Type of contribution: Paper

Title: “It was too early to choose, we were just babies”. Young people’s narratives of balancing between vocational and general upper secondary pathways

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Paper proposal (including the required themes):

This paper proposal deals with the questions of agency and social justice in relation to young people’s educational choice-making and narratives of their school time in upper-secondary education. The approach is ethnographic and even though the main focus is on young people’s narration, as a background data I will also consider teachers’ and other educators’ perspectives on educational choice-making in relation to current education policy discourses.

Distinctive for Finnish upper secondary education is a sharp divide into separate types of schools – vocational and general – after basic education which differs from the education systems of some other Nordic and many European countries. In the age of 15 to 16 young people are ought to make an educational choice concerning their future paths. Officially the both paths, general and vocational, offer an eligibility to further apply to higher education but according to statistics, it is very minor percentages of the University students who have completed only a vocational degree. As in other countries, vocational education and training in Finland has traditionally been seen as a short educational route and a sharp way to working life. Because of the labour market changes, it is not very probable nowadays that one finds employment just after graduation from vocational education (Niemi & Rosvall 2013). Even though a pressure to find tertiary education is a real challenge for all young people, the current reform of vocational education strongly emphasises “market relevance” by shortening studies and speeding up transitions of young people (see Nylund et al 2018).

While conducting an ethnographic fieldwork in upper secondary education, manifold, critical and reflective narratives of young people piqued my interest. Many students narrated uncertainty about their educational and working life paths and – in contradiction towards policy aims – expressed criticism towards too early choice-making between vocational and general education. Prevailing discourse on educational and work-related choice-making strongly emphasizes free and individual choices and ignores consideration of social structures and differences. My approach instead highlights the social formation of human agency: even though never completely predefined, young peoples’ agency and their educational paths are scrutinised as always influenced, restricted and enabled by societal structures and practices (Simmons et al 2014; Evans 2007; Henderson et al 2007). The analytical interest of the paper is in the agency which constitutes as a part of an educational choice-making process. More precisely I ask, 1) how do the students narrate their previous choices between vocational and general upper secondary educational and their possibly forthcoming educational and working life futures; and 2) how does the agency become constituted in the narration of young people?

The paper is based on a multi-sited ethnographic research project utilising the tools of life-historical research too. These approaches have enabled combination and use of different qualitative research methods such as participatory observation, individual and group interviews, document analysis, and
various analytical strategies (Lahelma et al 2014; Falzon 2009) as well as critical reflexivity towards research practices (Renold et al 2008). In this paper, I analyse the interviews conducted with 40 students paying special emphasis on the narratives of a few students. As a background data, I use my field-notes and interviews conducted with teachers and other educators.

My study points out how the practices and structures around educational choice-making can both enable but also restrict young adults’ agency. In the discussion of the results, I aim to turn the perspective to the theoretical concept of agency by investigating how various aspects of agency become constituted in the interview narrations of young people.

References:


