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Immigrant-origin youth and the indecisiveness of choice for upper secondary education in Finland

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ABSTRACT

The educational transitions of Finnish youth of immigrant background are challenging. They confront more difficulties in a twofold manner: they have more difficulties in transitioning to upper secondary education and they seem to drop out of education more often than their Finnish-origin counterparts. This study aimed to accomplish a view of the complex intertwinement of attitudes and experiences with upper secondary education choices, gender and origin. We compared immigrant-origin students ($n=161$) with Finnish-origin students ($n=156$) in a survey conducted during the final year of comprehensive school. Our objectives were to analyse the variation in attitudes, experiences and aspirations concerning post-comprehensive transition in gender and origin of the youth, and to analyse the factors behind the indecisiveness of the transitions. We concluded that youth with immigrant origin in general, and boys in particular, share a contradiction we termed the 'paradox of immigrant schooling', which refers to the combination of a positivity toward education and difficulties in learning and studying. We also found an immigrant-related contradiction between determinant and quite high occupational aspirations, and uncertainty of upper secondary choices. Our outcomes indicate that the immigrant-origin youth confront the upper-secondary choices in a much more complex and multidimensional situation than their Finnish-origin counterparts.

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Young people of immigrant background; indecisive choice; educational transitions; upper secondary education

Introduction

The integration of immigrant youth is an emergent issue in European societies, including Finland (e.g. Cebolla Boado 2011; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011). Traditionally, the number of immigrants in Finland has been considerably lower than in other European countries, although the population of foreign-origin residents is currently rising rapidly. Finland's outstanding PISA successes may overemphasise the quality and equality of comprehensive school, and underestimate the socially diversifying educational pathways to secondary education. First, young people from less-educated families are over-represented in vocational training (Myrskylä 2009), and the dropout rates for vocational secondary

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education are considerably higher than for general upper secondary education (Statistics Finland 2015). Secondly, despite the general equality of the Finnish comprehensive school, non-native children have difficulty to integrating themselves into the recognised mainstream educational pathways and face a higher risk of dropping out than their native counterparts (Itkonen and Jahnuainen 2007; Järvinen and Jahnuainen 2008; Statistics Finland 2013).

This paper focuses on a group of Finnish youth with an immigrant background moving from comprehensive school to upper secondary education. After the ninth grade in comprehensive school, the Finnish education system diversifies into two non-compulsory and separate branches: general and vocational upper secondary education. Although there are no obvious educational dead-ends, the dual-track system still commonly leads young people to either vocational or academic careers (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011).

In the European context, Finland offers a unique case in which multiculturalism encounters a quite uniform and homogeneous society, constructed according the Nordic welfare model and its ideal of equality. In system-level education policy terms, this means that both strands of secondary education provide eligibility for higher education, and career counselling is integrated into all stages of the education and training system (see Walther 2006).

The educational transitions of young people of immigrant origin have proved to be more complex than for their native counterparts in many countries. According to several researchers (e.g. Michelson 1990; Salikutluk 2013) immigrant-origin youth seem to confront paradoxes or contradictions in which the expected educational outcomes and aspirations do not measure up to the outcomes achieved. These paradoxes or contradictions make the processes of educational choice more complex. As a number of studies identify ethnic- and gender-related barriers which may cause career indecision (Hackett and Byars 1996; Lopez and Ann-Yi 2006; Poon 2014), we focus here on the *indecisiveness* about upper secondary choice, as well as the indecisiveness about career aspirations. We believe that increasing the knowledge of the preconditions of educational choice, and especially its indecisiveness, helps us to improve career guidance and counselling.

The overall aim of the *Transitions and educational trajectories of immigrant youth* research project¹ is to understand and interpret these trajectories and transitions on these tracks, especially contrasted with the majority population. This article concerns the first phase of the follow-up ($n = 445$), a survey conducted in spring 2015, when the respondents had reached their final year in comprehensive school. We have previously analysed this data from the perspective of determinants of upper secondary choice (Kalalahti et al. 2017) and goal orientation (Holmberg 2015, working paper). For this particular article, we focus on indecisive choice and determination of upper secondary choice with reference to immigrant origin.

We seek to develop a view of the complex intertwining of attitudes and experiences with post-comprehensive aspirations, gender, and origin. Our overall objectives are **to**:

- (1) analyse the variation in attitudes, experiences and aspirations concerning post-comprehensive transitions in the gender and origin of young people
- (2) analyse the factors behind indecisiveness concerning the transitions after comprehensive school

Theoretical background

We appraise our respondents at the moment in their lives when they have just completed comprehensive education and started to make actual choices for their post-compulsory education. The moment is crucial: in theories of late modernity, some 'ways of being' – such as reflexivity and the ability to make choices – have become more dominant and better rewarded than others (see, e.g. Wyn 2009). In terms of post-comprehensive-school transitions, Finnish upper secondary education divides young people into academic and vocational tracks, and hence, represents one of the most obvious educational phases that involves individual and structural expectations about reflexivity and decision-making (Heinz 2009; Ogbu and Simons 1998).

Trajectories from one education level to another, as well as those from education to work, 'are structured by socio-economic factors and institutional structures of formal education, while they are, at the same time, appropriated by individuals in their biographical constructions' (Walther et al. 2015, 351, see also Hegna 2014). Approaching upper secondary education transitions through trajectories emphasises the institutional settings, individual resources and biographical experiences and orientations of the young: that is, the interaction between structures and individuals (Stauber and Walther 2002, 13). In late modernity, transitions within education or from education to work are not seen as only linear and homogeneous, but also as being reversible and fragmented, with uncertain perspectives and a considerable number of options available. Following Stauber and Walther (2002), we assume that individual resources, biographical experiences and orientations together determine whether young people navigate themselves along 'standard biographies' or 'individual pathways' (see also Jahnukainen 2009).

