

Introduction

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*Youth on the move—Tendencies and tensions in youth policies and practices*¹ addresses one of the most urgent social problems today—that of the extended and uncertain transitions from school to work and higher education, and how they shape the interests of young adults,² including those outside of education and work. The book combines perspectives from policies and practices, as well as from young people themselves. It critically examines the ‘transition machinery’ that has emerged to put youth on the move in very specific ways, to manage and govern students, trainees and young jobseekers, and consists of various education and training measures, preparatory programmes, support systems, short-term projects and schemes. When lack of education and unemployment are treated as individual problems, personal deficiencies or identity issues, the solutions are likewise individualized. The book shows how youth transitions are intertwined with and shaped by social differences; they are for example related to gender, health, social class and ethnicity, but also to geographical location. School-to-work transitions, as politics, practices and discourses, are important to examine closely because they shape the conduct of young people and their intentions and possibilities.

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Heading for what future?

In the 2010s, European young adults on average have more years of education than any other youth generation, and hence should be better qualified and have better future prospects than ever before. For many of them, however, this is hardly the situation. A general trend towards increasingly extended, fragmented and uncertain school-to-work transitions has been prominent over the last decades (Colley, 2007; Dwyer & Wyn, 2006; Pohl & Walther, 2007). Today, a rather gloomy picture emerges from research and official reports, e.g. by state authorities, the European Union and the OECD. Youth unemployment rose markedly as a result of the recession that followed after the financial crisis in 2008–09 and has remained at high levels in many countries. In the European Union on average every sixth young adult aged 20–34 in 2017 was neither employed nor in education or training (so-called NEET)—in Italy and Greece almost every third (Eurostat, 2018a). In the UK, people in their twenties were worst hit by the crisis compared to other age groups in terms of unemployment, pay and incomes (Hills et al., 2013, p. 6). Similar patterns have been found in most other countries. This situation is deeply worrying from individual and societal perspectives, since spells of unemployment leave long-term scars, e.g. in terms of lowered life incomes and health conditions, and amplifies social segregation and exclusion (Scarpetta, Sonnet & Manfredi, 2010; Scarpetta & Sonnet, 2012. Also see Barslund & Gros, 2017).

It is important to recognize that the transition to adult and working life exposes considerably larger proportions of young people to difficult living conditions than have already been described. The percentage of youths aged 20–24 years who are temporarily employed is far higher than among older adults: approximately 40% in the European Union and considerably above that level in countries such as Poland, Portugal, Italy and Spain (60% or more in 2017; Eurostat, 2018b). Youth poverty is considerably more widespread in Europe than is usually acknowledged, and young people are more likely to experience recurrent poverty than older adults are. Fahmy (2007, p. 54) concludes that poverty is ‘not confined to a small minority of “socially excluded” young people, but is very common for Europe’s young people at various points in their transitions to adulthood’.

In this conjuncture, strategies and measures to make the transitions from school to work less protracted and risky are placed high on local, national and supranational policy agendas. Raising the levels of secondary school completion and minimizing the numbers of NEETs, modernizing vocational training and education and fostering young people’s ‘employability’ have become central components, e.g. in policies and recommendations of the European Union and the OECD (Brunila et al., 2017; European Commission, 2018; Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). A multitude of authorities and forces, a veritable ‘transition machinery’, has emerged to render young

adults governable and employable in their constant transitions as students, trainees and jobseekers.

In the contemporary era of the knowledge economy or knowledge capitalism, the welfare state has taken on a new active role in relation to the economy; a 'competition state' that seeks to enhance economic growth by supporting enterprise, flexibility and innovation has developed (Ball, 2007).

The welfare sector and not least education, which traditionally had relative autonomy vis-à-vis the economy, are now closely linked to economic and labour market policies (Apple et al., 2005; Jessop et al., 2008). Neo-liberalism—a political ideology and governing rationality with the individual, freedom of choice and safeguarding of the market as their cornerstones—permeates the global social imaginary of education.

Simultaneously, however, the marketization and commercialization of education mean a weakened relationship to the state and increasing subordination to the market and its instruments, such as performance indicators, accountability, rankings and responsabilization of the individual (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

Discourses on youth and transitions highlight certain aspects and problem representations while others are silenced or shadowed (Bacchi, 2009). Hence, the discourses on youth transitions do not simply *describe* young adults but *create* them, not only as objects but also as subjects, due to the way in which they can also influence the individual's sense of self. For example, new labels of psychological and emotional deficiency of young adults who fail to make successful transitions from school to work will serve to isolate and blame them for their inadequacies. When lack of education and unemployment are treated as individual problems, personal or identity issues rather than as institutional failures and structural deficits, the solutions are likewise individualized. Therefore, a critical reconceptualization of the cross-sectoral policies and practices of transitions is called for. Transitions in this book are understood not as developmental, natural and self-evident processes but as intertwined with social differences such as gender, health, social class and ethnicity.

