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**THOUGHT PIECE**

# Rethinking transition: What happens when young people leave school early?

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this thought piece we reflect on the transitions of young adults who left school early. Based on empirical findings from qualitative research conducted in Austria and Belgium we show the diversity and complexity in the transitions of early school leavers into the labour market and education and training system. Early school leavers very often try to re-engage in education and training in order to improve their labour market situation. However, drawing on Bourdieu's capital theory, we show that early school leavers from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to re-engage in education programmes that lead to an upper-secondary education certificate. In contrast, those coming from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds frequently enroll in short-term training programmes that aim to accelerate the transition into the labour market. Therefore, we discuss the role of agents in employment services and other related institutions in social exclusion processes, since policies for activating and re-engaging early school leavers in education programmes or the labour market often fail. Policy recommendations that aim to strengthen the labour market accessibility of early school leavers conclude this piece. Individuals face numerous transitions during their lives, characterised by age (e.g., adolescence, adulthood), occupational status (e.g., education and training, retirement) or life events (e.g., school entry, marriage). Over 100 years ago, van Gennep (1960/2004 [1909]) introduced the notion of 'transition' in academic literature and emphasised the specific rites that support it. For young people, a typical rite in the sphere of education is a festive ceremony during which they are assigned a new status by receiving a specific certificate. Referring to van Gennep, Glaser and Strauss (1971/2010) developed a broader concept, assuming that transitions in modern societies are becoming less ritualised and standardised and more individualised. They extended their

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concept of 'status passage' to general changes in different life situations (e.g., change of school), whereas van Genneep (1909) focused on transitions at certain stages of life (e.g., school-to-work). Besides these typical transitions which are an integral part of social life, some are less visible and therefore less often reflected upon. This is the case for the very heterogeneous and dialectical transitions of young people who leave school early.

School-to-work transitions are often accompanied by others, such as detachment from parents, becoming more self-sufficient or developing stable relationships. While Glaser and Strauss (1971/2010) still described this transition as a linear movement from one particular status to another, more recent conceptualisations no longer consider transitions as linear processes. Using the 'yo-yo' as a metaphor, they describe the typical back-and-forth movements of young people between adolescence and adulthood because of their longer economic dependency on their parents (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003; Walther & Stauber, 2002). In general, these different theoretical stances all view a transition as a movement from a well-known and familiar field (such as school) to a new and strange field (such as an apprenticeship). This understanding is especially relevant when reflecting upon the non-traditional transitions of young people who left school early.

## 2 | WHICH FIELDS DO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS ENTER?

Early school leavers have heterogeneous social backgrounds and educational trajectories, so they experience different transitions after leaving school. In the EU, almost 60% of early school leavers are unemployed, while this is only the case for 15% of young people in the same age cohort who obtained an upper-secondary education certificate (Eurostat, 2016). This shows the importance of educational credentials for successful labour market transitions. Although statistical data demonstrate the severe labour market situation of early school leavers, they are mere 'snapshots' and cannot depict possible life course changes. Here, we aim to go beyond these data by reflecting on the stories of early school leavers from our earlier qualitative research<sup>1</sup> by unveiling the complex relationships between the transitions of early school leavers and their lack of capital endowments (Bourdieu, 1997).

The transitions of early school leavers are very different: some young people stay at home for years, some enter the labour market as low-skilled workers and some try to re-engage in school immediately after leaving, but then leave school again. Some even spend years in publicly-funded education and training programmes in which they obtain particular certificates but never an upper-secondary education certificate (Gitschthaler, 2017; MacDonald, 2008; Van Caudenberg, Van Praag, Nouwen, Clycq, & Timmerman, 2017). This diversity also results from the wide range of prevention and intervention strategies which vary across education and training systems (Downes, Nairz-Wirth, & Rusinaite, 2017). Unlike these linear movements of early school leavers, their subsequent journeys through the education system and the labour market challenge the traditional understanding of transition as a linear movement. In fact, 'yo-yo' transitions (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003; Walther & Stauber, 2002) or turbulent trajectories, both inside and outside education and, between jobs and unemployment must be classified as such.