In late modernity, young people usually no longer face one major transition only, but rather a whole set of different types of transition on their path from youth to adulthood. For instance, non-linear 'yo-yo transitions' (Stauber and Walther 2002) are quite common under circumstances where traditional links between family, school and work have eroded. Indeed, a whole host of research on uncertain transitions from youth to adulthood emphasise the de-standardisation, individualisation and fragmentation of transitions. Therefore, in late modern societies young people have to deal with new risks and opportunities in their journey towards adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Surviving 'yo-yo transitions' enhances the ability to cope with the uncertainty and risks and to make multiple and correct choices. Arguably, the alarming number of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training) is a signal that there is a considerable group of young people who are not able to cope.

Drawing on Sen's (1995) theory of human capability, we examine decisions on transitions as a complex developmental process which is influenced by personal characteristics and background, as well as by larger societal factors. Future aspirations reflect the class positions, students being subject to particular resources, opportunities and constraints (Goldthorpe 1996), and are accorded different time perspectives from less-advantaged class positions (Aaltonen and Karvonen 2015). According to Galliot and Graham (2015; see also 2014), both personal characteristics and educational experience are vital in determining an individual's ability to make a career choice. *Career indecision* and *career decision self-efficacy* have a long tradition in explaining individual difficulties in the career decision-making process (e.g. Osipow 1999; see also Choi et al. 2012; Galliot

and Graham 2015). Starting with these premises, we seek not only to look at the individual young people who make choices in their socio-economic and institutional frameworks and structures, but also to analyse how these factors intertwine with determination or indecision concerning educational aspirations.

Our special focus is on decision-making and the aspirations of immigrant youth. There is extensive research literature on the speciality and plurality of educational transitions of immigrant youth, which often but not always results in their educational underachievement. As Jonsson and Rudolphi have claimed (2011), the processes underlying the educational underachievement of young immigrants are related both to differences in educational performance and to their educational choices. The first line of research, often measured as school achievement such as school grades, have shown that immigrant youth often underperform the majority or native youth. While much of the educational disadvantage is explained, by socio-economic background factors like the education level of the parents (Heath and Brinbaum 2007; Rothon 2007), some of the disadvantages are yet to be explained (Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011), and some migration populations outperform the majority or native population (Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012; Kao and Tienda 1998). Language proficiency, less advantaged socioeconomic status and cultural distance from the society and education system, for instance, might reduce the parents' ability to support their children in their schooling and learning.

The latter research concentrates on the potential and actions of educational choices and typically evaluates the costs and benefits that families expect to either incur or achieve through these choices (Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011). Immigrant families might occupy unfavourable positions with regard to income and wealth; beside this, however, they might also evaluate these costs and benefits under the concern of discrimination in the labour market. As Jonsson and Rudolphi conclude, this calculation within the realm of discrimination is complex, since it might be occupation-related and intertwine with the risk of unemployment and future migration expectations (Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011). Previous research has elucidated whether young immigrants estimate their capabilities differently from the majority or native youth. But there are research outcomes showing, for example, that study counselling and knowledge of educational tracks and their requirements (Leonardo and Grubb 2014), as well as social aspects like the impact of family, friendship networks and counter cultures (Goyette and Xie 1999; Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011; Kao and Tienda 1998; Ogbu and Simons 1998), might affect the decision-making processes of immigrant youth and their families.

Immigrant-related studies highlight many contradictions and paradoxes often embodied in the various immigrant-origin groups. One often-stated outcome is that immigrant-origin youth and their families share high educational aspirations and often make choices accordingly (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011; Kao and Tienda 1998; Kristen, Reimer, and Kogan 2008; Raleigh and Kao 2010, for instance), although this does not apply equally to all immigrant or minority groups. In fact, there is no one homogeneous group of immigrants, but a great variety of immigrant families. With this in mind, many researchers have reported similar findings of *educational optimism* (Raleigh and Kao 2010), an *attitude-achievement paradox* (Michelson 1990) and an *immigrant aspiration paradox* (Salikutluk 2013, for instance). These conceptualisations especially capture findings of positive educational attitudes held by immigrants or minorities and/or a belief in education as a vehicle for upward social mobility, despite experienced difficulty

in education or educational underperformance. These paradoxes are quite deep-rooted but difficult to analyse, since their connotations vary between ethnic and socio-economic groups (Kao and Tienda 1998) and may change over the generations (Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn 2009).

Conceptual distinctions between abstract and concrete attitudes help to comprehend the variety of contradictions between high aspirations and low performance. Whereas abstract attitudes constitute dominant ideologies, in other words they concern more general beliefs about education and its ability to foster social mobility, concrete attitudes reflect the 'diverse empirical realities' (Michelson 1990, 45) which are bound to the actual experiences of particular immigrant or minority groups (Michelson 1990; see also Kao and Tienda 1998). A different balance between abstract and concrete aspirations might prevail between age levels and among different immigrant and non-immigrant groups. In our study, we seek to compare the short-term aspirations (upper secondary choice) and long-term aspirations (career aspirations) and their indecisiveness.

A number of studies mention experiences of discrimination, economic instability and the lack of role models as typical of the career decision-making of youth of immigrant origin (Poon 2014). Findings from these studies suggest that ethnic differences in career decision-making confidence and in the perception of career-related barriers may contribute to career indecision (Lopez and Ann-Yi 2006). In general, women are more likely to anticipate gender-related barriers (gender discrimination and potential work-family conflicts, for instance) to career decision-making (Novack and Novack 1996). Moreover, women in ethnic minorities anticipate both gender and racial discrimination. According to Hackett and Byars (1996), beliefs about these barriers and the ability to cope with them may adversely affect their career decision-making confidence and hence cause career indecision.

Educational trajectories of young people of immigrant background in Finland

According to Walther (2006), complex systems of socio-economic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns that structure the journey from youth to adulthood can be comprehended as transition *regimes*. Drawing on Esping-Andersen (1990), the notion of a regime relates to 'existing institutional settings that have a history structured not only by conflicts and interests of specific social actors but also by the set of values and interpretations which they constantly reproduce' (Walther 2006, 124). The regime model clusters groups of countries into ideal types according to overall rationales.