The next part of this chapter is devoted to three different problem representations, two of which are common in current youth policies and practices, the third to a lesser extent. The first problem representation, that of a supposed lack of 'the right competences' (knowledge, skills, dispositions) of young persons, and commonly proposed solutions to this problem, is discussed first. The second problem representation, closely related to the first, is about young people's alleged lack of motivation to complete academic and vocational education, lack of enterprise and passivity in jobseeking, that is, a range of psychological and personal weaknesses and deficiencies, and the remedies are designed accordingly. The third problem representation concerns the limited structural possibilities for young people to have an influence on education, work and society. The last part of the introductory chapter gives an overview of the structure and contents of the rest of the book.

Focus on employability, entrepreneurship and active jobseeking

The steadily increasing demands of designing education, training and employment schemes in ways that enhance competitiveness and economic growth, and the growing population of young adults who have no or only weak connections to the labour market, have turned lacking employability and entrepreneurship into prime problem representations at different policy levels. The concept of employability is not new, but its meaning has changed over time. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, 'employability' mainly denoted achievement of full employment, while in the 1980s it was related to companies' needs for flexible staff in a rapidly changing environment. Gradually, and in particular from the 1990s, the focus shifted to concern the individual's ability to get and to maintain a job. Now career making and employability have mainly become the responsibility of the individual, related to the 'new psychological contract' between employers and employees (Forrier & Sels, 2003). On the one hand, the responsibility of education and training institutions to foster employable youth has been underscored to a higher extent than before, but individuals are also expected to be proactive in building up their CVs in order to make themselves attractive to potential employers. What is silenced to a large extent in this problem representation is that huge numbers of jobs that traditionally served as entry-level jobs for young people have disappeared due to industrial restructuring and outsourcing to low-salary countries. New job opportunities, e.g. in computer and communication firms, often require more special skills and higher academic qualifications, and are offered as temporary employments.

In the early 2000s, fostering children and young people to become enterprising became a major issue in a range of countries and at the European level. By 2012, about 20 EU countries had launched entrepreneurship education as part of their national lifelong learning or youth strategies (European Commission, 2012; Mononen Batista-Costa & Brunila, 2016). Entrepreneurship education is seen as a vital instrument in forming young people's attitudes and behaviours in line with industry's and society's need for self-governing, innovative and productive individuals and the creation of a true 'entrepreneurial culture'. According to the European Commission,

There is a growing awareness of the potential of young people to launch and develop their own commercial or social ventures thereby becoming innovators in the areas in which they live and work. Entrepreneurship education is essential not only to shape the mind-sets of young people but also to provide the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are central to developing an entrepreneurial culture. (European Commission, 2016, p. 9)

Moreover, youths starting their own firms are also seen as an answer to the underlying problem of too few available jobs.

The 'job first' principle, or activation line, i.e. demands on unemployed and recipients of social benefits to actively seek jobs, has spread throughout Europe

during the last decades. For example, this principle was introduced in the Nordic countries in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kvist, 2003; Berthet & Bourgeois, 2014). The activation line implies an emphasis on mutual obligations, including the development of an individual action plan, as a precondition for receiving income support. The rationale for the activation line and introduction of mandatory individual action plans is not, however, necessarily only for economic reasons. Instead, it might be found in changed political ideas and interests rather than management of economic crisis. Newman (2007) concludes that ‘activation measures can be understood as opening up more of the person to governmental power, requiring them to collaborate in the development of new subjective orientations to the worlds of work and welfare’ (Newman, 2007, p. 3).³

One of the big changes that neo-liberalism as a governing rationality has brought about is transforming survival as individual, instead of social, responsibility. This tends to focus on economic survival linked to a set of specific skills, the capacity to earn money being the most important. To meet the demand of individual responsibility for economic survival, developing flexibility, responsiveness, and responsibility for oneself has become a necessity, or, rather, an *obligation* (Davies, 2005; McLaughlin, 2011). The demand of individual responsibility for economic survival goes hand in hand with a notion of employability understood as a set of ‘correct’ skills and characteristics that guarantee entry to the current highly competitive labour market (Brunila & Rynänen, 2016). These skills include a requirement for individuals to constantly adapt to and manage changeable employer demands and flexible patterns of work and learning (Worth, 2003). Lack of employment is regarded as a lack of employability, that is, a personal deficiency of some kind that can be ‘cured’ by improving one’s employability and by becoming more willing to adapt and manage changeable employer demands (Siivonen & Brunila, 2014).

