

EPILOGUE

Silences and Challenges

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In this final section, we want to briefly discuss some aspects from the seven chapters of this book, in particular what they tell us about important points, missing or underdeveloped perspectives and challenges regarding transition policies and research on young people's transitions and agency at a time of rapid social and economic transformation. We believe that the contributions are well placed to make contributions to new, critical research, as they depart from different theoretical, methodological and actor perspectives and thus look at the transition landscape from various viewpoints.

The contributions by Tero Järvinen (Chapter 2) and Johanna Rosa Arnardottir (Chapter 3) build on large datasets that enable longitudinal comparisons, including over the years of the deep economic recession from 2008 to 2010. They both address the trajectories of NEETs—young people and young adults who are not in employment, education or training, and, importantly, their analyses nuance the picture of the vulnerability of this group. Comparisons, across time and across countries, of school-to-work transitions help to increase knowledge about what shapes youth conditions and may complement critical qualitative analyses in this field. While international comparisons of NEET rates have become common over the last decade, other aspects of young people's transitions are more difficult to compare, because of the different constructions of post-compulsory education and training, different definitions of unemployment and weak connections to the labour market etc. (Albaek et al., 2015).

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It is worth remembering that most of the contributions focus on the educational part of the transitions space, and they commonly bring up educational reasons, as well as remedies, for problematic career trajectories. This to large extent reflects the disciplinary background of the researchers. However, there has been a more general tendency in the last 30–40 years to find educational solutions to transition problems than measures related to structural and particularly labour market factors. Expressed differently, the ‘transition machinery’ (see also Chapter 7, by Kristiina Brunila and colleagues) departs from an ‘education logic’ rather than an ‘employment logic’ (Iannelli & Raffé, 2007).¹ There is a marked risk that this emphasis may serve to obscure some of the basic problems relating to young people’s career paths. On the one hand, there are a decreasing number of jobs that earlier served as door openers to the labour market for unexperienced youth without upper secondary qualifications. On the other hand, there is increasing unwillingness by employers to accept such jobseekers, even if the tasks technically do not require upper secondary education. The employers limit access to such jobs by demanding ‘soft skills’, for example having work discipline, the right attitudes, personality and appearance (Centeno & Stewart, 2013; Dafou, 2009; Nickson et al., 2012).

We however want to point out the importance of offering generous opportunities for adult education, so-called second-chance education to those who did not complete lower and upper secondary education. For example, Nordlund, Stehlik and Strandh (2013), in their study of Swedish second-chance education, conclude that it effectively improves the future labour market and economic prospects of people with few educational qualifications. The crucial role of this part of the education system is also briefly highlighted both in Chapter 2, by Järvinen, and in Chapter 4, by Lindblad and Lundahl, respectively, but, more generally, it is surprisingly little researched.

Another important question, pointed out by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours (Chapter 6), concerns the scarcity of research on local transition policies. They focus on the UK case, showing its complexity. In highly decentralized welfare and education systems, such as Sweden and Finland, research on the local opportunity landscape is particularly important (see also Jacobsson, Hollertz & Garsten, 2017; Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). Yet, youth research has often focused on young people in the cities, and the urban environment has been taken for granted. Young people’s problems and social exclusion are described as urban phenomena, for example in terms of segregation, unemployment, drug abuse and criminality. However, many of these problems, e.g. high unemployment rates, tend to be larger in smaller municipalities outside the urban regions (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). Particularly in rural areas, young people feel left aside, not participating in society. They also tend to distrust central state politics and administration to a higher extent than urban youth (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010). We share Farrugia’s (2014) conclusion that it is essential to conduct empirical studies of rural young people in order to make visible and better understand the spatial aspect of young people’s careers, even theoretically.

The contributions by Michael Lindblad and Lisbeth Lundahl (Chapter 4) and Ameerah Masoud, Tuuli Kurki and Kristiina Brunila (Chapter 5) highlight the preconditions for youth and young adults with a migrant background, to complete upper secondary education and construct a future career. Such issues have become increasingly urgent over time, not least during and after the latest large refugee wave in the mid-2010s. There is a prevailing strong tendency to depict migrant youth as problematic, but Chapters 4 and 5 both point to the strengths and potentials of having a history and perhaps own experiences of other cultures and migration—if one would recognize them. However, Chapters 4 and 5 also illustrate institutional inertia, lacking knowledge and prejudice in the encounter with the young persons concerned.