A liberal transition regime – as in the United States and Great Britain – values individual rights and responsibilities more than collective provisions. Self-responsible individuals are conceived as the 'entrepreneurs' of their own labour force. On the other hand, a universalistic transition regime – commonly found in the Nordic Countries – is characterised by an extended public sector and a wide variety of counselling and activation policies. An employment-centred (typical of Central European countries) and a sub-protective regime (a system which prevails in Southern Europe) can also be distinguished (Walther 2006).

In Walther's typology, Finland can be categorised into a *universalistic transition regime*, which is frequently based on a comprehensive school system and post-comprehensive-

school routes in general and vocational education that guarantee equal access to tertiary education. In the universalistic transition regime, counselling is widely institutionalised throughout all stages of education, training and the transition into employment. Importantly, 'disadvantage' is interpreted individually in terms of not being ready to participate in an individualised choice biography. Hence, most 'second chance' options aim at (re-)opening access to regular and recognised options, rather than adaption to low-status careers (Walther 2006).

The Finnish basic education system² consists of a nine-year non-tracking comprehensive school. The basic school (*peruskoulu*) starts at the age of seven and lasts until the student has either completed all nine grades or spent ten years at school. After basic school, students apply for upper secondary education, which is a dual system in Finland. The two types of upper secondary institution are general upper secondary schools (*lukio*) and vocational upper secondary schools (*ammattikoulu*). Both of these tracks are three-year courses whose qualifications give access to tertiary education. Students apply for upper secondary school during the ninth grade via general joint application (*yhteisvalinta*).

Apart from these, there are other options targeted especially at immigrant youth. They can participate, for instance, in pre-vocational preparatory education for immigrants in order to improve language skills and other abilities according to an individual study plan. There are also preparatory studies for general upper secondary education. These studies take one academic year in which the language of instruction is either Finnish or Swedish. In some of the preparatory education, it is also possible to improve basic education grades and take general upper secondary courses.

Previous Finnish studies (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011; Räsänen and Kivirauma 2011; Teräs and Kilpi-Jakonen 2014, for instance) indicate that young immigrants feel positive about school and are more oriented toward general upper secondary than vocational education; some immigrant minorities might even have an aversion to vocational education. Studies focusing on young people of immigrant origin in Finland highlight that in many cases their attachment to school is challenging. Immigrant families value education highly, but when contrasted with the majority, their children underachieve academically and thus their level of education remains lower. To be frank, such young people attend school for a shorter period of time and drop out of education more frequently (Hyvärinen and Erola 2011; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011; Teräs and Kilpi-Jakonen 2014).

The previous school achievement of immigrant youth, their family resources, and in some cases, being an immigrant itself, predicts success or failure in upper secondary education. According to Kilpi-Jakonen (2011), immigrant youth dropping out of education can be explained almost completely by previous school achievement and family resources. Moreover, Hyvärinen and Erola (2011) illustrate that the connection between family background and education is even stronger among immigrant youth than among the majority.

The dropout rate of low-achieving young immigrants from upper secondary education has been explained, for instance, by the failure of the joint application system and young immigrant lower enrolment in a voluntary additional year of basic education (10th grade) (Karppinen 2007). From this perspective, the higher dropout rates among immigrant youth cannot be interpreted as their antipathy towards education, but rather indicate particular system-level problems in career guidance and counselling, and an insufficient level of overall support. The decision to drop out of the education system might, for example,

be due to insufficient support after an unsuccessful choice, or inadequate guidance in enrolling in the 10th grade or some other alternative options, and do not involve the negative attitude in itself (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011).

Research design and questions

The data

The sample included both immigrant-origin and Finnish-origin 9th graders and was compiled from three lower secondary schools from the city of Turku and five from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The schools were selected for their considerable number of students of immigrant origin. Beside the number of immigrants, these schools also offer a wide variety of foreign languages in their curriculum, so that plenty of Finnish-origin students are also enrolled. As a result, these schools consist of students from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. We were not seeking schools that represented average Finnish lower secondary schools, our object being to sample a mix of students that was as culturally rich as possible. Nevertheless, these schools are not private schools that select their students: most of their students come from local neighbourhoods and were assigned by the municipality.

The sample consists of 445 students altogether: 284 (64%) of them were of the Finnish-origin majority, i.e. by definition, both parents and their offspring were born in Finland, whereas, 161 (36%) of them were young people of immigrant origin, i.e. in broad terms, people who are born abroad, or had a foreign background. In other words, we included in this group: (1) first-generation immigrants who were themselves born abroad, (2) second-generation immigrants both of whose parents were born outside Finland, or (3) second-generation young people from mixed-origin or multicultural families, i.e. a family consisting of a union between an immigrant and a person with a native Finn. A majority of the youth of immigrant origin in our data were second generation (67%); thus, they were born in Finland, but with at least one parent(s) born abroad.

For this paper, we constructed a subsample resembling an *exact matching* method, pairing the immigrant background youth with Finnish-origin youth according to three background factors: gender, parents' education and employment level. We matched the immigrant background boys and girls as closely as possible to a Finnish-origin group of boys and girls whose parents had the same education and employment levels, and left out 128 of the Finnish-origin youth. By doing this, we were able to take into account the most relevant background factors that have an effect on their educational choices and expectations, as we see in the next section. In other words, we were able to keep the research frame as open as possible in order to portray the various orientations concerning transitions. After matching the data ($n = 317$), we had 77 boys and 84 girls of immigrant background, and 74 boys and 82 girls of Finnish origin.

Families within this subsample varied by occupation: approximately one-third of the immigrant mothers worked, mainly in the health and social sector, in jobs that typically required an upper secondary education vocational diploma. They were also typically employed in manual and service jobs, and a considerable number were also at home (16% compared with Finnish-origin mothers 5%). Finnish-origin mothers were more often employed in the health and social sector, but in jobs that require a bachelor-level diploma from tertiary education. Teaching, research, and jobs in the public sector were also quite common. The differences between

the education and employment of the immigrant and majority fathers were smaller: Finnish-origin fathers worked more often, but not as a general rule, in professions that required higher education. Immigrant-origin fathers worked more frequently as tertiary-level educated teachers and were entrepreneurs more frequently.