Employability problems—individualized and therapeutic solutions

The young people in school-to-work transitions thus tend to be conceptualized as being psycho-emotionally vulnerable. Some of them might have a history of learning problems, but psycho-emotional vulnerability is also associated with people belonging to ethnic minority or other minority groups and those requiring special education or from migrant backgrounds. Young people from various backgrounds and outside education and working life tend to be constructed in policy either as ‘vulnerable victims’, ‘troubling’ or ‘dangerous wrong-doers’ and held fully responsible in situations where they transgress (Brown, 2014; Fionda, 2005; Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015).

In one sense, key concerns related to young people have changed very little over the decades. However, we seem currently to be witnessing a new more hybrid model of governing. Psychologically and therapeutically derived vocabulary, ideas, knowledge and implementations on education policy, teaching and

assessment practices seem to be extending both their reach and impact. Rooted in what is commonly described as the ‘vulnerability zeitgeist’ (Brown, 2014), ‘age of vulnerability’ (McLaughlin, 2011), or therapeutic ethos (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015), wide-ranging remedies, ideas and disciplines have become increasingly popular in educational settings in many countries (McLeod, 2012; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2014; Petersen & Millei, 2016; Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015). These include (positive) psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy and other forms of therapeutic interventions, emotional literacy, psycho-emotional support systems, self-help, happiness training and counselling. In youth policies and practices, and especially in youth programmes that aim to educate and train unemployed young people, there is a tendency to develop individually oriented competences, skills and attributes of emotional skills, emotional management, resilience, self-responsibility, empathy and self-esteem. Increasingly, the whole transition machinery has been given a role helping young people cope with their personal difficulties in a way that is held to be empowering, a process through which they allegedly learn to deal with their emotions, which in turn is assumed to lead to social survival and, most importantly, coping in the labour market. The problem is that the language of emotional skills, competence and literacy disguises normative views about desirable attributes, attitudes and dispositions (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015). The focus on individual responsibility risks hiding societal elements as determining contexts of youth transitions, and might result in young people being blamed by themselves or others for their failures (France, 2007, p. 71). At the same time, individualized interventions create new non-permanent, informal structures where public and private actors, operating outside their formal jurisdictions, become part of political institutions’ decision-making processes.

What about young people themselves? Young people’s influence and democratic citizenship

In spite of initiatives that promote equal and fair transitions, young people’s own experiences and aspirations have remained invisible in policy and research to a large extent. Hierarchies between different forms of education, as well as between categorizations (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity, age, class and health) are reflected in whose voices are heard and listened to. If young people have been incorporated into policy processes, it is generally those considered high-achieving, self-responsible and entrepreneurial who are invited to take part (Bottrell & Armstrong, 2012). Several studies have found similar tendencies in schools (Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Lundahl & Olson, 2013).

It seems that more and more public sector areas, including educational policies and practices, are shifting towards strengthening the market-oriented approach and sustainability of hierarchical categorizations (Brunila, 2012). A taken-for-granted backdrop for students’ choices includes norms concerning

societal differences such as age, gender, ethnicity/race, social class and health. Decisions that the young people make are constantly interpreted through the dominant discourses and the representations constructed within these discourses. In other words, students are encouraged to take the routes that are expected for 'their kind' (see also Brunila et al., 2013).

Researchers should pay more attention to the policies, cultures and practices through which young people are spoken of and speak about themselves. It is crucial to examine both tensions and fractions in these discourses, and uncover different ways to conduct research in terms of young people. We argue that, by focusing on the ways in which subjectivities of young people are constructed by policymakers, professionals such as teachers and youth workers, academic researchers, and young people themselves, some ideas and assumptions of problematic transitions and their taken-for-granted 'good intentions' could be challenged. Hence one of the aims of this book is to create more room for young people's interpretations, responses and actions in order to construct knowledge and understanding together with young people and stakeholders involved in school-to-work transitions.