Successful transitions depend on the structure of the education and training system, one's capital endowment and the labour market, as shown by studies which emphasise the country-specific differences in the labour market status of early school leavers (Ecorys, 2013; Gesthuizen, Solga, & Künster, 2011; Van Alphen, 2012). Despite the often cited displacement argument which explains the lesser demand for low-skilled workers because of technological progress and the educational expansion, the structure of the (country-specific) education and training systems plays a crucial role. A highly-stratified system according to socio-demographic characteristics results in a more homogeneous group of early school leavers, which mostly comprises young people with less (acknowledged) cultural and social capital (Gesthuizen et al., 2011; Van Alphen, 2012). This fosters the negative perception of early

school leavers as lacking basic qualification (discredit) and being unable to achieve what is socially expected from young adults, namely to obtain an upper-secondary certificate (stigmatisation).

### 3 | DO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES REALLY OFFER A SECOND CHANCE?

Early school leavers often realise that low-skilled work does not lead to long-term employment and good labour conditions. Hence, they try to improve their labour market chances by re-engaging in education and training (Ecorys, 2013), with diverging success rates depending on their social, economic and cultural capital endowments.

The finding that low-qualified young people have 'normal' aspirations (e.g., finding a job, being economically independent, having a family) but limited chances to realise them applies more especially to those from socio-economically excluded backgrounds. Insufficient financial and/or socio-emotional support, as well as a lack of orientation and information capital frequently cause them to downgrade their aspirations. Their limited opportunities are often reflected in the short-term courses – often in low-paid, gender-stereotyped vocational fields – offered to them by employment services or other institutions to accelerate their labour market entry. These programmes obviously aim to bridge phases of unemployment, but lead neither to an upper-secondary educational certificate nor to labour market integration and social security (MacDonald, 2008; Simmons, Russell, & Thompson, 2014). Referring to Kronauer's (1998/2010) concept of 'excluding inclusion', participation in such programmes risks prolonging their troubled trajectories and contributing to their further stigmatisation.

Conversely, young people with higher capital endowments mainly re-engage in educational programmes that confer an upper-secondary certificate (Gitschthaler, 2017; Kieselbach, 2003; Tolonen, 2008). This can be explained by their social relationships, which provide economic and information capital and a habitus that better fit the specific field requirements. Thus, they have a better 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this group, some want to explore different lifestyles, like living abroad before re-engaging in education, as described in Arnett's concept of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000). Others try to establish themselves in 'alternative fields of activity', opting for an alternative to their status of unemployment by turning their relatively high cultural capital into professional work (e.g., developing computer games, playing poker professionally, teaching equestrianism).

### 4 | HOW TO ADDRESS THE HETEROGENEOUS SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS?

Policy makers need to consider the heterogeneity of school-to-work transitions of early school leavers to design the labour market and educational programmes that suit this group's needs. Furthermore, these transitions vary across educational contexts (Gesthuizen et al., 2011; Van Alphen, 2012). Differentiating within this group is crucial, since turbulent trajectories and social inequalities are reinforced in both regular secondary education and alternative forms of education and training and depend on educational system features (MacDonald, 2008; Simmons et al., 2014; Van Alphen, 2012).

Some policy recommendations can be formulated. First, the specific nature of the school-to-work transitions of early school leavers should be considered together with processes leading to early school leaving. As suggested by the 'yo-yo' metaphor, the school-to-work transitions are seen as dialectical and should be approached less linearly than before (Ryan, 2001). Furthermore, young people need support during 'turning points' (Bynner, 2005) in their careers by offering post-care measures (e.g., mentoring) that could provide high-quality information about different options and their consequences (Ecorys, 2013). Second, agents in employment services and other institutions should consider and better understand the long-term impact of education and training programmes that do not lead to upper-secondary education certificates. Some contribute to the further

stigmatisation of this group and trigger processes of self-elimination by deteriorating young people's aspirations (Kronauer, 1998/2010). The provision of high-quality VET programmes could not only prevent youngsters from leaving school early, but also attract those who initially left and re-engage themselves in education and training, and reinforce the idea that life-long learning is a process (Cedefop, 2016; Ecorys, 2013). Community lifelong learning centres provision of non-formal education, which may be combined with formal education pathways as part of a lifelong learning process, may also facilitate re-engagement for those alienated from the system (Downes, 2011). Third, when early school leavers re-engage in education or training, academic research should not solely focus on their further transition into the labour market, but should also consider the quality of the job and transitions into other spheres of life.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Twenty eight interviews with early school leavers in Austria (Nairz-Wirth, Gitschthaler, & Feldmann, 2014) and 9 interviews with early school leavers and 9 interviews with youngsters in alternative learning arenas in Flanders, Belgium (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017).

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