Methods and research questions

Our first objective was operationalised according to the research question: *what combinations and differences are there concerning attitudes, experiences and post-comprehensive aspirations between girls and boys, and youth of a different origin?*

We operationalised six indicators measuring dimensions of attitudes and experiences: (1) *school appreciation* (single statement), (2) *determination of transition* (sum score), (3) *vocational orientation* (sum score), (4) *trust in education* (sum score), (5) *being bullied or discriminated against* (sum score), and (6) *difficulties in learning and studying* (sum score). A detailed list of statements and sum scores with Cronbach's α can be found in Appendix 1. 'School appreciation' consists of a single statement 'at the moment, do you like going to school?' 'Determination of transition' is a sum score of three statements, including 'I have been thinking about my future aspirations', and 'I know what occupation or career I want'. 'Vocational orientation' measured the conceivable educational / professional images of the respondents at the age of 21 with four statements: 'I am working', or 'I have completed the matriculation examination'³ (reversed scale), for example.⁴ 'Trust in education' covers the statements 'I believe that good education guarantees a steady job', and 'I can be successful in life if I complete my schooling well', for instance. 'Being bullied or discriminated against' was measured by two statements concerning whether or not the respondent agreed with the statements 'I have been bullied or discriminated against' at school or during leisure time, and 'Difficulties in learning and studying' measured by seven statements on the extent to which the respondents have difficulty with school assignments (like 'performing oral presentations' or 'working in groups'), peers or teachers.

Indicators of post-comprehensive aspirations were open-ended questions concerning *upper secondary choice* and *career aspiration* 1–2 months prior to the deadline for the post-comprehensive decision (see Appendix 1). We categorised the young people into three groups: general, vocational and indecisive choosers. Students applying for a double degree (*kaksoistutkinto*) were classified as vocational choosers. *Indecisive* indicated that the students did not know, or were not willing to fill in the open-ended question. These groups consist of students who indicated that they did not know what to choose yet (upper secondary choice $n = 22$ and career aspirations $n = 68$) and those who left the question unanswered (upper secondary choice $n = 27$ and career aspirations $n = 16$), but answered other questions in *indecisive* terms. We consider those such answers as an indicator of indecisiveness, since all but one student answered multiple choice questions on the same issue but left those questions at the very beginning of the questionnaire unanswered.

We used the hierarchical cluster analysis for the six variables of attitudes and experiences already listed to portray the general orientation towards transitions and to organise the results thematically. The analysis revealed two clusters – *extended education* and *early transition to work*. We represented the mean differences of the six variables that constituted the clusters by gender and origin (immigrant or Finnish origin) and used cross tabulation with the chi-square test and analysis of variance together with the Kruskal-Wallis

Test (at a significance level of 0.05) to estimate the statistical significance of variation in attitude and experience. All the indicators were standardised. Statistical significance of analysis of variance is included in the text and in the figures with an asterisk (***) = $p < 0.001$; ** = $p < 0.01$; * = $p < 0.05$).

Our second objective was operationalised according to the research question: *what factors explain indecisiveness about the transitions after comprehensive school?* For this question, we analysed separately the group of young people who were (1) indecisive about their upper secondary choice ($n = 68$) and the group of young people who were (2) indecisive about their career aspirations ($n = 84$).

Conceptually *indecisive* refers here to students who are hesitant or unsure about their upper secondary education choices, or career goals in general. Galliot and Graham (2015) have used the term *career certainty*, where 'career uncertain' students responded 'not sure' or 'nothing' as their intentions after finishing school, referring theoretically to career choice opportunities. Since we refer here only to two open questions concerning (1) upper secondary choice, and (2) career goals, without specific theoretical or empirical focus on the psychological process itself, we use the term *indecisive* in its narrow sense to describe the ability or willingness to express one's educational choices and career aspirations.

We used logistic regression analysis to explore the effect of independent factors (trust in education, vocational orientation, school appreciation, being bullied or discriminated against, difficulties in learning and studying, gender, subjective socio-economic position, and origin) by estimating the average mean effects (AME)⁵ for being an indecisive chooser. An indicator of *determination of transition* was left out of the analysis because of multicollinearity. As an indicator of the family's rank in the societal hierarchy we used a measurement of subjective socio-economic position known as The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (see also Appendix 1). This measurement has been developed to capture the common sense of social status across the SES indicators (in a pictorial format it is represented as a 'social ladder' with ten rungs; see, e.g. Adler and Stewart 2007). Subjective socio-economic status could be considered as a separate dimension of a person's objective socio-economic position, and as an indicator of subjective class identification.

Results

Upper secondary choices and career aspirations

The respondents' plans for the transition to upper secondary education are described in Table 1. In general, girls were more oriented towards the general upper secondary school than boys. A considerable proportion (60%) of girls of immigrant background planned to apply for general upper secondary education, usually aiming for a course at the tertiary level; at the other end of the continuum, only 39% of boys of immigrant background preferred the same choice. The plans to apply for vocational education were more evenly distributed among immigrant and Finnish-origin youth. One third of the boys of immigrant background (33%) and girls with a majority background (32%) named vocational upper secondary school as their preferred choice. By contrast, the group of *indecisive choosers* consists mainly of boys; strikingly, 29% of boys with an immigrant background and 27% of boys with a majority background were not sure about their choice or did not express their plans 1–2 months prior to the choice. The disparity, especially among girls with a majority background (11%), is evident.

Table 1. Plans for upper secondary choice (1–2 months prior to the deadline for choosing) by gender and origin, $n = 327$ (%).

