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Tolonen, Tarja

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Tarja Tolonen¹  and Sinikka Aapola-Kari²

Abstract

In this article, we analyse the narratives of Finnish young people regarding their educational choices for upper secondary education in a theoretical framework inspired by Bourdieu's forms of capital and Skeggs' concept of the classed value of self. Our data consist of interviews with 66 ninth-graders, produced in the Youth in Time research project. In the narratives, we identified six frames of choice between general upper secondary and vocational education and outside formal education. We also recognized that there was hesitation and various strategies that young people utilized in making their educational choices, based on their social and cultural capitals. Young people become aware of their value in the educational market through this process of making their choice. Their educational choices are complex and intertwined with gender, social class, social relations, racialization and locality.

Keywords

Educational choices, educational transitions, social capital, cultural capital, value of the self, vocational education, general upper secondary education

Introduction

Every spring, tens of thousands of ninth-graders in Finland participate in the national joint application process and choose their preferences for upper secondary education. Many ninth-graders have difficulties, as their vocational destinations are unclear.

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

² Finnish Youth Research Society, Helsinki, Finland.

Corresponding author:

Tarja Tolonen, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, P. Box 18, Unioninkatu 35, Helsinki 00014, Finland.

E-mail: tarja.tolonen@helsinki.fi

However, the application process is unavoidable, and the choices young people make have important consequences for their future educational careers. In this article, we focus on young people's own meaning-making regarding their educational choices for upper secondary education, while interpreting them in a structural theoretical frame. The process of making educational choices needs to be contextualized within the national education system (see Boone & Van Houtte, 2013; Brunila et al., 2011; Yoon, 2020). In Finland, for instance, there are many contradictory expectations towards education. First, education is seen as the main way of ensuring an adequate labour force, as the younger cohorts are diminishing. Education is also regarded as the key measure to prevent the exclusion of young people from the labour market (Government Programme, 2019) as well as to reduce social inequalities. Education is considered as the main—or only—pathway to the labour market. Research shows that in educational policy documents young people are increasingly expected to make 'ideal and rational educational choices' and efficiently proceed through education to work in order to be successful citizens (Hegna, 2014; Nikunen, 2017).

Critical educational researchers, such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Willis (1978) and Ball (2010), suggest that education has a significant role in the reproduction of inequality in society. According to Bourdieu and Passeron, this happens through educational cultural practices based on 'symbolic violence'. This means that education naturalizes the privilege of those already in powerful positions, thus passing their privilege on to the next generation and excluding others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Yoon, 2020). Earlier studies suggest that inequalities are reproduced within families' everyday life and educational practices, and also in transitions into the next level of education, mediated by an unequal distribution of social and cultural capital (Holland et al., 2007; Kalalahti et al., 2017; Kurki et al., 2019; Reay, 1998; Salovaara, 2021; Shildrick et al., 2012; Skeggs, 1997; Willis, 1978). Our research continues this critical tradition. Our special contribution is to combine educational choice theory with critical social youth research, in order to show how the inequalities in education are formed in subtle ways in everyday life. We use Skeggs' (2004) term 'value of self' to point out how an individual's educational value is formed not only in relation to social class differences but also in relation to gender and racialization in the Finnish context (cf. McNay, 2004; Mirza & Meeto, 2018). In addition, our empirical analysis highlights the six frames of educational choices our interviewees described, with their varying strategies and hesitations. Our contribution is to make visible young people's complex processes of making decisions about their educational future and elaborating on the type of hesitations young people from different kinds of backgrounds with differing resources have in these processes. Our findings may even help professionals working with young people to better support their educational choices.

Theoretical Background

The main theoretical strands in the research on young people's educational choices are cultural reproduction theory, rational action theory and applied social capital theory (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013; Salovaara, 2021). The cultural

reproduction theory highlights the role of cultural practices in reproducing inequalities, whereas the rational action theory accentuates the tendency of parents and students to choose the most (financially) successful route with the lowest costs. The studies applying social capital theory, on the other hand, highlight the information received within social networks (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). We mainly follow the cultural reproduction theory strand but contribute also to research based on social capital theory, by applying the concepts of cultural and social capital, referring mainly to Pierre Bourdieu's approach (1986, 1990, 1998) and to Beverley Skeggs' feminist interpretation of it (Skeggs, 2004). In addition, our inspiration comes from critical social youth research where young people's own meaning-making is central.

