

# Unequal transitions in a paradise of equality?

Education authorities' views on the transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or with special educational needs



# Research projects

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- Transitions and educational trajectories of immigrant youth: A 4-year longitudinal study from compulsory to further education
  - Funded by the Academy of Finland 2014–2018.  
University of Helsinki & University of Turku, Finland
- Employability, Education and Diversities (EMED)
  - Skills, Education And the Future of Work –consortium, funded 2016–2019 Academy of Finland.



# Researchers

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- <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/transit-okl/about-transit-research/>



# Educational pathways

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- Nine-year non-tracking and non-streaming comprehensive school <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/koulutusjaerjestelmae/?lang=en>
- Dual upper secondary education system: general and vocational
- Respectively equal access to tertiary education, yet majority of students transfer to tertiary education from general track
- Additional choices: the optional 10th grade and a specific model under the umbrella of 'preparatory and rehabilitative training and guidance' of vocational education or general education.



# Educational pathways

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- Youth with immigrant backgrounds and/or with special educational needs have reported to have difficulties in getting into mainstream education.
- The young with immigrant background face 5 x odds to be positioned outside the education and work compared to Finnish-origin youths
  - (18-29-years, Myrskylä 2011)
- NEETs in Helsinki: Majority 7% vs. Immigrant background 22 %
  - (2013; 16-29 years, Finnish or Swedish-speaking vs. other mother tongues; Statistics Finland)
- Young people with special educational needs usually continue their studies in vocational instead of general upper secondary education.



# Aims and research questions

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- Aim is to analyze the ways in which local education authorities governing educational transitions consider the structural possibilities and obstacles that frame the educational transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or with special educational needs.
  1. How do the authorities reflect the opportunity structure for the young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs?
  2. How are these reflections constructed in relation with national core curriculum?



# Methods and data sources

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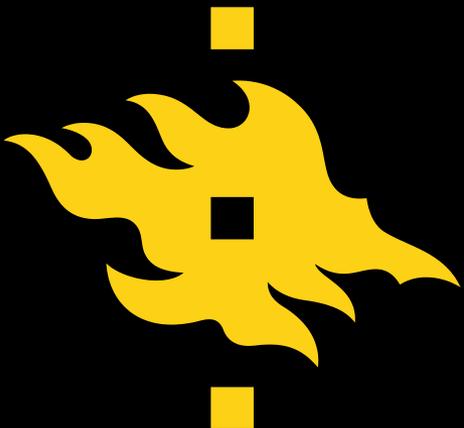
- The focus is on local education authorities from lower and upper secondary education.
- Comprehensive school: thematic interviews (12 study counselors, 6 principals and other administrators).
- Upper secondary education is approached with an ethnographic setting including observation notes and interviews (3 study counselors, 8 teachers and other administrators).
- Analytical frame: the national core curricula of basic education, preparatory training programs and general and vocational upper secondary education.



# Theoretical framework

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- Institutional opportunity structure – “different problematisations, mechanisms and solutions to issues in education policy and governance” (Dale & Parreira do Amaral 2015)
- Universalistic transition regime – extended public sector and a wide variety of counseling and activation policies (Walther 2006)
- Education and educational transitions are recognized as arenas where the viewpoints of different actors – study counselors, principals and administrators – encounter and form *doxa*, *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy* (Bourdieu 1977; see also Simola 2015)



# Orthodoxa of upper secondary transition?

The national core curricula of basic education, preparatory training programs and general and vocational upper secondary education.



# National curricula – single orthodoxa for educational transitions?

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1. Post-compulsory transition = **linear path** either to vocational or general upper secondary education.

- Each and every (with the exception of students with special educational needs) student is expected to make **personal choices according to their abilities and interests**.



# National curricula – single orthodoxa for educational transitions?

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2. Preparatory education programs and **vocational** upper secondary education degrees can be considered as instrumental and process-like.

- The overall approach is more **pluralistic and holistic**.
- Different **educational routes** and **special educational needs are recognized** and supported.