	Upper secondary choice			Total
	Vocational	General	Indecisive	
Girl (Finnish-origin)	26 32%	47 57%	9 11%	82 100%
Boy (Finnish-origin)	17 23%	36 49%	20 27%	74 100%
Girl (immigrant-origin)	18 22%	50 60%	16 19%	84 100%
Boy (immigrant-origin)	25 33%	30 39%	22 29%	77 100%
Total	86 27%	163 52%	67 21%	316 100%

$\chi^2(6) = 14.36; p < 0.05.$

In considering their upper secondary choices, the young people mentioned career aspirations that required tertiary-level education (49%, Table 2) most often. Highly educated occupations were aspired to more among the immigrant-origin young, but a considerable number of immigrant-origin boys also aimed at vocational training or self-employed occupations (31%). As a general rule, Finnish-origin youth were apparently more indecisive when pondering their future career choices; in contrast, immigrant-origin youth, and especially boys, were the most predetermined in their career aspirations. Nevertheless, Tables 1 and 2 reveal the potential unrealism of occupational aspirations: 57% of immigrant origin boys aspire to occupations requiring tertiary education, yet only 39% have decided to enter general upper secondary education, which most clearly leads that way.

The 'Paradox of immigrant schooling': positivity toward education despite learning and studying difficulties

We clustered our school-related attitude and experience factors on two dimensions using the hierarchical cluster analysis. The variables 'school appreciation', 'transition determination' and 'trust in education' were charged to the *cluster of extended education* and the 'vocational orientation', 'difficulties in learning' and 'experience of being bullied or discriminated against' variables were applied to the *cluster of early transition to work*. These

Table 2. Career aspirations by education level, gender and origin, $n = 327$ (%).

	Career aspiration by education level			Total
	Occupations requiring vocational training / self-employed	Occupations requiring tertiary education	Indecisive	
Girl (Finnish-origin)	17 21%	40 49%	24 30%	81 100%
Boy (Finnish-origin)	24 32%	20 27%	30 41%	74 100%
Girl (immigrant-origin)	13 15%	50 60%	21 25%	84 100%
Boy (immigrant-origin)	24 31%	44 57%	9 12%	77 100%
Total	78 25%	154 49%	84 27%	316 100%

$\chi^2(6) = 28.94; p < 0.001.$

clusters suggest that the indicators of individual experiences and attitudes towards them reflect two distinctive trajectories, academically and vocationally oriented. Based on these general orientations, the differences in these attitudes and experiences within different origin and gender groups are reported in Figures 1–2.

Figure 1 presents the first dimension of hierarchical cluster analysis and the distribution of attitudes and experiences in each item. The respondents were divided along two axes: their *origin* (immigrant / Finnish origin) and *gender* (female / male). In general, youth of immigrant origin emphasised school appreciation ($F(3,311) = 12.33, p = 0.001$) and trust in education ($F(3,313) = 4.47, p = 0.004$). Immigrant boys in particular showed a strong overall positive attitude towards education; immigrant girls also shared some of these characteristics, but to a slightly lesser extent. In contrast, Finnish-origin youth, especially boys, did not like school nor did they trust in education. Finnish boys particularly seemed to lack predetermination in respect of transition ($F(3,313) = 3.50, p = 0.016$).

Figure 2 demonstrates the second dimension of the hierarchical cluster analysis and, again, the distribution of attitudes and experiences in each item. Vocational orientation was equally shared among all the students ($F(3,313) = 0.62, p = 0.602$), although vocational upper secondary choice was more common among boys (see Table 1). Among all groups, boys of immigrant origin have undoubtedly faced the most difficulties in learning and studying, whereas Finnish girls had the least problems in that area ($F(3,311) = 6.53, p = 0.001$). The fact that boys with an immigrant background especially had the most positive attitude towards education and simultaneously faced the most difficulties at school, is definitively a paradox for their transitions. It is also noteworthy that experiences of being bullied or discriminated against were not particularly common among immigrant youth, but rather among Finnish-origin girls. Finnish-origin boys reported the least instances of being bullied or discriminated against and immigrant-origin youth were in

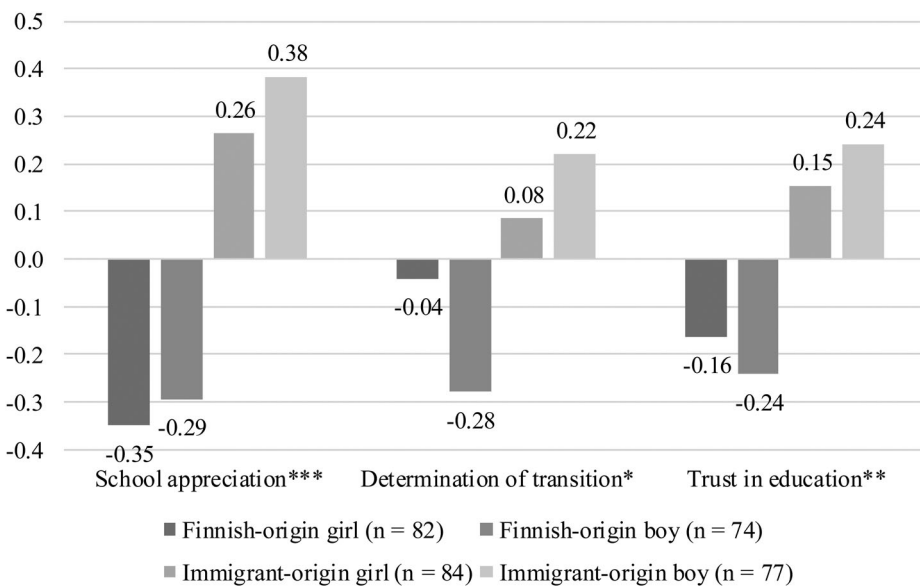


Figure 1. Cluster of extended education by gender and origin, statistical significance indicated with an asterisk (¹Kruskall-Wallis test).