The themes of reproduction of inequality in society have been researched within the sociology of education in recent decades in different contexts, often inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (cf. Yoon, 2020). The results indicate that social class with more or less privileged resources and forms of capitals strongly effect young people's educational success as well as their future aspirations. In earlier studies, social and cultural capital has been recognized as affecting educational processes in various ways (cf. Reay, 1998; Salovaara, 2021; Vryonides, 2007). It is clear, for instance, that professional-managerial parents' knowledge of the educational system and their ability to supervise their children's studies as well as to mobilize useful social connections help to advance their children's education (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013, p. 554; Reay, 1998).

On the basis of reproduction theory, we claim that young people's educational choices are connected to the forms of capital they have acquired. Bourdieu's theory includes cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital, but we concentrate here on cultural and social capital. Cultural capital, for Bourdieu 'made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success...' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47) and '... competition for the same goods, in which scarcity—and through it social value—is generated. The structure of the field, i.e. the unequal distribution of capital, is the sources of the specific effects of capital' (p. 49).

For Bourdieu, the accumulation of cultural capital is intertwined in the social relations of the family and covers the whole period of socialization (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 49). The unequal distribution of capital is maintained through competition and value formation in certain fields, such as education (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 49). In our research, students compete for access to upper secondary education with their cultural capital, and social value is used and generated in this process. Social capital, for Bourdieu, is not irreducible to other forms of capital but is interdependent and connected to them (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51). Social capital refers to resources based on connections, networks and membership in certain groups:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual of potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group.—The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize on the volume of the capital. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51)

Through social networks, advantages can be generated, especially by the upper and middle class with their connections to expert knowledge (cf. Boone & Van Houtte, 2013; Yoon, 2020). For us, social capital means various resources, not only information, but even role models and emotional support young people receive from their family, relatives and friends (cf. Holland et al., 2007; Reay, 1998; Salovaara, 2021; Tolonen, 2005). We suggest that students rely on their informal relationships, such as families and friends, i.e. social capital, in making their educational choices. In our analysis, the elements of social capital appear as social continuities in young people's narratives.

We also rely on Beverly Skeggs' (2004) interpretation of the formation of class, defined as a process. Class subjectivities are produced and 'inscribed' through cultural evaluations, and not just in discourse but also physically in people's bodies through their habits and behaviour (cf. Skeggs, 2004, pp. 2–15). Furthermore, for Skeggs, 'the value of the self' is learned, and it is class-specific as well as intertwined with gender and ethnicity. In comparison to the working-class self, the middle-class self learns its own value more self-evidently in relation to education and even to other public discourses (Skeggs, 2004). Following Skeggs besides Bourdieu, we claim that young people come to realize their value in education when they have to make their choices regarding upper secondary education. This value, we claim, is accompanied by different hesitations in their narratives.

According to earlier empirical research on young people's choices, educational paths are linked not only with social class but also with gender, ethnicity and locality via cultural and social capital (Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016; Armila et al., 2018; Essed, 2002; Käyhkö, 2008; Mirza & Meeto, 2018; Peltola, 2016; Skeggs, 1997). Our focus is also on gender and racialization besides social class. We follow Lois McNay (2004), who claims that like class, gender is a lived relation. She uses Bourdieu's notion of social space, and combines it with the symbolic. McNay writes: 'Actors occupy positions within social fields that act in a way determined both by the distribution of resources within a given field, and also by the structural relations between that field and others' (McNay, 2004, p. 184). According to McNay, gender is not only structural, discursive and performative, but an experienced relation within certain fields. Similarly, Skeggs has shown how the (de)valuing of working-class women takes place in the social space of media (Skeggs 2004; cf. Reay, 1998). Ethnicity and race can also be seen as an everyday social order, based on (colonial) historical relations, which effects young people in their everyday lives in public spaces, at school institutions and even their future expectations (Essed, 2002; Mäkelä & Kalalahti, 2020; Rastas 2005). Due to ethnic everyday cultural orders, young people of colour face racism and devaluing. Even the cultural capital, habits and languages they accumulate often seem less valued at school than those accumulated by young people from majority backgrounds (Yoon, 2020, p. 198).

