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# School to work transitions in Europe: choice and constraints

Morena Cuconato<sup>1</sup>

1 **Abstract** Starting from the assumption that school to work transitions constitute not only  
2 the end goal but also an integral part of educational trajectories, this article reconstructs the  
3 narratives of the decision-making processes of young people at the end of lower secondary  
4 education, namely the ways in which decision-making is referred to, the temporal horizons  
5 in which transitional decisions are embedded, the criteria of decision-making, the actors they  
6 mentioned and obviously also the relationship between structural constraints and individual  
7 choice, both in explicit references and emerging from interpretative analysis. A special analy-  
8 sis considers the decision-making of disadvantaged youth and the way in which it evolves  
9 differently in five European countries, focussing on the questions of *whether* and *to what*  
10 *extent* school succeeds in combating social inequality.

11 **Keywords** School systems · Transition · Social inequalities · Decision-making process

## 12 1 Introduction

13 This article analyses how students, labelled as disadvantaged or attending schools in disad-  
14 vantaged districts, refer to *decision-making* regarding the next school path leading towards  
15 their future ‘dream’ job: which criteria are most relevant for them, how they experience and  
16 express choice and constraint, and what other actors are involved and in what way.

17 The aim is to model different empirically grounded constellations of disadvantaged stu-  
18 dents’ decision-making processes, trying to highlight the way in which schools contribute  
19 to reproduce or combat social inequality. The article is based on data resulting from an  
20 EU-funded comparative research project ‘Governance of Education Trajectories in Europe’  
21 (GOETE 2010–2013). In Sect. 1, we introduce the main features of the GOETE project,  
22 framing it within the two typologies that we adopted to compare its findings. In the Sect. 2,

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23 we present the concept of educational decision-making and the few existing empirical studies  
24 dealing with it. In the Sect. 3, we explain the adopted research methodology, and in the Sect. 4  
25 the four constellations of decision-making that we reconstructed. Some concluding remarks  
26 close the article.

## 27 **2 Theoretical framework**

28 The GOETE project analysed the role of school in re-conceptualising education in terms  
29 of lifelong learning by combining a life course and a governance perspective. In European  
30 knowledge societies, education is expected to ensure a balance between individual, social and  
31 economic aspects. Therefore, we wanted to explore *whether* and *how* educational institutions  
32 conceptualise and organise individual educational trajectories in order to achieve this aim.  
33 The study covered the period of the transition from lower secondary education into upper sec-  
34 ondary education/vocational education and training, i.e. the development age group between  
35 10 and 16 years.

36 Considering the challenge of matching individual, social and economic aspects of educa-  
37 tion, special focus was given to students having fewer opportunities than their peers, so-called  
38 *disadvantaged youth*. Many countries use this label as an umbrella category, embracing all  
39 young people with poor socio-economic and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron  
40 1977). In some other countries, terms such as youth at risk, vulnerable youth, disconnected  
41 youth or socially excluded youth are preferred to describe social inequality among young  
42 people (Bendit and Stokes 2003). In some countries, such as Germany, disadvantaged youth is  
43 a codified legal term structuring access rights to support and positive-action-type programs.  
44 However, this codification—while providing these young people with rights to support—  
45 risks ascribing them negative labels that compromise their future access to the labour market  
46 (Walther et al. 2006). This aspect has led some youth researchers to argue against the defin-  
47 ition of a new *underclass* (MacDonald 1997).

48 This project adopted an interactive approach, combining a *life course* and a *governance*  
49 *perspective*, which was further broken down into three thematic perspectives: *access*, *coping*  
50 and *relevance*. The regulation of access to and within education represents the first structural  
51 constraint that students encounter in their path towards the labour market and social inte-  
52 gration. The ways in which they cope or fail to cope with education depend on the formal  
53 and informal support they receive and can mobilise, while the relevance that different actors  
54 ascribe to education confers meaning and/or (de)motivation to the students' learning process.  
55 Evidently, these thematic perspectives intersect and are strictly connected to the question of  
56 social inequality, becoming particularly evident at the end of lower secondary education,  
57 which often coincides with the end of compulsory schooling. When facing the transition into  
58 upper secondary education/vocational education and training, children and young people  
59 have to decide *where* and *how* they assert themselves in the subsequent educational path,  
60 which implies new (adult) expectations, status and practices that will have a long-term effect  
61 on their future labour market entry and social integration.

