



## Book review

# Youth on the move: Tendencies and tensions in youth policies and practices

Kristiina Brunila & Lisbeth Lundahl (Eds.)

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In the anthology *Youth on the Move: Tendencies and Tensions in Youth Policies and Practices*, the authors investigate one of the most urgent social problems today: ‘... the extended and uncertain transitions from school to work and higher education, and how they shape the interests of young adults, including those outside of education and work’ (p. 1). Combating youth unemployment and youth poverty through strategies and measures to manage youth transitions are issues high on local, national and supranational policy agendas, and the book critically examines this ‘transition machinery’, with a special focus on young adults not in employment, education or training (NEET). This is done by combining perspectives from policies and practices with those of young people themselves. The book argues that when young adults’ unemployment and poverty are treated as individual deficiencies on the part of the young adults, measures also become individualistic and place responsibility and agency on the young adults rather than on social and formal structures and conditions for young adult lives and transitions. Hence, one of the key arguments in the book is that ‘... by focusing on the ways in which subjectivities of young people are constructed by policymakers, professionals such as teachers and youth workers, academic researchers, and young people themselves, some ideas and assumptions of problematic transition and their taken-for-granted “good intentions” could be challenged’ (p. 7).



The book consists of an introduction where the theme of the book is presented, two main parts and an epilog. The two main parts are: Part 1 – *Young people's trajectories and identities*, which consists of chapters 1–5 and addresses young people's own perspectives, and Part 2 – *Young people's transitions: Policies and new forms of governing*, which consists of chapters 6–8 and addresses policies and official practices.

In chapter 1: *Young citizenship – Academically high-achieving middle-class students in transitions talk about participation*, Maria Rönnlund deals with some of the strongest discourses of European citizenship through concepts such as 'individual agency', 'self-responsibility' and 'self-regulation' in relation to Swedish high-achieving middle-class students. Rönnlund shows how the strong Nordic educational tradition of participation and learning to become a democratic citizen has, in later years, lost ground to the idea of the citizen as having a more market-oriented role, but also to the idea of citizenship as related to personal identity. Through her analysis, Rönnlund shows that young people take up these new dominant discourses and understand themselves through these, thus understanding and interpreting failure to e.g. participate in the school council as a 'personal shortcoming' rather than a result of a rational consideration or an active choice. Rönnlund also points to an interesting dilemma for these young people as they struggle to position themselves against complex ideals: they need to be agentic and communicative according to the dominant discourse of individual, self-responsible and self-regulating agency but at the same time they need to downplay their activeness according to social norms of modesty, e.g. by not talking too much or being too loudly. High-achieving students are often left out in studies on participation and transition, and the chapter is important in filling this knowledge gap, underscoring the point that '*... even this "low-risk" group of students struggles to respond to the complexity of being a "good" and successful student-citizen*' (p. 30).

In chapter 2: *Social background and labour market careers of young people – A comparison of two cohorts of Finnish young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)*, Tero Järvinen critically examines the assumption that being outside education and the labour market is fatal to one's future life course and labour market chances. The study compares two NEET cohorts aged 16–18 before and after the economic recession of the early 1990s. In light of the facts that 1) NEET are one of the main target groups for policies of education and employment across Europe and 2) reducing the number of NEET is a key benchmark of the EU youth strategy, it is interesting that Järvinen shows that despite the more difficult socio-economic situations of that time, the NEET of the mid-1990s had succeeded better in finding their place in working life than the NEET of the mid-1980s. Järvinen offers two explanations for this. It might have to do with differences in individual features of the two NEET cohorts. It might also have to do with much more effort being put into reducing dropout, early school leaving and interruption of upper

secondary education since the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, from this interesting angle, the chapter examines the central theme of the book: the significance of paying attention both to structures and individual agency when addressing young NEET school-to-work transition opportunities.

In chapter 3: *Transitions from school to work – Icelandic young people in NEET*, Jóhanna Rósa Arnardóttir compares education and first job opportunities of the NEET group to young people who study or are employed. Young Icelandic people of the NEET group have not been studied very much in the past and in this regard Arnardóttir's study brings important new knowledge about the transitions of Icelandic young belonging to the NEET group. Arnardóttir concludes that lack of job opportunities rather than lacking talent affects young people in a NEET situation. Thus, despite differences when comparing Iceland to EU and other countries, the same tendency stands out, namely that structural conditions rather than e.g. (lack of) motivation, skills or talent are important to take into account when understanding young NEET transitions from school to work. However, this was also the starting point of the study following the opportunity structure theory and in this regard the conclusion is not surprising.

In chapter 4: *Winding paths through school and after – Young Swedes of migrant origin who failed upper secondary school*, Michael Lindblad and Lisbeth Lundahl also highlight how conditions rather than individual features are important in the understanding of young NEET people's situations in Sweden. Through narratives from 21–23-year-old Swedes with migrant backgrounds without upper secondary qualifications, Lindblad and Lundahl point out how the transitions of these young people are shaped by scarce symbolic and economic capital as well as lack of support from school. It is a well-known fact that multiple factors outside school contribute to school failure and dropout. However, less attention has been paid to how school itself may contribute to failure. In this regard, the study presents new and important insights that can help support better school paths and transitions for young NEET, and especially those with migrant backgrounds, as well as other groups of young people struggling to get a foothold in school and/or the labour market.