Young people's resources and forms of capital vary, which affects their value in the educational market and shows in the kind of vulnerabilities and hesitations they mention while narrating their school choices. They all express hesitations, albeit differently. As Walther et al. (2015) show, we see young people's educational decision-making and transitions as an ongoing biographical process, which is negotiated in relation to social structures and educational institutions, cultural patterns of normalities, pragmatic identifications of preferences, social networks

and routines as well as to unpredictable turning points (cf. Lund, 2008; Mäkelä & Kalalahti, 2020; Walther et al., 2015, p. 353; Wierenga, 2009).

Together with Walther et al. (2015), we claim that structures as well as (lack of) privilege become visible in the narratives of young people as they make educational choices: ‘transitions are revealed as moments in which inequalities become effective in terms of resources and opportunities’ (cf. Henderson et al., 2007; Walther et al., 2015, p. 351). Young people from different backgrounds have varying resources at their disposal in relation to education, which strongly effects their choices, as well as their view of themselves and their value in the educational market (Skeggs, 2004).

In this article, we explore young people’s lived experiences of class, gender and racialization in relation to making educational choices, as narrated in their interviews. We ask the following questions: How do the students construct social and cultural continuities and refer to their skills, resources and value of the self (Skeggs, 2004, pp. 2–15) while making their choices? What kind of educational strategies do they use in ambiguous situations? How are their choices and hesitations intertwined with the forms of cultural and social capital they have acquired?

Data and Analysis

Our research context is Finland, where the educational system is based on basic education lasting nine years (comprehensive school) for all 7- to 16-year-olds. The Finnish secondary school system is divided into general upper secondary education (the academic route, with matriculation examination) and vocational education. In 2019, more than half (54%) of the 57,800 young people who completed ninth grade chose general upper secondary education, and 40% applied for vocational education. Three per cent continued in preparatory education, and 2.4% of the cohort did not apply for upper secondary education (Statistics Finland, 2020).

In the national joint application process, students are expected to select five educational institutions or branches, either general upper secondary or vocational education, and put them in an order of preference. They fill in their choices on an e-form together with the school counsellor or their parents.

Our data consists of interviews with 66 young people aged 15–16 years from various social backgrounds, schools and localities around Finland. They were born in the year 2000. Twenty-eight were from the capital, Helsinki, in Southern Finland, while 18 came from a small rural community in Central Finland and 20 were from the city of Oulu, which is situated in Northern Finland.

There were 38 boys and 28 girls, and 19 were from immigrant backgrounds, i.e. either they or their parents had been born outside of Finland, and their mother tongue was not Finnish or Swedish. Their social background varied: some of their parents were highly educated, while others had less educational capital.

The interviews were conducted in the context of fieldwork (Sherman Heyl, 2001) in ‘ordinary’ local schools, publicly financed by the local authority and open to all local students. The students were interviewed either alone or with a friend, according to their preference. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The participants were informed about the themes and the purpose of the study beforehand, and their participation was voluntary. They also signed a letter of consent. The data used in this article draw on the ongoing Youth in Time research project, which is being conducted jointly by the Finnish Youth Research Society and the Universities of

Helsinki, Eastern Finland and Oulu. The study received a statement from the ethics committee of Childhood and Youth in Finland, in September 2015.

The research sites differ greatly in size, population, ethnic diversity, resources and educational opportunities. The Helsinki Metropolitan Area has about one million inhabitants. We conducted our research in a socio-economically and ethnically varied suburb with substantial groups of first- and second-generation immigrants from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. In the Oulu region, there are approximately 200,000 inhabitants. The research school was situated in an area with mainly council housing, with tenants from many social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In the rural community in Central Finland, there are fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, and little ethnic diversity. There was only one upper secondary educational institution, and relatively long distances to all others. Helsinki and Oulu have good public transportation systems and there are plenty of educational options.

We did not aim for a systematic comparative analysis; rather, we wanted a theoretical sample including a wide variety of young people in order to generate descriptions of different classed, gendered and racialized lives (cf. Kurki et al., 2019; Mirza & Meeto, 2018; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

In line with Lamont and Swidler (2014), we see our in-depth interview data as a source where young people's meaning-making, categorization systems and even imagined—but for them significant—meanings about themselves in relation to education come to the surface and allow us as researchers to try to make sense of them within our theoretical frame. We treated the interviews as the participants' narratives of the self in the context of education (see Henderson et al., 2007; Phoenix, 2013, p. 16; Wierenga, 2009).

