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Becoming a Finnish Student with an Immigrant Background - Life courses and educational trajectories

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Abstract
In this study, we will focus on eight life biographies of 15-year-old students with immigrant backgrounds. We combine life course perspective with the participant observations which grounds on observations made at guidance counselling moments (one-year qualitative follow-up to a school class with an ethnographic approach). As a general task we will ask how a group of pupils with immigrant backgrounds do become Finnish secondary-school students in their narratives. Empirically we ask how are the agentic orientations concerning education expressed in young people’s life-narratives and how is the agency achieved in the Finnish basic education? By analysing the narratives of becoming a Finnish upper-secondary student in the midst of the upper-secondary-choice context, the study will contribute to the discussion on the normative expectations of study guidance and counselling and individual conditions.

Keywords: Upper secondary choice, guidance and counselling, life course approach, immigrant background

Relation to the conference theme
In this study, we will focus on eight life biographies of 15-year-old students with immigrant backgrounds. By analysing the narratives of becoming a Finnish upper-secondary student in the midst of the upper-secondary-choice context, the study will contribute to the discussion on the normative expectations of study guidance and counselling and individual conditions.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework
Research done among migrant families have shown some contradictions and paradoxes characterising the schooling of young people with immigrant backgrounds. Families are holding positive attitudes towards education and high academic aspirations although they sometimes face difficulties and underperformance in education (Salikutluk 2016; Fernández-Reino 2016; Tjaden and Hunkler 2017; Kao and Tienda 1998). In a similar vein, the educational aspirations of Finnish young people with immigrant backgrounds are often academic (Kalalahti, Varjo, and Jahnukainen 2017; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011), despite their below-average school performance (Harju-Luuikkainen et al. 2014) and relatively high drop-out rates (Larja et al. 2015).

Recent research done among pupils with immigrant backgrounds in Finland provide some interpretations on the mechanism behind these contradictions and paradoxes. To achieve good educational positions is more difficult for students with scarce social and cultural resources, but also for students with immigrant backgrounds (Kalalahti, Varjo & Jahnukainen 2017; Holmberg et al. 2018). They counter qualitatively different institutional and social structures where they face everyday racism and downplaying (see Zacheus et al. in print; 2017). They must cope with unfamiliar opportunity structures, often with the lack of required Finnish skills, and sometimes with special educational needs. Further, our studies on local educational authorities (Kalalahti et al., in press) show that study counselling and guidance for immigrant origin pupils are often felt insufficient, categorical and complex. Comprehensively, study counsellors fall in-between these optimistic orientations, structural boundaries and oversimplified or even biased views on pupils with immigrant backgrounds (see also Lindgren 2010).

Despite the rich research above, there is still lack of studies focusing on the interlockings of educational biographies and the context-for-action (see Biesta & Tedder, 2007) of the educational choices of immigrant young people in Finland. The broad aim of this study is to increase the understanding about the dynamics of educational biographies, transitions, and guidance and support in different structural environments. By looking
at life course trajectories of eight young people we will analyse the engagement (“the configurations of routine, purpose and judgement” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) and agentic orientations that these young people express when describing their educational trajectories and processing the choice for upper secondary education. The aim is to halt their life narratives to the upper-secondary choice and to portray their context-for-action by following their study guidance counselling moments for a half a year.

In Finland, guidance and counselling is institutionalised to basic education at all grades. During the lower secondary education (grades 7–9) pupils have guidance counselling 2 hours for a week in all, usually allocated so that they have one hour of guidance counselling for each week at the 9th and final grade of basic education. Besides the guidance counselling classes, pupils and their families attend to school visits and briefings. The objectives for guidance counselling are set at the national core curricula. According to these tasks, guidance counselling supports the pupils’ agency and independence in decision-making related to their education and career choices. The guidance counsellor has the main responsibility for the implementation of guidance counselling.

After the final year of basic education pupils complete their basic education and apply for dual-model non-comprehensive upper secondary education. For pupils with immigrant backgrounds this is often the first phase where they need individual competences to make successful transitions to upper secondary education. Since we already know relatively much about the causal mechanisms of family background and school achievements among the immigrant families, our attempt here is to focus on the context of guidance counselling with contextual and biographical approach. Our study will develop the knowledge on the agency expressed in educational life biographies within the frames of the Finnish education system. As a general task will ask how a group of pupils with immigrant backgrounds do become Finnish secondary-school students in their narratives. Empirically we will address two research questions:

Q1: How are the agentic orientations concerning education expressed in young people’s life-narratives?
Q2: How is the agency achieved in the Finnish basic education?

Methodology

This study combines life course perspective with the participant observations; it grounds on observations made at guidance counselling moments (one-year qualitative follow-up to a school class with an ethnographic approach), with a special focus on the life courses of eight 9th grade pupils with immigrant backgrounds from this class (interviews). This group of young people have multiple ethnic and migrant backgrounds: they are young people with refugee, migrant or Finnish backgrounds, dual nationalities, multilingual families and multi-ethnic backgrounds. In all, they share stories about facing the Finnish education system with immigrant backgrounds. We participated the guidance counselling practices (lessons, visits, briefings) and followed the moments where the students prepared for, and attended to the joint application practices. This data consists of field notes and interviews.

With the life course perspective, we ask how the chronological age, educational transitions, as well as social relationships and other life transitions interlock in the narratives of the 15-year old pupils with immigrant backgrounds. In the interviews, these young people with the immigrant backgrounds were asked to draw past and future “life spirals”, to mark all important moments of their life course, and to tell stories about these moments for the interviewee. These narratives enabled students to tell stories about their journey to becoming upper secondary students with immigrant backgrounds within the highly structured Finnish education system. The main aim for the mixed method analysis is to reflect individual educational trajectories with the institutionalized forms of guidance counselling, and hence to portray the agentic orientations with individual “contexts-for-actions”. With mixed data, we utilise the life course perspective and analyse the reconciliation of the educational system with the timing of lives, agency, and diversity in life course trajectories (see Brady & Gilligan 2018).

Outcomes

The preliminary outcomes follow the previous research done among the immigrant pupils: the educational biographies of eight young people with immigrant backgrounds are multiple and in many way difficult to
adjust to the Finnish education system. Educational biographies were fragmented and externally guided. Although the young people had found schooling satisfactory and had outspokenly found their future biographies, their imagined future trajectories were also often indecisive and fragile. Their choices and moments for guidance counselling were constant negotiations of identities and nativity, discussions of ethnic identities, languages, nationalities and possibilities that seemed to be, or not, reachable or desired for them. These negotiations with study counsellors, peers and families seemed to concern various mismatches between individual idealities and externally imposed models (see also Yoon 2012; Selimos 2017; Mäkelä & Kalalahti 2018). Nevertheless, their narratives were quite motivated and easy. Although there were differences between their agentic orientations, these young people seemed to rely on the guidance practices and were trustful and optimistic. In this presentation, we will discuss on the role of the study guidance and counselling within the universalistic transition regime in the intertwine of educational biographies, transitions and choices (see also Lindgren 2010; Walther 2006).

References