This book illustrates the complexity and multidimensionality of young people's transitions within and from school to work and higher education. With the help of contributions we have chosen for this book we argue that there are even more persistent changes that are focusing on young people. These changes shape the ways in which young people are perceived and how they should perceive themselves both as psycho-emotionally vulnerable but also necessarily employable, resilient and competitive. In terms of the transition machinery, the question is not whether to intervene, but which type of governance is the most effective in producing and fostering suitably flexible youth subjectivities that could cope with insecurity. The machinery that puts youth on the move tends to promote a rather narrow, individualized, decontextualized and instrumentalist approach.

Thereby the book highlights the need to avoid determinist and totalizing accounts, (e.g. characterizing the mechanisms and consequences of transitions simply as emancipatory or repressive). We argue that transitions shape subjects and agency by encouraging or compelling young people to speak and act through the language and social relations of transitions while also allowing them to think about how they are 'reformed' by transitions, and how they constantly learn to act in these power relations, as well as to utilize them.

Structure and contents of the book

The rest of the book is structured in two parts that address first young people's own perspectives and then policies and official practices.

The first part, *Young people's trajectories and identities*, comprises five chapters on young people and young adults at the point of choosing future careers

or being in the process of transition from upper secondary to higher education or work. It is thus the young people/adults themselves and their experiences that form the core of the texts, based on either survey data or interviews with smaller groups of young people. The geographical contexts and migration status of the young people vary and make a difference, but gender, social class and ethnicity nevertheless constitute important categories in the analyses.

In Chapter 1, *Young citizenship—Academically high-achieving middle-class students in transitions talk about participation*, Maria Rönnlund departs from the dominant discourse of European citizenship education that celebrates individual agency, self-responsibility and self-regulation. The chapter focuses on high-achieving middle-class students who, at least from an outsider perspective, act and behave in accordance with these expectations. The analysis indicates that young people themselves predominantly take an individual view on subjectivity and suggests that failures are interpreted as ‘personal’ shortcomings, something that has implications for transitions into future labour and educational markets. This tendency towards focusing and blaming the individual will recur in most of the other chapters in this book.

Based on register data, the next two chapters analyse the trajectories of youth standing outside of education and the labour market. Chapter 2, *Social background and labour market careers of young people: A comparison of two cohorts of Finnish young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)*, by Tero Järvinen, aims to explore the consequences of early school leaving and being in the NEET category in the Finnish context. It critically evaluates the dominating assumption that being outside both education and the labour market after compulsory school is fatal to one’s future life course and labour market chances in particular. While young people’s school-to-work transitions and not least the NEET group has attracted increasing attention by politicians and scholars in many countries, research in this field has been rare in Iceland. Therefore Chapter 3, *Transition from school to work: Icelandic young people in NEET*, by Jóhanna Rósa Arnardóttir, helps to fill a gap. It focuses on transitions from school to work among Icelandic young people and young adults, aged 16–34, not in employment, education or training. Education and the first job opportunities of the NEET group are compared to those of young people who study or are employed. The experience of transition in Iceland is also compared with the situation in the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom, Germany and Spain. Arnardóttir concludes that lack of job opportunities is a major factor behind young people being in a NEET situation, rather than lacking talent or commitment to work. She underlines the importance of education, counseling and other support at an early stage to prevent young people ending up in a vicious circle of unemployment and temporary jobs.

With their qualitative approaches, Chapters 4 and 5 helps to deepen the understanding of the shaping of young adult’s career trajectories from both agency and institutional perspectives. Chapter 4, *Winding paths through school and after—Young Swedes of migrant origin who failed in upper secondary school*,

by Michael Lindblad and Lisbeth Lundahl, aims to contribute to the understanding of young people's extended and problem-filled careers through school and after. The narratives of these 21- to 23-year-olds without complete upper secondary qualifications, most of them of non-European origin, show how scarce symbolic and economic capital, and schools' lack of support frameworks, shape the transitions of these young adults. Adult education, however, constitutes a positive turning point for many of them. Chapter 5, *'Learn skills and get employed'—Constituting the employable refugee subjectivity through integration policies and training practices*, by Ameera Masoud, Tuuli Kurki and Kristiina Brunila, looks at how integration policies and training practices shape the employable refugee subjectivity. The authors utilize a discursive approach in the analysis of the official documents of integration policies and practices, as well as interviews with young migrants (aged 20 to 35 years), integration training project managers, and teachers/trainers. They conclude that the dominant employability discourse serves to reduce refugees to a homogeneous group of 'not yet employable', regardless of their previous education, training and work skills and regardless of their interests—in fact, a reversed process of skilling.