We coded the interviews thematically with the Atlas-ti programme. We identified relevant narratives by searching for the themes 'future', 'education' and 'choices', which we attached to classed, gendered and racialized positions. We assumed that the students had various experiences within education which would be present in their narratives, as well as different expectations regarding their value in the educational market (Skeggs, 2004, pp. 10–12). We paid attention to their educational hopes and doubts. We also noted that young people experienced considerable hesitation in making their educational choices and developed practical strategies to solve these hesitations.

Walther et al. (2015) analysed destination, rupture and choice in young people's educational biographies and identified smooth academic, discontinuous academic, smooth vocational, discontinuous vocational and remedial or intermediate biographies (Walther et al., 2015, pp. 355–357). Similarly, we recognized in young people's narratives their destination and degree of choice, but instead of ruptures, we focused on their hesitations and strategies as well as social and cultural continuities. We identified the following frames of choice:

1. Clear choice for general upper secondary school
2. Unsure between general upper secondary and vocational education
3. Clear choice for vocational education
4. Unsure between fields of vocational education
5. Heading outside formal education, based on leisure activity
6. Uncertain educational route with additional training.

Next, we will present our results more closely.

Narratives of General Upper Secondary Education

In Finland, general upper secondary education has been the culturally most valued educational route, since it leads to academic education. Every year, the names of those who have passed the matriculation examination are published in the media. Young people graduating from vocational institutions receive less public attention and celebration. In our data, a sizeable proportion of the interviewees—20 out of 66—mentioned general upper secondary education as their definite first choice. A higher proportion of girls than boys chose this option. Proportionately, many students from immigrant backgrounds headed for general upper secondary education, even in cases where they were not particularly successful at school. This is related to their positive attitudes towards schooling. In general, young people with both parents born outside of Finland do not get into their desired upper secondary education as often as their peers whose parents have been born in Finland (see Kalalahti et al., 2017).

In their narratives, some young people presented themselves as having a high value in the educational market. Often, they had plenty of cultural and social capital and experiences of a social continuum (Bourdieu, 1986; Skeggs, 2004). They received social support from both their family and friends (Holland et al., 2007). They chose general upper secondary education with a determined strategy: They could easily link their choice with a successful educational route and further into professional life (see Nikunen, 2017). However, even in these narratives, there were moments of hesitation:

Meeri:¹ ‘Well I intended to, or I have not quite decided yet, if I will go to [upper-secondary school] or if I will go to [another school] for the norm branch [general education] or maybe to the [first school] to the IB class.—Well, I have had good grades, so I think I will probably get into whichever [school] I put as number one.—I will probably just put something there and then I will regret it or not. So, I dunno.’ (Girl, Oulu)

Meeri’s parents were highly educated professionals, and she had done very well in comprehensive school, so it seemed self-evident that she would go onto general upper secondary education. Her parents appeared to utilize their social and cultural capitals in order to advance their daughter’s education (cf. Vryonides, 2007). However, while they encouraged Meeri to choose an ‘elite’ school, she hesitated, because her friends were not considering the same option. Here, cultural capital in Meeri’s background was steering her to an educational elite but potentially separating her from an important part of her social capital. She saw the benefits of both and hesitated.

Many interviewees saw general upper secondary education as the only possible option: They knew what they wanted in life, and how to achieve it. They aimed for an academic high-status future profession (doctor, lawyer) and were able to make ‘distinctive selections to get them to top universities later’ (Yoon, 2020). A typical narrative portrayed a young protagonist with a high sense of value of the self, coming from a family with high levels of cultural and social capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1986; Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). However, even students from more diverse backgrounds and with different motives produced such narratives (Kalalahti et al., 2017; Peltola, 2016).

For example, Hiram, a young man from a multicultural background, explained why he wanted to go on to general upper secondary education. His parents were divorced, and did not have much cultural capital, i.e. knowledge of the Finnish education system. However, there were close relatives who strongly encouraged him onto an academic educational path similar to theirs, and he compensated his lower cultural capital through his social capital this way.

Hiram: 'I want to go to this [elite] general upper secondary school to a special branch [with good grades]... and after that to [health-related] sciences to university... this has been my plan... My aunt is a [health professional] and my mom also tried but didn't make it... so I thought I might.—No one ever pressured me to do it, but there have been suggestions.' (Boy, Helsinki)

In these narratives, the young people knew which route to take, but there were also hesitations about which local school to choose: the more or less competitive school or one with special programmes? In small towns the students' options were more limited (Armila et al., 2018).