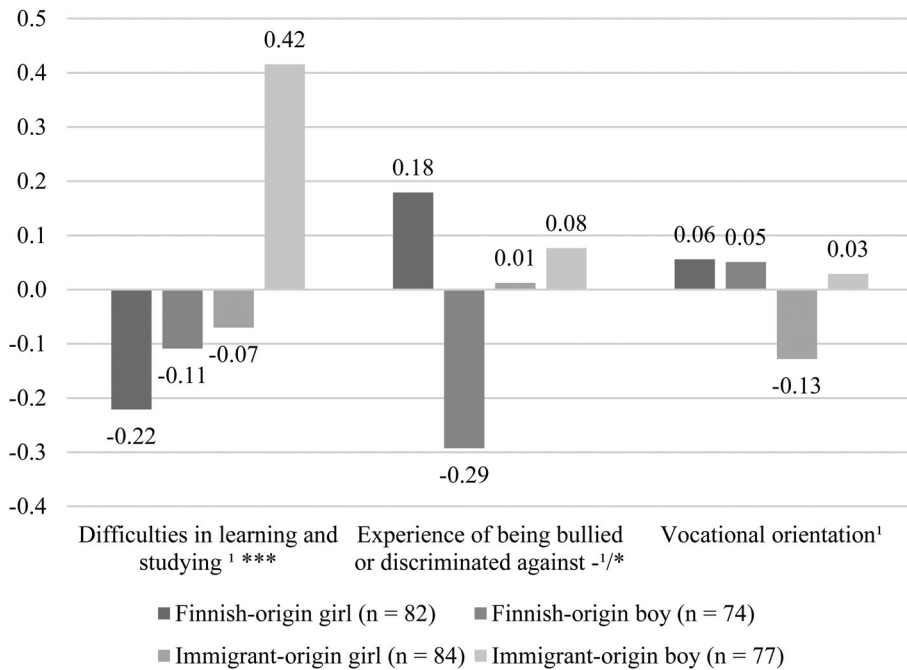


Figure 2. Cluster of early transition to work by gender and origin, statistical significance indicated by an asterisk (¹Kruskall-Wallis test).

between Finnish-origin boys and girls ($F(3,307) = 3.12, p = 0.026$), but this outcome was statistically close to rejection and was not significant in the Kruskal-Wallis test.

The indecisiveness of post-compulsory transitions

Our special emphasis was on transitional indecision and lack of determination in transitions. The latter, measured by 3 statements, was generally the most common among Finnish-origin boys (Figure 2). Although indecisive upper secondary choice was most prevalent among both Finnish-origin and immigrant-origin boys (see Table 1), the immigrant-origin boys were also the most determined in their transitions (Figure 1) and most decisive about their career aspirations (Table 2). Hence, the immigrant-origin youth, especially boys, share much stronger decisiveness in post-secondary aspirations, although they still ponder their upper secondary choices. This result was also confirmed by analysing open-ended questions of educational and career aspirations after upper secondary education, since almost all immigrant-origin boys (94%) expressed either their educational or occupational aspirations, whereas Finnish-origin boys were the most indecisive (62%), and immigrant-origin girls (78%) and Finnish-origin (80%) girls fell somewhere in between ($\chi^2 = 22.07; df = 3; p = 0.001$).

We used logistic regression analysis to explore the effect of independent factors (gender, family background factors, schooling attitudes and experiences) further by estimating the average mean effects (AME) for being indecisive about upper secondary choice ($n = 68$) and career aspirations ($n = 86$) (see, e.g. Mood 2010; Onukwugha, Bergtold, and Jain 2015). We ran the analysis in three models: first with origin, gender and the

interaction between them, second with the indicator of subjective socio-economic status, and third with the variables of attitudes and experiences.

In the first models (Tables 3 and 4), gender explained the indecisiveness of the upper secondary choice, whereas the origin changed the probabilities of the career indecision. The indecisive upper secondary choice was more prevalent among boys, and indecisiveness about career aspirations among Finnish-origin youth, even when the interaction with gender was modelled. Gender and origin had an interaction in the first models when estimating indecisive career aspirations, but this interaction became non-significant in the last model. On average, the probability of being indecisive about upper secondary choice was 0.12 smaller (a 12% point decrease) for girls than for boys and the probability of being indecisive about career aspirations was 0.15 smaller (a 15% point decrease) for immigrant-origin youth when compared with Finnish-origin youths. The average change in the probability of being indecisive for the career aspirations of immigrant girls compared with Finnish boys was 0.18. Finnish-origin boys were the most indecisive about their future career aspirations.

The overall picture was steady when the subjective socio-economic status was modelled in the second models, since the same explanatory variables remained significant and there was no significant change in the average mean effects. Additionally, upper secondary choice was more often indecisive, especially among young people from the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder and among boys. Indecisiveness about career aspirations was more common among Finnish-origin youth, regardless of their gender or socio-economic status.

The attitudes and experiences were added to the analysis in the third models (Tables 3 and 4). The explanatory effects of gender and family background remained statistically significant, but choice was elaborated, especially the understanding of the factors explaining indecisiveness about upper secondary choice. Students who appreciated school less or were vocationally oriented were most likely to be indecisive about their upper secondary choices. The young people who had not decided their future careers more often lacked trust in education or reported less difficulties in learning and studying.

To sum up, the indecisiveness about upper secondary choice was connected to gender and socio-economic background. Boys rather than girls, and students who consider their families positioned among the lower echelons of society were the least sure about their upper secondary choices. Upper secondary choices were also related to vocational orientation and school appreciation, whereas career uncertainty was linked to weak trust in education and lack of difficulties in learning and studying. The socio-economic factors were generally relatively weak in explaining indecisiveness, since origin was the only variable that had statistically significant effects on indecisiveness about career aspirations, and subjective socio-economic status alone was linked to indecisiveness about upper secondary choice.

The most significant result for our research objectives concerned immigrant and Finnish origin in relation to career aspirations and the non-significance of origin in relation to indecisiveness about upper secondary choice. When the socio-economic indicator and gender were analysed together, immigrant and Finnish-origin youth were equally decisive and certain about their upper secondary choices, but those of immigrant origin were less indecisive about their career aspirations. Nevertheless, since logistic regression models included only a very few independent variables, we cannot conclude that origin or the

Table 3. Logistic regression model for indecisive upper secondary choice, average marginal effects (AME).