The three chapters of Part II, *Young people's transitions: Policies and new forms of governing*, illuminate that policies and governing of youth transitions not only take place at different political levels but also are enacted by a range of actors and institutions and by more or less transparent technologies and discourses. Furthermore they underscore that youth/young adults is far from a homogenous category, and a central, although less apparent, function of governing is still to contribute to the channelling of young people to different positions in society.

Local policies constitute a highly important part of transition policies but are largely under-researched. Chapter 6, by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, *Young people and transitions in upper secondary education in England—The influence of policy on the 'local opportunity landscape'*, gives an important contribution in this respect. The chapter critically explores ways in which national policy on curriculum, qualifications, institutional accountability and governance impact on the opportunities for learners to progress within, and complete, English upper secondary education. The researchers conclude that top-down national policy levers have interacted with a local marketized environment of competing institutions—a policy landscape that England shares with many other countries—to behave in ways that may contribute to rather than counteract early school leaving.

Even short-term entrepreneurial and therapeutic education and training programmes in and outside formal educational institutions have been developed across Europe and constitute an increasingly important, but still under-researched part of the 'transition machinery'. Chapters 7 and 8 address these phenomena with somewhat different focuses and contexts. In Chapter 7 *Economic worries—therapeutic solutions? Entrepreneurial and therapeutic governing of transitions of young people*, Kristiina Brunila, Katariina Mertanen and

Sari Mononen Batista-Costa critically analyse entrepreneurial and therapeutic education programmes in a range of Finnish institutional settings. The programmes are responses from local governments and the European Union to tackle young people's unemployment and aim at creating smoother transitions from school to working life. The authors explore the kind of subjectivities and entrepreneurial and therapeutic discourses shaped as a form of governing young people. They argue that young people through these discourses learn to recognize themselves as responsible for their careers and self-actualization, looking inwards to find reasons for both success and failure in these respects.

In Chapter 8, *Ethical and care-oriented, but still psychological and 'at risk'—teachers' constructions of young people's transition from school to society*, Sara Irisdotter Aldenmyr and Maria Olson analyse Swedish teachers' descriptions of their teaching for health promotion. Three youth transition discourses stand out as prevailing: a psychological 'risk' discourse, a role model discourse, and an ethical discourse of care. The first two discourses yield hierarchical notions of youth transition from school to life, while the third stands out as more reciprocal and non-hierarchical. While the first discourse reflects a current therapeutic trend in society, the other two stand out as professional responses to this trend as they nurture notions of educational cultivation of youth based on traditional role modelling and ethical instruction.

The epilogue discusses some of the results from the previous chapters, in particular questions and insights that point to a need for new critical research on young people's careers and transition policies.

The majority of the contributions in this book concern young people and different aspects of the transition machinery in the Nordic countries of Iceland, Finland and Sweden but we also have a contribution from England to show similarities between policy landscapes. The aim of the book is not one of comparing transitions in different countries. However, the sample illuminates noteworthy similarities across the Nordic countries. They highlight for example a predominance of constructions of entrepreneurial, competitive and autonomous young individuals, held responsible for navigating their careers successfully while, paradoxically, at the same time they are often addressed as vulnerable and in need of psychological or therapeutic support. In parallel, activation policies, introduced in the late 1990s and early 2000s in many countries including the Nordic ones, require jobseekers to be available and actively showing the right attitudes to work as a precondition for receiving social support (also see Jørgensen, Järvinen & Lundahl, 2019). Hence, current transition policies in the Nordic countries seem to deviate from and be less harmonious than Walther's (2006) often-cited characterization of the Nordic universalistic transition regime as being inclusive, aiming at personal development, and supportive of young people experimenting with repeated switching between education and work. They set youth on the move, but under less benevolent conditions.

This book offers a fresh and critical analysis of youth transitions, based on young people's own narratives of risks and possibilities while moving ahead in life, and on studies of transition discourses, policies and practices. The book illustrates the dilemmas and dissonances, sometimes opportunities, which young people and young adults encounter when they face the contemporary 'transition machinery'.

Notes

- ¹ The title alludes to one of the 'flagship initiatives' of the Europe 2020 strategy.
- ² Young people aged 16–29 often find it difficult to decide if they are 'young' or 'adult'. Similarly, official statistics and reports use different definitions and delimitations. Here we alternate between the terms 'young adults', 'youth' and 'young people'.
- ³ See Newman (2007) for a critical discussion of the different meanings of the concepts of activation and individualization in different welfare contexts.

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