However, not all narratives describing a clear choice for upper secondary education reflected a firm decision and a determined future. Some of our interviewees were unsure about their skills and value in education, as well as about their future career. Most commonly, they solved these hesitations with the postponement strategy. For them, choosing general upper secondary education aimed at 'buying time', i.e. postponing the career choice:

Sagal: 'I just want to go on to general upper secondary education but not aiming at a certain occupation yet. This is because I feel there is going to be a lot of work and I am not ready for it yet.'

...

Mire: 'I don't know where to go, and with general upper secondary you get three more years to think. You get [more time] to decide. You get more time.. But it depends on whether I get into general upper secondary or not.' (Girl and boy, Helsinki)

Sagal and Mire both had newly formed families, consisting of divorced parents and their new partners as well as several siblings. Their parents had working-class jobs, but Mire's father had completed general upper secondary education. By pursuing general upper secondary education, Sagal and Mire were on track for such educational careers that their immigrated parents had not fully achieved (Holland et al., 2007; Kalalahti et al., 2017). Mire mentioned that his father had difficulties at school, while Sagal did not share information about her parents' education. Their hesitation regarding education was based on their uncertainty about their future profession, so they wanted to postpone their decision. However, they needed to have reasonably good grades and a relatively high value in the educational market in order to attain general upper secondary education (Skeggs, 2004).

The first narrative we identified, a clear choice for upper secondary school and the determined strategy, was closest to the ideal of rational choice which is apparent in educational policy (see Nikunen, 2017) and closest to high symbolic capital. This strategy was used particularly by those young people who had high amounts of cultural capital in their family. Their educational skills were good, they got good

grades and defined their value in the educational market as high (Skeggs, 2004). These students were likely to be middle-class, female and living in bigger towns (cf. Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016; Armila et al., 2018; Kalalahti et al., 2017; Kurki et al., 2019), but even other young people considered this option.

However, there were some who chose this option because they simply wanted more time to consider their future. Often, even if they did not have high amounts of cultural capital, they had received support from their family and friends and had acquired a lot of social capital to compensate. They could see a clear social and educational continuum in their family.

General Upper Secondary Education or Vocational Education?

In the narratives of the second frame of choice, there was uncertainty between two different educational destinations. In our data, 12 students found it difficult to choose between general upper secondary and vocational schooling. One of them was Hanna, who was uncertain about her performance in comprehensive school and had vocational interests alongside the academic route. Her parents were not highly educated.

Hanna: ‘Yeah, I put general upper secondary schools [in the application form] and then [vocational food branch] and [vocational business branch] in case I do not make it to the general upper secondary schools. I don’t know if my grades are good enough to get there.’ (Girl, Oulu)

Besides the hesitation in choosing between educational institutions, in these narratives there was uncertainty about one’s value in the educational market. This becomes apparent in Juulia’s interview:

Juulia: ‘At times I have thought maybe not general upper secondary and I will go straight into vocational and then I have thought that I would never get into general upper secondary school and I have panicked. I have stressed a lot about it... Soon we have to select the school. But I had a lot of stress about where to go and I ended up in general upper secondary. It wasn’t self-evident at all... I don’t like exams and since I want to study for my exams, I won’t have much leisure time.’ (Girl, Central Finland)

Juulia’s family encouraged her to choose general upper secondary school, but she hesitated, fearing she would need to sacrifice all her leisure time. However, she was also tempted to try this route. Her parents were not highly educated, but she had an older sibling who studied at general upper secondary to whom she could turn for advice; this meant important social and cultural capital for her.

There was much uncertainty inscribed in these narratives (Skeggs, 2004); social continuums were unclear, same as educational goals, special interests as well as one’s value in relation to education. Education seemed distant, a ‘resource out there’ (Wierenga, 2009, p. 128). These young people did not mention the postponement strategy. Rather, in their narratives, they seemed to adopt the strategy of avoidance, as they dismissed certain occupations or study programmes as undesirable and tried to decide which was the least undesirable option (cf. Käyhkö, 2008).

Due to the lower grades they had received at comprehensive school, these young people did not have a clear future vision nor cultural capital for making educational choices (Skeggs, 2004). In addition, some of them also lacked educational and social continuums and social capital, namely people to go to for advice about education (Kalalahti et al., 2017; Skeggs, 1997, p. 3). In these narratives, the ninth-graders' difficulties in choosing their educational path were clearly visible.

Routes to Vocational Education

In our data, the third frame of choice, a clear choice for vocational education, was described by 25 students out of 66. They mentioned a specific vocational education branch as their first option. Often, there was a strong and long-standing identification with an occupation, a 'biographical occupational continuum':

Aino: 'I am going to go to vocational school.. upper secondary education is the last thing I want.—[I will go] into the [food industry] line.—I have been thinking about this career since I was little.—At times it has changed but I have always come back to it.' (Girl, Helsinki)

These young people presented themselves as having a continuous direction, heading for a certain practical occupation. At times, this was linked with their family: they could easily position themselves in the generational continuum.

Miikka: 'If I get through compulsory education, I know I will want to get into vocational education to [a food-related course]. My mum's family are in this industry; many have worked in the [food industry] business.... I don't actually bake much but I do the cooking.' (Boy, Helsinki)

Miikka's family background was an asset in his transition to vocational education, as he had a strong identification with the food industry branch. We consider this as a social continuum, as social capital strengthening his working-class cultural capital.

There were even other narratives of continuity in addition to the biographical generational continuum. Besides family, some young people relied on the social capital provided by friends or neighbours. Local industries or educational possibilities were of primary importance to some students from smaller communities (Armila et al., 2018; Tolonen, 2005).

The young people who chose vocational school often described themselves as practical people, who disliked reading books but enjoyed manual work (Brunila et al., 2011; Käyhkö, 2008; Skeggs, 2004, pp. 175–177). Their orientation towards education was instrumental, sometimes combined with a certain anti-school humour and resistance (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998; Willis, 1978):

Jimi: 'After this year I can hear vocational education calling.'

Jukka: 'I think it's the same for me.'

Pekka: 'Yeah, me too.'

Jimi: 'General upper secondary education is not... is just not for me.'

Pekka: 'It is kind of useless...'

Jukka: '...useless tinkering.'

Jimi: 'It is just too much reading and I am a kind of a working man. Reading does not interest me at all.'

Pekka: 'That is the same for me as well.' (Three boys, Helsinki)

These young men presented themselves as workers, who valued practical work instead of 'paperwork'. When asked whether their parents had influenced their choices, they replied:

Jimi: 'No. It was based on my own interest, there was no like...'

Jukka: 'For me neither, I did not have anyone like my mum or anyone pressing me on.'

While we do not know very much about these young men's parents' education, they seem to have a strong affiliation with vocational education, and they have been left to make their own educational choices without their parents' demands or support (Holland et al., 2007; Reay, 1998; Salovaara, 2021; Vryonides, 2007).

In some narratives, the hesitation was related to the protagonist's value in the educational market, as in the following case:

Researcher: 'What about next autumn? What have you been thinking about? To leave or go away somewhere?'

Oula: 'Yeah, to some sports vocational college; I am considering that.'

Mikko: 'I need to study more to improve my grades.'

Oula: 'With slightly better grades, it could be possible. That is the sort of place I would like to study at.'

Mikko: 'That is the place; I would really like to go there myself.' (Two boys, Oulu)

These boys thought their grades were low, so they had to weigh up their possibilities of achieving their most desired school choice, as they were very interested in sports and thought this would be a desirable educational path. They do not refer to their parents' advice. Many students described themselves as having some practical educational cultural capital (i.e. practical skills). In addition, they often had lots of social capital, namely personal, social and local continuums supporting their choices (Berg et al., 2018; Käyhkö, 2008; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Tolonen, 2005).

The students with the third type of narrative, a clear choice for vocational education, identified strongly with practical skills. They wanted to gain practical cultural capital, to be able to work with their hands (Brunila et al., 2011; Käyhkö, 2008). Some had gained social capital: their choices were presented within social and local continuums (Armila et al., 2018), while others referred to their own preferences, but few talked about parental advice.

