**

One of the key principles of renowned Finnish education is that every young people must have equal access to high-quality education and training. The same educational opportunities should be available to all persons irrespective of their ethnic origin, migration background, age, gender, wealth, disability or where they live. It is evident that during the Finnish comprehensive education, the support and safety net generally works well: the standard deviation of learning outcomes between students is small, and there is only a small number of such early school leavers (0.5%), who leave without completing their (compulsory) comprehensive education (OSF, 2015).

Nevertheless, after the ninth school grade, the Finnish education system diversifies into two non-compulsory and separate branches: general and vocational upper secondary education. This transition is a high stakes situation where *young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or with special educational needs* alike have reported to have difficulties to integrate themselves into the mainstream educational pathways. They may also face a considerable risk of dropping out of education or remain circulating in various short-term training programmes.

Although the stakes are high for all the young people and the drop-out rates increase after the first transition these stakes are not equal for all. Youth with immigrant backgrounds end up becoming early leavers from education and training more often than Finnish-origin youth (Larja et al., 2015), and the risk to be positioned outside the education and workforce is four to five times higher in comparison with Finnish-origin youth (Myrskylä, 2011). Compared to their counterparts, young people with special educational needs take longer to get into and complete their upper secondary studies. They also tend to drop-out of education more often. (Kirjavainen et al 2016.) Moreover, most students with special educational needs continue education in vocational sector instead of general upper secondary education which is a rare choice for them (Niemi & Mietola 2016). Overall, learning difficulties, problems in linguistic skills and

inadequate support in those have an effect on the successful transition to upper secondary education (e.g. Järvinen and Jahnukainen, 2008; Kalalahti et al., 2017; Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011; Myrskylä, 2011).

In Finland – like in other Nordic countries – the municipalities are key actors in facilitating young people’s transitions from comprehensive to upper secondary education. Because of the delicate nature of this transition period, a wide range of models and projects aimed at students in between the comprehensive and upper secondary education have been developed. Curriculum based options are ‘the additional 10th grade’ (see Jahnukainen, 2001) and ‘preparatory education and training for vocational studies (VALMA)’ (Niemi 2015), but also a new specific programme aiming to promote immigrant youth’s transitions to general (academic) upper secondary education called ‘preparatory education for general upper secondary education (LUVA)’.

In this presentation, we analyse the ways in which local education authorities (teachers, study counsellors, principals, etc.) governing educational transitions consider the structural possibilities and obstacles that frame the educational transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and with special educational needs. Our theoretical approach grounds on the institutional *opportunity structures*. We see that national education systems provide various opportunity structures, which include “different problematisations, mechanisms and solutions to issues in education policy and governance” (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015), and are related to solving the dilemma of immigrant and special educational needs -related diversity in educational attainment. These opportunity structures are intertwined with the discursive formations of educational systems and represent a variety of transition regimes (Walther, 2006). Although in most developed countries minority groups are “identified as a significant ‘educational at-risk group’” (Amos, Martelli, Loncle & Dale, 2015, p. 117), they also are positioned into a wide variety of educational arrangements and support practices.

### **Methods/methodology**

The theoretical setting consists of the concept of the Finnish universalistic transition regime where individual educational paths are emphasised and counselling is an institutionalized part of the education. The overall aim of this contribution is to combine the interpretations of minority status (immigrant backgrounds or special educational needs) with an understanding of institutional opportunity structures. We argue that it is necessary to acknowledge both factors when approaching the diversification of educational possibilities related to transitions. Furthermore, our analysis is intersectional which means that we consider the different dimensions of social differences as intersecting. We aim to critically examine the dynamics of Finnish education system and analyse the possibilities it constructs to young people with immigrant backgrounds or special educational needs.

Our research frame is triangulated. We combine data and research outcomes from several research projects and re-analyse the data with a novel research question in conjunction with four researchers. The focus is on local education authorities – teachers, study counsellors, principals – from lower and upper secondary education. The research projects have multi-dimensional data from secondary education providing insight on transitions from lower to secondary education, as well as transitions from secondary education to further education and working life. Our data combines interviews (14 study counsellors, 6 principals and other administrators) and ethnographic observations from 2 institutes of vocational and general upper secondary education focusing on student counselling.

In this paper, we analyse the following questions: (1) How do the authorities portray the structural possibilities and obstacles, in other words what is the opportunity structure like for the young people with immigrant backgrounds or special educational needs? (2) How do these underlying dimensions of immigrant background or special educational needs intertwine with each other or with other beneficial or restrictive dimensions? We especially analyse the position that the local education authorities outline for the young people with special educational needs and/or immigrant backgrounds. Hence, we interpret the structural meanings these interviews reflect.

### **Expected outcomes/results**

Our findings elaborate the ways in which ethnic and cultural backgrounds and disabilities intertwine with fragmented, non-linear and haphazard educational transitions. Guidance and support is often viewed sectoral and categorically, hence the opportunity structure is portrayed distinctively from the young people's views on the opportunity structure.

The situation of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs in opportunity structures needs to be understood within the specific nature and principles of the educational system, administrative context and the study counselling given to them. The guidance is often formulated for homogenous groups of immigrants, who are most often seen as disadvantaged groups that need specific support measures. For students with special educational needs, and particularly for those with more severe learning difficulties, the upper secondary education options are rather limited, although basically the Finnish education system is built to avoid the dead ends. This means that those students may continue studies in so-called detour routes before entering in education that would lead to qualifications.

One should be most aware of the mechanisms that produce and explain the transitional difficulties of immigrants and/or students with special educational needs. The solutions for the immigrant youth seem to be uniform and simple, offering "second chance" options for access to "regular" options, grounded firmly on language acquisition. Uniform solutions might not be enough to meet the needs of the rich variety of young people with immigrant backgrounds, regardless of the volume of resources and support. Within their educational transitions, young people with special educational needs face various multi-professional negotiations where the solutions for further studies are made. When trying to establish accessible educational pathways for youth with immigrant backgrounds and/or with special educational needs, a more systematic and student-centered consideration of their diverse educational hopes, needs and the intersectional social dimensions is required.

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