Chapter 7, by Kristiina Brunila, Katariina Mertanen and Sari Mononen Batista Costa, describes how transition policies and machineries tend to focus on the ‘vulnerable’—labelled as NEETs, dropouts, early school leavers, refugees and the like. Here it is essential to remember that the young people seldom see themselves as victims and vulnerable but rather as the architects of their own lives (for example see Lundahl et al., 2017; de Graaf & van Zenderen, 2013). This may be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, one may see this as an expression of a general tendency to individualize problems and responsibilities, which also means that young people blame themselves for failures that result from structural and institutional factors, and from actors, such as parents, teachers and decision makers, who are more powerful than the young persons in the transition field. On the other hand, it is important to recognize young people’s agency and optimism regarding their future options as an important source of empowerment and change. It is also important to recognize that professional approaches to young people may differ considerably, and hence enable their agency to varying extents. Sara Irisdotter Aldenmyr’s and Maria Olson’s analysis in Chapter 8 on teachers’ psychological, role model and ethical discourses in life competence education helpfully illustrates this.

Although large parts of the school-to-work transition research focuses on ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ youth, Chapter 1, by Maria Rönnlund, takes a more original route and examines how middle-class, high-attaining students in upper secondary education look upon and try to influence life in school. Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours in Chapter 6 analyse local policies addressing ‘middle attainers’ in English post-compulsory education. More generally, we see a need for transitions research to widen its scope in order to get a deeper, more nuanced knowledge and understanding of how young people proceed through school and after, and hence get a less stigmatizing and psychologizing picture of large groups of young persons than has become frequent today.

The majority of contributions in this book concern youth transitions in the Nordic countries. These countries have been assumed to offer relatively strong, universal support to young people when leaving school and trying to establish themselves in work and adult life (see also Walther, 2006). However, in the last 20 years Nordic transition policies have imported neo-liberal features, including

so-called activation policies that entail reduced social support and increased individual responsibility for successful transitions (Kvist & Greve, 2011; Newman, 2007). In addition, decentralization, and choice and market reforms in education have resulted in a changed school landscape that increasingly segregates students along social class and ethnic lines (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Bjordal, 2016; Kosunen et al., 2016). The 'transition machinery' tends to ignore problems that young people experience as related to societal, economic and political turns and differences, and instead positions the difficulties within the individual. It is for example telling that Swedish local decision makers in a national survey ranked young people's lack of motivation as the single most important reason behind incomplete upper secondary education (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). Life-course interviews with young adults, however, clearly show how long-established processes with many interacting factors are responsible for school failure (Lundahl et al., 2017).

The outcomes therefore point to the need of more societal, cross-cultural and intersectional analysis of youth transitions, considering ethnicity/race, gender, social class, health and disability. Since the young people are not always able to navigate the changing school and labour markets, the practices of transition machinery are often of little use and even problematic when the problems young people experience are for example racialized and gendered but still considered the problems of individuals.

A number of researchers and policymakers across the world are referring to a major crisis in education, arguing that it is failing to produce the outcomes it should produce. In terms of young people in transition, we ought to ask what this means, and not least because of equity and fairness.

We locate this crisis as taking place within the economic rationality enabling non-educational and depoliticized ways of thinking about young people's transition towards employability. The role of education and other support systems offered to young people seem to be shifting from knowledge-based activities towards the development of specific character, skills, competences and types of emotion, with a highly personally tailored precision education model (Williamson, 2017; Brunila et al., 2019). In precision education the focus on creating a specific type of ideal learning subjectivity tends to work by ignoring political, economic, societal, cultural and structural aspects. The model puts youth on the move again. As an outcome of the economic rationality, it requires young people to submit to their individually understood vulnerabilities, and a lack of socio-economic activity becomes an indicator of personal deficiency. Alongside private companies and marketization, precision education includes a wide variety of disciplines, such as psychology, neurobiology, evolutionary biology, paediatrics and behavioural genetics, forming new networks of governance in order to tailor education and other support systems towards individually defined needs.

The current economy-driven rationality has the potential to offer more efficient governance through various opportunities for more tailored and individualized human engineering. This type of governance cultivates policies and practices for young people to become flexible, learnable, manageable and

suitably resilient: someone who is easily governable, someone who knows their place, and makes realistic plans to achieve them. However, it could be understood, following Lauren Berlant (2011), as a slow death, the physical wearing out of a population under economic and capitalist regimes of structural subordination and governance.

Notes

- ¹ Iannelli and Raffe (2007) used these concepts to characterize the orientation of vocational education and training in different countries.

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