There were also six interviewees who were sure about vocational education but unable to decide between different fields. They represent the fourth frame of choice: unsure between fields of vocational education. As in the narratives of a clear choice

for vocational education (above), these young people primarily identified as manual workers and valued practical skills (Skeggs, 2004; Willis 1978). They had social capital (see also Holland et al., 2007) and had discussed their educational choices with their parents. They sometimes mentioned their older siblings as valuable sources of information:

Jamiila: 'First, I wanted to be a fashion designer, then I thought I would get bored with that after a while. Then there was the choice of business; well, the same with that. Then there was the option of healthcare; I thought that might be interesting. For one thing, my sister is a nurse.' (Girl, Helsinki region)

In this example, even though the interviewee was uncertain about her choice of educational programme, the information provided by an older sister was highly important and represented social continuity. She, like many other Muslim girls, was expected to become a nurse by counsellors and even by family members (Kurki et al., 2019; Mäkelä & Kalalahti, 2020; Mirza & Meeto, 2018).

The fourth frame of choice was present in the narratives of students who valued manual work, even though they were hesitant about their destination. They also appeared to have less social capital than the more certain vocational students. In general, we found fewer social and cultural continuums in their narratives. Theirs was a strategy of avoidance. In our data, these narratives were often related by young men from immigrant and racialized backgrounds, as well as students from rural settings. At times, their hesitation was linked with their relatively poor success at school, which affected their sense of value in the educational market. Their relationship with education was quite instrumental, and they even lacked compensatory social capital (cf. Wierenga, 2009).

Outside or Inside Education?

In some interviews, the narratives of upper secondary education were very uncertain. The students were often very unsure about their value within the educational market (Hegna, 2014; Pless, 2014; Skeggs, 2004), and their grades were usually low. The fifth frame of educational choice, heading outside of formal education, was based on the narratives of four young people. They focused on their success in leisure time activities, such as computer games, sports or music. While they invested their time and energy in these activities, some of them also used an avoidance strategy in relation to further education.

In these narratives, the students saw themselves as highly able, but their cultural capital and skills were not well aligned with formal education. For example, Thomas had difficulties with some school subjects. Although he considered general upper secondary education, a career in sports seemed more desirable. He recounted a narrative about himself as a successful athlete. He had social capital to support this path, namely family, coaches and team members.

Researcher: 'How serious are you about this [sport]?'

Thomas: 'I want to do everything I can to become a professional, a top player, like you see on TV, playing in an international league....'

Researcher: 'Have you always been so sure about this? No hesitations, no consideration of dropping out?'

Thomas: 'No, not really; I have always been going in this direction.' (Boy, Helsinki)

It was mainly boys who developed these 'alternative' narratives with dreams of becoming successful in sports, music business or gaming. This route with a determined strategy for success outside education was a positive chance for some, especially those who considered their value in education as low (Skeggs, 2004).

The sixth and last frame of choice, the narrative of an uncertain educational route with additional training, was told by six young people (cf. Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016; Hegna, 2014). They were hesitant about their place in education. They used a postponement strategy by choosing additional training, usually the 10th grade of comprehensive school. Their aim was to improve their grades, in order to add to their value in the educational market, and to learn more about possible educational routes.

Netta: 'I think I will go on to preparatory training for vocational education [in a big town further away or in nearby town].—It is preparatory so that you can go there for a year to get better marks ... and go to different schools to see what they are like.' (Girl, Central Finland)

Netta had some learning difficulties at comprehensive school, and by ninth grade she had realised that her low grades did not allow her to continue straight into upper secondary schooling. She and her best friend had parallel study plans, and with support from her family, Netta seemed relatively untroubled by her future education (Holland et al., 2007; Salovaara, 2021).

The last two educational frames of choice were present in 10 interviews in our data. These students either wanted to venture outside the official educational routes or were 'knocking on doors' to get into upper secondary education. Some were hopeful about sports or musical success. Often with low educational capital, their position in formal education was vulnerable and better possibilities were 'resources out there' (Wierenga, 2009, p. 128). Even if they were talented in their leisure activities, and could possibly be successful without further education, this was no guarantee for 'a proper job' later in life, as one of them put it (cf. Skeggs, 1997, 2004). Their educational choices seemed limited (Hegna, 2014; Pless, 2014). Some of them thought they would continue their education later. Those who chose additional or preparatory training were more outspoken about their vulnerability and hopes for a higher amount of cultural capital (Walther et al., 2015; Wierenga, 2009).

Dreams, Hesitations and Value of Self in the Educational Market

Our analysis of young people's educational choices is based primarily on the reproduction theory (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013; Bourdieu 1986; Wierenga, 2009). Earlier research in the Finnish context (Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016; Kalalahti et al., 2017; Nikunen, 2017) indicates that despite aspirations towards promoting gender and social equality, there are persistent inequalities in the Finnish educational

system. Hence, we assumed that young people's educational choices vary on the basis of their gender and socioeconomic, ethnic and geographical backgrounds.

