

Paper

Shared understanding about educational expectations? - The experiences and views of students and local education authorities concerning student counselling

Information on how the contribution is related to the conference theme

The transition period from compulsory to secondary education, based on grade point average of the 9th grade, is important in the Finnish education system. There are visible and hidden mechanisms that might complicate the transition process. In this presentation, we investigate the role of student counselling during the transition.

Authors

Tuomas Zacheus¹, Mira Kalalahti², Janne Varjo³, Joel Kivirauma⁴, Marja-Liisa Mäkelä⁵, Minna Saarinen⁶ & Markku Jahnukainen⁷

Keywords

Career counselling, Transition, Immigrants, Achievement attitude

Theoretical framework

Finnish education system is typical example of the *universalistic transition regime* – characterised by an extended public sector and a wide variety of counselling and activation policies (Walther 2006). Compulsory education is free for all, teachers are highly appreciated and educated, compulsory education is non-tracking, and all educational tracks can lead to tertiary education. Study and career counselling is based on curricula and counsellors are teachers with university-level specialization on career counselling.

This system has many favourable points of departure for providing equal educational opportunities for all. After the ninth grade of comprehensive school, the Finnish education system diversifies into two non-compulsory and separate branches: general and vocational upper secondary education. Although there are no obvious educational dead-ends, the dual track-system still commonly lead youth to vocational or academic careers (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011).

However, the transition period of young people of immigrant origin in Finland has been considered as problematic in multiple ways. Register-based studies suggest that e.g. the risk among young people with immigrant origin of being positioned outside education and the workforce is four to five times higher in comparison with young people with Finnish origin (Myrskylä 2011). Whereas 85 per cent of young people of Finnish origin have completed their upper secondary education by the time they are 23 years old, the percentage is seven to 50 percentage points below this within various groups of immigrant-origin youth (Ansala, Hämäläinen & Sarvimäki 2014). Young people with refugee status arriving Finland after the compulsory school age (over 16), have the highest risk of dropping out from the educational

¹ University of Turku, Department of education, tuzach@utu.fi

² University of Helsinki, Department of education, mira.kalahti@helsinki.fi

³ University of Helsinki, Department of education, janne.varjo@helsinki.fi

⁴ University of Turku, Department of education, joekiv@utu.fi

⁵ University of Turku, Department of education, mllmak@utu.fi

⁶ University of Helsinki, Department of education, minna.k.saarinen@helsinki.fi

⁷ University of Helsinki, Department of education, markku.jahnukainen@helsinki.fi

path, because commonly their schooling in Finland is based on short and fragmented courses (Björklund 2014).

The solutions to prevent young peoples' dropping out of school seem to offer "second chance" options for access to regular and recognised options and grounded firmly on language acquisition (see also Walther 2006). It seems that uniform solutions might not be enough to meet the needs of the rich variety of immigrants and minorities, regardless of the volume of resources and support. The differences in learning outcomes between the immigrant origin and Finnish origin pupils are not only larger than the average among OECD-countries, but also among other Nordic countries (Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2014). Especially those who have arrived in Finland outside the European Union have not been gained success in school in comparison to the majority population (Väänänen et al. 2009; NAO 2015).

About half of the age group in Finland is heading to general upper secondary after comprehensive school, but students who reach for vocational education have to make the decision of their future profession. This is not an easy task for young people who are only 15 years old. It may be even more challenging to the young people with an immigrant background, especially the first generation, because they (and their parents) often lack the knowledge about the Finnish education system and its possibilities. The educational transitions of young people with immigrant origin have proved to be more complex in contrast with their native counterparts in many countries. Immigrant-origin youth seem to confront paradoxes or contradictions (e.g. Mickelson 1990; Salikutluk 2013), where the expected educational outcomes and aspirations do not meet with the achieved outcomes. These paradoxes or contradictions make the processes of educational choices more complex. As number of studies express ethnic- and gender-related barriers which may cause career indecision (Poon 2014; Lopez & Ann-Yi 2006; Hackett & Byars 1996).

Methods

Our research questions are:

- 1) What kind of experiences from co-operation during the transition process from compulsory to upper secondary education students, study and career counsellors, and other local educational authorities have?
- 2) How they see the educational possibilities of young people with the immigrant backgrounds?

The research data consists of semi-structured interviews, including:

- 1) The students of final grade of comprehensive school in eight schools (n = 112).
- 2) The local education authorities (study and career counsellors, principals and administrators) from comprehensive and upper secondary education (n = 28).

Students and authorities come from the city of Turku and the Helsinki metropolitan area. The schools were selected due to their considerable number of students with immigrant origin: they are rich of multicultural population, but at the same time they have plenty of people with a Finnish background.

The students' interviews consisted of 54 young people with a Finnish background and 58 with an immigrant background, of whom 66 were girls and 46 were boys. In our study, "young person with an immigrant background" means a young person with one or both

parents or guardians born abroad. Other young people are termed “young people with a Finnish background”.

The students’ interviews were held in the schools during the school day. The themes of the interviews were school experiences and orientations, educational aspirations and transitional expectations, future orientations, and views on multiculturalism, harassment, discrimination and racism. The interviews of the local education authorities consisted of 18 student counsellors and 10 principals and other administrators. The themes of the interviews concerned Finnish school system and its strengths and weaknesses, the joint application system, the transition period from compulsory to secondary education, and the challenges in the post-compulsory education. All participation was voluntary, and schools, as well as the students and education authorities, were fully anonymised.

The analysis and the interviews were made with several researcher and synthesized for this paper with a general focus and shared analytical frame. We analysed the views on educational expectations and possibilities with content analyses.

Results

In this presentation, we want to highlight two preliminary outcomes. First, both the authorities, as well the young people themselves, described the ‘*immigrant optimism*’ – the strong belief in education that was particularly strong among young people and families with immigrant backgrounds (see Kao & Tienda, 1995). Nevertheless, the belief in personal *educational possibilities* – articulated as success in the upper secondary education and later in life – seemed to be less strong among study and career counsellors.

Especially the counsellors emphasised the ‘*achievement-attitude*’ paradox (see e.g. Michelson 1990; Salikutluk, 2013) and saw that, based on their school reports, families with an immigrant background were often unrealistic in their choices and envisioned occupational paths. Authorities interpreted that families with the refugee background had come to Finland from countries where higher education was unreachable for most of the population. They believe that in Finland, where education is free for all, anyone could reach the high professions; whilst the native Finns and their parents seemed to be better aware of the relevance of school grades when reaching high educational status.

Second, although the career counselling aims at interaction and mutual respect, both the educational authorities and students felt they often had not reached a shared understanding of the possibilities and expectations. The counsellors felt that their duty is make sure that students understand the “facts and realities” concerning the application to secondary education. Hence, the counsellors were balancing between the educational achievements and future plans. However, the students often felt understated and discouraged. In some cases, when the counsellor explained that the grade point average was not good enough to guarantee access to general upper secondary, students and their parents considered this explanation as discriminative. The counsellor viewed this criticism unfair.

Intent of publication

We will write the article based on our presentation.

References

- Ansala, L., Hämäläinen, U. & Sarvimäki, M. (2014). *Integroitumista vai eriytymistä? Maahanmuuttajalapsen ja -nuoren Suomessa* [Integration or diversification? Immigrant children and youth in Finland]. Helsinki: Kela research department. Working papers 56.
- Björklund, K. (2014). "Haluun koulutusta, haluan työtä ja elämän Suomessa". *Yksintulleiden alaikäisten pakolaisten kotoutuminen Varsinais-Suomessa* ["I want education, work, and life in Finland." The integration of young refugees who arrived alone in Finland Proper] Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutin tutkimuksia A 48.
- Hackett, G. & Byars, A. M. (1996). Social cognitive theory and the career development of African American women. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 44 (4), 322–340.
- Harju-Luukkainen, H., Nissinen, K., Sulkunen, S., Suni, M. & Vettenranta, J. (2014). *Avaimet osaamiseen ja tulevaisuuteen. Selvitys maahanmuuttajataustaisten nuorten osaamisesta ja siihen liittyvistä taustatekijöistä PISA 2012 -tutkimuksessa* [Keys to competence and future. A report on PISA 2012 results and related underlying factors for students with an immigrant background]. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, Finnish Institute for Educational Research.
- Kao, G. & Tienda, M. (1995) Optimism and achievement: The educational performance of immigrant youth. *Social Science Quarterly*, 76 (1), 1–19.
- Kilpi-Jakonen, E. (2011). Continuation to upper secondary education in Finland: Children of immigrants and the majority compared. *Acta Sociologica*, 54 (1), 77–106.
- Lopez, F. G. & Ann-Yi, S. (2006). Predictors of career indecision in three racial/ethnic groups of college women. *Journal of Career Development*, 33 (1), 29–46.
- Michelson, R. A. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63 (Jan), 44–61.
- Myrskylä, P. (2011). *Nuoret työmarkkinoiden ja opiskelun ulkopuolella* [Youth outside the labour markets and education]. Helsinki: Ministry of Employment and the Economy.
- NAO (2015). *Immigrant students and the effectiveness of basic education*. Performance audit report 12. Helsinki: National Audit Office of Finland.
- Poon, O. (2014). The land of opportunity doesn't apply for everyone: The immigrant experience, race, and Asian American career choices. *Journal of College Students Development*, 55 (6), 499–514.
- Salikutluk, Z. (2013). *Immigrants' aspiration paradox – Theoretical explanations and determinants of the aspiration gap between native and immigrant Students*. Arbeitspapiere Nr. 150, 2013. Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung. Universität Mannheim.
- Väänänen, A., M. Toivanen, A-M. Aalto, B. Bergbom, K. Härkäpää, M. Jaakkola, P. Koponen, S. Koskinen, H. Kuusio, K. Lindström, M. Malin, H. Markkula, R. Mertaniemi, U. Peltola, U. Seppälä, E. Tiitinen, M. Vartia-Väänänen, M. Vuorenmaa, M. Vuorento, and K. Vahlbeck. (2009). *Maahanmuuttajien integroituminen suomalaiseen yhteiskuntaan elämän eri osa-alueilla* [Integration of immigrants into Finnish society in distinctive domains of life]. Esiselvitysraportti. Sektoritutkimuksen neuvottelukunta. Osaaminen, työ ja hyvinvointi 9/2009. Helsinki: Työterveyslaitos, Kuntoutussäätiö, Terveiden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos.

Walther, A. 2006. Regimes of youth transitions: Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *YOUNG – Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 14 (2), 119–139.