In chapter 5: *'Learn skills and get employed' – Constituting the employable refugee subjectivity through integration policies and training practices*, Ameera Masoud, Tuuli Kurki and Kristiina Brunila also look critically at how structures and conditions – in this case discourses – shape the understanding of Finnish refugees. Through their analysis of official documents of integration policies and practices, as well as interviews with young migrants, training managers and teachers, they show how the discourse of employability overlooks the skills and interests of the refugees and reduce them to a homogeneous group of 'not yet employable'. They also convincingly show how policies and the discourse of employability put the responsibility for not succeeding in the transition to the Finnish labour market on the individual refugee: *'Since they are mature, they need to show commitment, as*

*if that is the only thing hampering their employment'* as the authors put it (p. 111). The study is important in emphasising the risks and possible consequences associated with making employment the (only) measure for refugees' integration. In this respect, the study holds an important message, not only to Finland but to all countries facing the task of integrating refugees in the society and the labour market.

Chapter 6: *Young people and transitions in upper secondary education in England – The influence of policy and the 'local opportunity landscape'* is written by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours. Like the other two chapters in the second part of the book, they look at how institutional technologies and discourses (the 'transition machinery') are at work in the policies and governing of youth transition. In this chapter, the authors look at national policy on curriculum, qualifications, institutional accountability and governance, and highlights how this has interacted with a local marketised environment of competing institutions and impacted the opportunities for learners to progress within, and complete, English upper secondary education (USE). The chapter focuses on the group of 'middle attainers', and shows how USE in particular has limited the transitions of young people in this group, in risk of '... becoming the new education "precarariat"' (p. 140). The chapter thus provides useful and important insight into the transitions *within* the English upper secondary education system of this large but somewhat overlooked group of students in the UK.

In chapter 7: *Economic worries – therapeutic solutions? Entrepreneurial and therapeutic governing of transitions of young people*, Kristiina Brunila, Katariina Mertanen and Sari Mononen Batista-Costa writes about how young Finnish people, through entrepreneurial and therapeutic discourses, learn to recognise themselves as responsible for their careers and self-actualisation. Thus, the chapter shows in an interesting way '... how entrepreneurial and therapeutic discourses indeed work together to govern young people's transitions' (p. 150) and form educational practices as a form of governmentality, as well as the effects of this on young people and their imagination of themselves and others. The chapter is particularly interesting, because Finland for some years has been at the forefront of performance, effectiveness and quality in regard to education and considered a forerunner in entrepreneurial education. Therefore, the chapter holds an important message to all educational systems in Europe and elsewhere moving towards market-oriented entrepreneurial and therapeutic education and support systems.

In chapter 8: *Ethical and care-oriented, but still psychological and 'at risk' – Teachers' construction of young people's transition from school to society*, Sara Irisdotter Aldenmyr and Maria Olson looks at Swedish teachers' descriptions of their teaching for health promotion. As in chapter 7, a critical perspective on the therapeutic education 'regime' is applied, and – in accordance with this perspective – it is highlighted that in order to help young people's transitions and futures there is a need for '... not more intervention but rather more critical reflection on the

*intervention programmes that are in use in many schools in Western society'* (p. 169). The chapter points to three youth transition discourses that stand out: a psychological risk discourse, a role model discourse, and an ethical discourse of care. It is convincingly shown how these discourses work together with different notions of youth and the needs of young people in order to make safe and good transitions into adulthood, each discourse making certain educational practices seem legitimate and necessary. The chapter brings the teachers' perspective to the forefront and, in doing so, presents important new knowledge about how teachers see themselves as part of various types of therapeutic educational processes imbedded in the 'life competence education' which has been part of the Swedish compulsory school system over the last two decades.

Overall, *Youth on the Move: Tendencies and Tensions in Youth Policies and Practices* constitutes an important work on how young people's transitions from school to work and higher education currently play out, mainly in the Nordic welfare countries but with an outlook to Iceland and the UK. It is shown how young people themselves understand these transitions, discourses and practices, along with their impact on their identity and future aspirations. Furthermore, it is convincingly shown how policies, educational programmes and other institutionalized framework constitute powerful discourses that shape how young people learn about themselves and understand their identity while navigating transitions. The book covers a variety of educational systems from different countries. All the chapters are well positioned in their respective fields. They provide thorough analysis of young people's transitions and the specific education systems and policies and provide a pamphlet of interesting perspectives and important findings.

However, a discussion of the apparent dilemma many of these young people are facing in trying to balance the individualising discourses and their ambitions to e.g. also 'do something for others' or 'for the greater good' would have been interesting - that is, the dilemma between the individual and the community. Especially in relation to the environmental crisis, which has put the young generations of today in a very special position.

Furthermore, there is a tendency - not marked though - in the different chapters that the overall conclusion to the respective studies seems to have already been predicted or given from the outset: the strong message of the book is that young people's chances for successful transition are not solely dependent on themselves but also to a large degree affected by social structures and institutional conditions and that this should be taken into account when working with initiatives to support the transitions of young people. However, a critical examination of this outset, as well, might have lifted the analysis further.

In many of the chapters, the Vocational Education and Training sector is in play as one of the key educational programmes that absorb and is expected to re-

skill young adults. This is an interesting finding and it might have been interesting with a discussion on how and why this particular upper secondary education programme is the preferred educational programme for young NEET adults' re-skilling and transition, be it migrants, refugees or other.

However, these are minor objections, which does not remove the overall impression of the book: it presents solid, highly relevant and nuanced new knowledge on different young people's transitions in different time periods and in a variety of countries with different education and support systems and labour markets. Thus, the book holds an overall important message to all professionals working with young adult transition, from policymakers to leaders and educational practitioners: while recognising young people's agency, it is important to challenge neo-liberal arguments of enhancing individual enterprise, flexibility and innovation and also look to the importance of social conditions and institutional structures for young adult transition within school, and from school to work or higher education. As it is stated in the epilog: *'Young people blame themselves for failures that result from structural and institutional factors, and from actors, such as parents, teachers and decisions makers, who are more powerful than the young persons in the transition field.'*

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