In our analysis, young people's narratives were constructed in relation to their social contexts, resources and 'realistic' expectations as well as various hesitations (Phoenix, 2013). As in previous research (cf. Henderson et al., 2007; Mirza & Meeto, 2018; Shildrick et al., 2012), our interviewees had learned how to make the 'right' choices according to their lived gendered, classed, racialized and local relations (cf. Essed, 2002; McNay, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). They had internalized which kinds of dreams and future plans were possible for them: whether they were to use their 'hands' or their 'heads' (Brunila et al., 2011; Käyhkö, 2008; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Tolonen, 2005). Thus, we claim that young people learn their potential value of self in relation to the educational market, which becomes particularly visible in the process of making their choices for upper secondary education (cf. Skeggs 1997; Walther et al., 2015). Our analysis thus supports the earlier research findings in the sociology of education. In addition, we have provided a new typology of six frames of educational choices, where we show young people's struggles with making 'ideal and rational' individual choices, albeit in different ways (Hegna, 2014; Nikunen, 2017). In each frame of educational choice we have presented, young people describe specific hesitations which are linked to their acquired or lacking capitals.

In our analysis of six frames of educational choice, there are subtle details which bring more light into how young people choose their education. Besides claiming that young people learn their place and value in the educational market, we highlight that there are distinct hesitations in all the interviewees' narratives. In the most decisive narratives demonstrating the 'right' kinds of cultural and social capital, the hesitancy was related to choosing the best possible school. Other young people with less decisive narratives were uncertain about their future goals, their cultural capital and their value in the educational market. Those who had more social capital overcame these hesitations more easily and were able to position themselves in meaningful social, professional or local continuums. There was hesitancy towards education in many young people's narratives, particularly those who thought they lacked value and the 'right' kinds of cultural capital. Some of them knocked on the doors of formal education trying to find their way in. Interestingly, some young people were purposely headed outside of formal education. They trusted their value and capitals to be higher in other fields (e-games, sports and music) (Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016; Walther et al., 2015, p. 351). Thus, by analysing the various hesitations expressed by young people, we have identified how they vary depending on their resources and capitals. Simultaneously, we have clarified how young people identify their value and position in the educational market (Skeggs, 2004).

Our results contribute to both reproduction theory-based studies and discussions on the role of social capital in young people's lives (Holland et al., 2007; Salovaara, 2021; Vryonides, 2007; Yoon, 2020). We emphasize that social capital is an important compensating tool, which helps young people to produce cultural capital in their educational paths. Here, we adapt Bourdieu's understanding of social capital as interdependent capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51; cf. Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). The social continuum was obvious for young people with highly educated parents and high amounts of cultural capital, and for working-class young people with clear plans for

vocational education. They often relied on their social capital, and their choices were contextualized within social or professional continuums. Even other young people with less decisive narratives defined their social relations as supportive. Even though their parents did not often have much information about the Finnish educational system, these students received educational information and social support from their siblings and other relatives (Holland et al., 2007; Kalalahti et al., 2017; Salovaara, 2021).

The different strategies utilized in the six frames of educational choice, as portrayed in this article, represent young people's ways of solving their hesitations regarding education. By looking at the social and cultural capitals as well as their hesitations regarding upper secondary education in their narratives, we have shown the complexities in the process; how young people's 'individual' choices are always heavily embedded in social structures and their resources 'at hand'.

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ORCID iD

Tarja Tolonen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5077-9070>

Note

1. The interview excerpts have been pseudonymized. They have been translated from Finnish to English by the authors.

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Authors' Bio-sketch

Tarja Tolonen is DSocSci, Adjunct Professor at the University of Helsinki, and holds a position of Senior Lecturer (specialized on research on marginalization of children and young people), at the Department of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki. She is a sociologist and youth researcher with wide interests, such as youth cultures, education, leisure time, urban spaces and marginalization, all with reference to gender, social class and racialization.

Sinikka Aapola-Kari is DSocSci, Adjunct Professor at the University of Helsinki, and currently works as Research Director at Finnish Youth Research Society. She is a sociologist with a long experience in youth research. Her special interests include education, age, gender and qualitative methods, particularly longitudinal research.