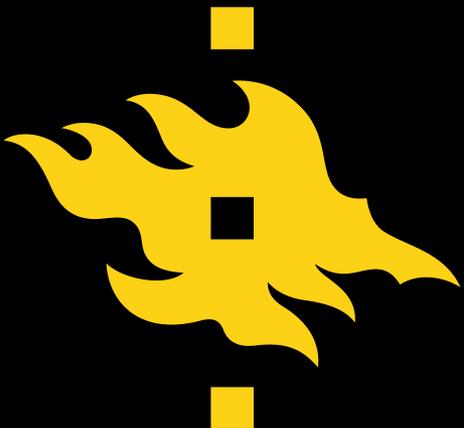


# National curricula – single orthodoxa for educational transitions?

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3. **General upper secondary school** and the core curriculum of the program preparing for that emphasizes study guidance as a tool for supporting the individual **learning processes**, readiness to study, and **studying skills**.

- Special educational support is designed to develop **adequate Finnish skills** required for studying in general upper secondary education.



# Heterodoxa

Local education authorities



## **Societal relevance of transitions (in the sight of the local education authorities)**

- Comprehensive school: the need to find a suitable and safe place for all pupils.
  - The main aim was to find a next step in the life course, where young people would feel safe and have time to grow up.
- Vocational school: relevance of transition in the frames of labor force
  - Emphasizing the importance of guiding the young people to such study places where they could be motivated and educated for professional labor force.
- General upper secondary school: emphasizing student abilities (learning skills and outcomes)



# The construction of upper secondary transition

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1) The image of the uniform (dual) and institutionalized one-step transition do not tally with the reality that the local education authorities face.

- Alternative routes make the system flexible and nimble, the constant flux make them haphazard, difficult to predict, locate, and guide through.



# The construction of upper secondary transition

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”This -- jungle of non-traditional options, is a bit different every year, and may change within a year. It is like - from the perspective of the families and the young people - one hell of the mess to find out what is offered and when.”

Study counsellor, comprehensive school



# The construction of upper secondary transition

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- 2) Strong determinative power of the language skills
- Unrecognized skills?
  - Young people with 'not sufficient' language skills (often immigrant backgrounds) often guided into vocational education.
  - Tricky links between language skills, upper secondary education and employment: studying in Finnish without adequate support and skills is demanding, and even if the young people manage to graduate, employment without fluent Finnish skills is difficult.



# The construction of upper secondary transition

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”-- Especially the intelligent students with immigrant background might not be recognized because of insufficient language skills, although these skills are developing there beneath. Our system cannot navigate through this, but proceeds exactly based on what can be seen at the time. Then there might become difficulties and they end up changing study places, or to think things through again.”

Principal, comprehensive school



# The construction of upper secondary transition

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## 3) Some young people with special educational needs somewhat lost in transition

- The transition of students with severe special educational needs seem to be more holistically but also strongly guided and prepared. These transitions concern most often only the vocational special education institutions.
- Young people with minor special educational needs (therefore not eligible for these institutions), are often guided to vocational upper secondary institute's general study groups, where their support needs are not necessarily responded.



# Young people with immigrant backgrounds an/or special educational needs

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- Considered as individuals, but
  - Typifications and categorizations
    - Students with immigrant backgrounds need to learn Finnish (not English, or their native language)
    - “Immigrant optimism” and “paradoxes”; “unrealistic” choices
    - The necessity of independency, self-confidence and strength
- Urge to see young people apart from the (Finnish) language skills and/or special educational needs



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” And, of course, the aims might be unrealistic. There is a lot of talk about distinguished professions like doctors and lawyers. Then we have to see how their strengths match with these aims and see that [for example] the math numbers seem to be quite weak for even passing the general upper secondary education. The need to understand the realities is different with the students with immigrant background.”

Study counsellor, upper secondary school



# Discussion

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- The heterodoxa revealed that the educational routes for students with inadequate Finnish skills and special educational needs are so fixed that they do not meet the individual aspirations and competencies recognized during the study guidance process.



# Discussion

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- The interviews with local education authorities at secondary level didn't produce as noticeable heterodoxa against the curriculum texts; rather they reinforced the two distinctive orthodoxies concerning the dual model of upper secondary education.



# Discussion

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- The analysis of the interviews provided a clear heterodoxa for curriculum text, especially in the case of basic education.
- From the perspective of local education authorities, the transitions seemed fragmented, non-linear and haphazard.
- The institutionalized common and uniform transition was seen to marginalize all other transitions as exceptional and contingent.



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*National core curriculum for Basic Education*

*National Core Curriculum for Additional Tuition in Basic Education*

*National Core Curriculum for Pre-Vocational Training*

*National Core Curriculum for Preparatory Training for General Upper Secondary School*

*National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary School*

*National basis for Vocational Upper Secondary Education and Training degrees.*