

# Educational choices of the future

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A sociological inquiry into micro-politics in education

Goran Puaca



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND WORK SCIENCE

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### Abstract

This thesis investigates how students' practical considerations for future choices in education and occupations correspond to policy objectives of socially productive educational choices. This is conveyed through the primary aim of analyzing the correspondence between on the one hand educational policy intentions and on the other hand students' educational choices and the social and cultural conditions that structure them. These concerns are addressed with specific aims in four different articles. However, the following research questions have been of central guidance for framing the main issue: (1) How are economic, political and social processes brought together on a policy level for motivating and regulating individuals' educational choices (Article I)? (2) How do students' educational choices correspond with policy intentions and the assumptions of rational choice that the latter are founded on (Article I-II)? (3) How are students' educational choices shaped by wants and identities (Article II-IV)? (4) What is the relationship between students' want formation and relevant social and cultural conditions (Article II-IV)?

The empirical material consisted of interviews and semi-structured questionnaires with young people in secondary education and higher education, and interviews with school staff in secondary education. Empirical inquiries were also conveyed via a semiotic content analysis on recent policy: specifically the Swedish Long-Term Surveys from 2008 and 2011. In comprehensive terms, the rationality of choices from both how choice is practiced and what is desired has been of primary interest. These concerns are addressed by the following emphases in the different investigations.

In Article I the form of government that aims to shape actors' wants and decisions in relation to productive educational choices in the Long-Term Surveys is investigated. The forms of rationality in general, and the suggested implementation of rational choices in particular, are here analyzed through a critical semiotic analysis. The result of the study lifts forward critical distinctions of ontological and epistemological assumptions in how to delineate social and economic claims for the *righteousness*, *reasonableness* and *necessity* of choices.

Article II focuses on how students' wants and choices are formed in a vocational (vehicle maintenance program) and a theoretical (social science program) upper secondary education. By examining students' want-lists complemented by interviews with students and school staff the study argues that it is important to view wants in an organic totality based on individual and collective experiences. The results show a pragmatic rationality in students' decision-making, which challenges instrumental rationality in educational choices. This is importantly about how structural support guides students' decisions over the future under conditions of the radical uncertainty that marks decisions in open social systems.

In article III the analysis of vocational and theoretical upper secondary students' want formations are further developed in relation to their educational environment. Through analysis of interviews with students, teachers, principals and student counselors the article pays particular attention to institutional school effects and school habitus. The results showed that different forms of school habitus in the investigated programs could be empirically attributed to how students form their wants.

Article IV investigates identity work via a semi-structured questionnaire and group interviews with students from a Swedish Human Resource program in higher education. What in particular was investigated was how symbolic signification of education and occupations occurred within education. The actual meaning students attributed to education rested importantly on collective sense-making. Indicated in the results is that the meaning of being a student incorporates an awareness of social status and an ability to form relatively autonomous personal projects related to social forces.

The result of the thesis points to a lack of correspondence between, on the one hand, political notions of how rational and utility maximizing choices should be made based on effective matching of education and working life and, on the other hand, how young people form their paths into the future in practice through education choices. Students often make their educational choices due to a lack of better alternatives and are often uncertain about where their choices will take them in life. These results show that there is a need for concrete support in schools in order to turn students' insecurity about the future into useful strategies for educational and occupational paths.

Keywords: *Educational choice, micro-politics, want-formation, habitus, identity*