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	AME	Low.CI ^a	Upp.CI	AME	Low.CI ^a	Upp.CI	AME	Low.CI ^a	Upp.CI
Girl	-0.119	-0.191	-0.046***	-0.120	-0.192	-0.048***	-0.129	-0.222	-0.037**
Immigrant-origin	0.078	0.001	0.156*	0.081	0.003	0.159*	0.089	-0.005	0.183 ^{ns}
Gender* Origin	0.022	-0.135	0.179 ^{ns}	0.031	-0.126	0.188 ^{ns}	0.075	-0.110	0.260 ^{ns}
Subjective socio-economic status				-0.025	-0.045	-0.005*	-0.025	-0.049	-0.001*
School appreciation							-0.054	-0.105	-0.003*
Difficulties in learning and studying							0.029	-0.017	0.076 ^{ns}
Experiences of being bullied or discriminated against							-0.062	-0.126	0.003 ^{ns}
Trust in education							0.006	-0.044	0.057 ^{ns}
Vocational orientation							0.053	0.008	0.098*

Statistical significance indicated by an asterisk (*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$).

^aConfidence interval (95%).

Table 4. Logistic regression model for indecisive career aspirations, average marginal effects (AME).

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	AME	Low.CI ^a	Upp.CI	AME	Low.CI ^a	Upp.CI	AME	Low.CI ^a	Upp.CI
Girl	0.019	-0.063	0.101 ^{ns}	0.021	-0.061	0.103 ^{ns}	0.033	-0.063	0.130 ^{ns}
Immigrant-origin	-0.150	-0.231	-0.070***	-0.145	-0.226	-0.063***	-0.139	-0.242	-0.036**
Gender* Origin	0.182	0.022	0.342*	0.179	0.017	0.340*	0.161	-0.030	0.352 ^{ns}
Subjective socio-economic status				-0.004	-0.029	0.020 ^{ns}	-0.003	-0.031	0.025 ^{ns}
School appreciation							-0.011	-0.069	0.047 ^{ns}
Difficulties in learning and studying							-0.066	-0.131	-0.001*
Experiences of being bullied or discriminated against							-0.034	-0.105	0.036 ^{ns}
Trust in education							-0.059	-0.112	-0.006*
Vocational orientation							-0.021	-0.072	0.030 ^{ns}

Statistical significance indicated by an asterisk (*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$).

^aConfidence interval (95%)

actual combination of variables in all are the only factors explaining indecisiveness. We can only estimate which factors available for this analyses were related to indecisiveness at a very general level. It is worth noting that before the school-related experiences and attitudes were modelled, origin still had a small but statistically significant effect from, indicating that immigrant-origin youth were more indecisive concerning their upper secondary choice.

Finally, to elaborate the combination of indecisiveness and lack of determination, we assembled a group of 'drifters' who were (1) less determined in their transitions than average, (2) indecisive about their upper secondary choice, or (3) indecisive about their career aspirations. Students that met at least two of these criteria were categorised as *drifters* ($n = 61$). Drifting through the first transition after comprehensive school was most common among Finnish-origin boys (38%) and immigrant-origin girls (19%) in our categorisation. The most determined and certain about their choices and aspirations were immigrant-origin boys (9%) and Finnish-origin girls (12%) ($\chi^2 = 24.34$; $df = 3$; $p = 0.001$) who, curiously, had also felt the most discrimination or had been bullied.

Summary

Our first objective was to analyse the variation in attitudes, experiences and aspirations concerning post-comprehensive transition by gender and origin (Finnish or immigrant) of young people. Following the dual model of the Finnish education system at upper secondary level, we formed two chooser groups (general academic and vocational) and a group of those who were uncertain about their choice (indecisive). We concluded that Finnish-origin and immigrant-origin youth relatively equally aimed at general and vocational tracks and were equally indecisive about their upper secondary choices. Nevertheless, and although differences were modest, immigrant-origin girls applied most often for general academic upper secondary education and they, as well as immigrant-origin boys, had occupation aspirations that required tertiary-level education more often than Finnish-origin youths. Almost one in three of the immigrant-origin boys also aspired towards vocational training or self-employed occupations.

Taking a closer look at immigrant-origin and gender, youth of immigrant origin in general and boys in particular had more positive attitudes towards education and transitions; they liked being at school more, had a greater trust in education and were more determined in their post-secondary transition than their Finnish counterparts. This probably reflects the same immigrant 'optimism', high and persistent educational aspirations related to determination of career choice, that Raleigh and Kao (2010) have explored. Since our young people also reported plenty of difficulties in learning and studying, we concluded that many immigrant-origin youth share a contradiction we termed the 'paradox of immigrant schooling', which is the combination of a *positivity toward education* and *learning and studying difficultys*, confirming and increasing the understanding of aspiration-achievement (e.g. Salikutluk 2013) or attitude-achievement (Michelson 1990) paradoxes. According to Michelson (1990), we should pay attention to the dynamics of pragmatic and abstract beliefs, as well as practical levels of experience in evaluating the achievement behaviour. In this respect, the paradox of immigrant schooling involves quite abstract overall positivity toward education, as well as a contradiction between actual experiences like simultaneously liking school and having difficulty at school.

Although we did not analyse beliefs (Michelson 1990) or explain the educational outcomes or actual choices, the outcome of some mismatch of actual experience, combined with high overall expectations, shows one essential dynamic of the difficulty that immigrant-origin youth share in evaluating their opportunity structure.

Our second objective was to analyse the indecisiveness about transitions. We focused on the groups that were indecisive about their aspirations or were drifting through their post-comprehensive choice. Drifting through upper secondary choice without a determinate attitude or clear vision about upper secondary or post-upper secondary aspirations was most common among Finnish-origin boys and then among immigrant-origin girls. Nevertheless, certain groups, especially immigrant-origin boys, were hesitant only about their upper secondary choice, but had determined aspirations towards the future, since a variety of indicators showed that immigrant-origin youth were quite decisive about their career aspirations. To summarise, we might argue that, beside the immigrant paradox of schooling, we found an immigrant-related contradiction between determined and quite high occupational aspirations, and uncertainty about upper secondary choices, especially among the boys.

Our findings indicate that the immigrant-origin youth in general have positive attitudes to and expectations of education. It is reasonable to believe that most of the immigrant-origin youth will take to upper secondary education well and succeed in their 'individual pathways' (Stauber and Walther 2002) with their positive attitudes and expectations, which might even overcome difficulties in learning and studying in upper secondary education. Another aspect of the polarisation of immigrant-origin youth (Hyvärinen and Erola 2011), is that those who are detached from education, underachieve academically, or drop out of school. Our analysis indicates that this detachment might have some explanation in the contradictions and paradoxes mentioned before, an imbalance between lower-secondary difficulties in learning and studying (see also Kalalahti et al. 2017), uncertainty about upper secondary choice, certainty about career aspirations, and tertiary-level aspirations. Further, in a choice-driven and dual education system (see Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012), successful navigation to vocational and self-employment occupations would require broad skills and knowledge of upper secondary opportunities which immigrant-origin families might not possess. Children from upper or middle-class Finnish-origin families without severe difficulties in learning and studying have an easy, often general, upper-secondary choice, whereas their immigrant-origin counterparts encounter a much more complex position. The lack of parental knowledge might also explain why young people who positioned their families among the lower echelons of society were more indecisive about their upper secondary choices.

Especially in the case of immigrant-origin boys, the contradiction between the strong trust in education and multiple difficulties in learning and studying can be crucial in seeking the route to an aspired-to occupation. Evidently, the studying difficulties are obstacles to successful 'individual pathways', despite the positive attitude. Besides, it seems that the students of immigrant origin are generally more decisive in their career aspirations, and their horizon of aspiration ranges further than the current choice in secondary education. Our analysis indicates that the transition indecisiveness intertwines with family background and individual attitudes and orientations, but the explanatory model is different as between immediate educational choice and far-reaching occupational aspiration. We also conclude that the indecisiveness about transition relates to general beliefs,

such as trust in education and vocational orientations, rather than to concrete experiences like difficulties in learning and studying. These findings support those of Walther and his colleagues (2015) that decision-making is neither purely structural nor individual, but an on-going biographical process embedded in a broader social context.

We might also ponder whether decisiveness in career aspirations reflects abstract attitudes for the immigrant-origin young person (a certain 'dominant ideology'), not concrete attitudes ('empirical realities') based on individual experiences (Michelson 1990, 45). Contrary to abstract post-secondary aspirations, the young people may ponder the upper secondary choices taking place in 1–2 months after the survey, based on their attitudes and individual experiences such as liking school, which made them more decisive about their upper secondary choices. These findings are to be elaborated in more detail with the interview data collected from the same sample, but peer relations in particular might be one dimension that explains these effects.

Our approach was general – we categorised all youth with immigrant background into one group in order to find common features while being aware that there is no one single homogenous group of immigrants. We will continue our longitudinal study with interviews and follow-ups, emphasising the life biographies of the young people and the various meanings given to transitions in their individual pathways towards adulthood. It is important to note that neither the students nor the schools involved in our project are a representative sample of immigrant- or Finnish-origin youth or educational establishments in Finland, since schools were selected for their considerable number of immigrant-origin youths and students were selected for this subsample because of their individual features. The object of the selective sampling was to reach and engage enough immigrant and Finnish-origin girls and boys in the study in order to understand the similarities and differences of the preconditions of upper secondary education transitions.

Notes

1. Transitions and educational trajectories of immigrant youth: A 4-year longitudinal study from compulsory to further education. Funded by the Academy of Finland during 2014–2018. University of Helsinki & University of Turku, Finland. <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/transit-okl/about-transit-research/>.
2. <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/koulutusjaerjestelmae/?lang=en>.
3. The Finnish Matriculation Examination is the examination taken at the end of secondary education to qualify for entry into university.
4. This measurement was adopted from the School Health Promotion Study (see, for example, Aaltonen and Karvonen 2015).
5. We conducted this analysis with STATA-software; see, e.g., Pinzon 2016; Onukwugha, Bergtold, and Jain 2015.

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Appendix 1. Sum scores, statements and Cronbach's α

Cluster of Extended Education

Determination of transition (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.56$): 'I have been thinking about my future aspirations', 'I know my future depends on me', 'I know what occupation or career I want'.

School appreciation: 'At the moment, do you like going to school?'

Trust in education (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.66$): 'I believe that good education guarantees a steady job', 'I am ready to study for several years', 'I can be successful in life if I do my studies well'.

Cluster of Early Transition Work

Vocational orientation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$): 'I have a vocational degree', 'I am working', 'I am studying at the university' (reversed scale), 'I have completed the matriculation examination' (reversed scale), 'I want to have a job as soon as possible'.

Difficulties in learning and studying (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$): 'Following teaching in class', 'Working in groups', 'Performing tasks that require writing', 'Performing tasks that require reading (e.g. from a

book), 'Performing oral presentations', 'Getting along with school mates', 'Getting along with the teachers'.

Being bullied or discriminated against (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$): 'I have been bullied or discriminated against in my leisure time', 'I have been bullied or discriminated against at school.'

Post-comprehensive aspirations

Upper secondary choices

'What is your first choice in the joint application [*yhteisvalinta*]? Fill in the school or institution and the program if you have one.'

Career aspiration

'What kind of work would you like to do as an adult?'

Subjective socio-economic status

'Imagine that all the Finns were standing on this ladder.

At the top, the people are doing the best – they have the most money, the best education and work that people respect. At the bottom, people are not doing that well – they have the least money, not that much education or work, or they have jobs that people don't appreciate.