### 62 **2.1 Educational transitions: constraints and support**

63 Young people's educational trajectories are structured differently across Europe, with vary-  
64 ing numbers of transitions to be coped with, and varying levels of permeability and status  
65 differences between different educational tracks and levels. Therefore, reference has been  
66 made to two existing comparative typologies, first as a rationale for comparative sampling

**Table 1** Categorisation of countries based on Allmendinger's typology (1989)

Standardisation/stratification	Low	High
Low	Italy, Poland, UK	Finland, Slovenia
High	–	France Germany The Netherlands

**Table 2** GOETE countries according to youth transition regime

Regime type	School	Training	Welfare	Disadvantage	Youth
Universalistic (FI)	Comprehensive	Standardised	State	Individual/structural	Personal development
Liberal (UK)	Comprehensive	Non-standardised	State/family	Individual	Economic independence
Employment centred (D, FR, NL)	Selective	Standardised	State/family	Individual	Vocational socialisation
Under-institutionalised (IT)	Comprehensive	Non-standardised	Family	Structural	Status vacuum (dependency)
Post-socialist countries (PL, SI)	Comprehensive	Variable	State/family	Individual/structural	Variable

67 of different national contexts and second as an interpretative framework helping to explain  
 68 differences and similarities (cf. Walther et al. 2006).

69 The first is that developed by Allmendinger (1989), who analysed education systems,  
 70 considering the way in which they are linked to the employment system. Key dimensions  
 71 of this analysis are *stratification* and *standardisation*. Stratification refers to the *way* and the  
 72 *extent to which* differentiated educational routes lead to different outcomes, i.e. qualifications  
 73 of unequal status. Standardisation refers to the *way* and *degree to which* the content and  
 74 qualifications of education are regulated and recognised across single education institutions or  
 75 local contexts. This typology is relevant for understanding the relationship between education  
 76 and later life course, access to and within education, the labour market value of education,  
 77 and mechanisms of educational governance. The resulting typology distinguishes four ideal  
 78 types, three of which are covered by countries in the GOETE project (Table 1).

79 Beyond the linkage between education systems and labour markets, the GOETE perspec-  
 80 tive also aims to understand the system of measures taken to promote equality in education.  
 81 The model of transition regimes (Walther 2006) combines Allmendinger's typology with the  
 82 model of welfare regimes of Esping-Andersen (1990), modified by Gallie and Paugam (2000)  
 83 and Ferrera (2000), and includes youth-specific dimensions such as young people's access to  
 84 social security, the orientation of policies for unemployed youth, as well as dominant cultural  
 85 meanings of disadvantage and youth. This model also distinguishes four types covered by  
 86 GOETE countries. These types, however, do not apply to post-socialist countries such as  
 87 Slovenia (Table 2).

## 88 2.2 The interactive nature of decision-making in transitions

89 At transitions, in all countries, the decision-making of students is influenced by individual  
90 needs, interests, experiences, problems, expectations etc. as well as by contextual factors  
91 such as school organisation, local labour markets, out-of-school offers etc. Apart from this,  
92 it involves interaction with significant others such as friends or parents, trusted teachers and  
93 key persons as well as formal and informal *gatekeepers*.

94 According to this interactionist approach, in our analysis we adopted the *hybrid decision-*  
95 *making models* identified by Paton (2007), which interpret decision-making as interaction  
96 between structural possibilities or barriers and subjective intentionality, considering indi-  
97 vidual actions of decision-makers, different rationalities, as well as external structures. This  
98 reflects the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who elaborated a concept of *agency*  
99 relating past experiences, imagination of the future and coping with present situations. This  
100 means that such decision-making develops as a process whose sequence of stages are not  
101 continuous and always congruent.

102 According to Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), educational and career decisions are bound  
103 to ‘horizons for action’, determined by both external opportunities for jobs as well as personal  
104 perceptions of what is possible, desirable and appropriate, depending on the wider context  
105 and individual’s life history. They (1997) put forward three key elements, which could explain  
106 individual decision-making processes as part of a wider lifestyle influenced by the social and  
107 cultural context, including respective norms, of an on-going biographical process in life-  
108 course trajectories, of people’s social network of friends, family members and acquaintances  
109 and their inter-relations with institutional actors.

## 110 3 Decision-making: a brief review on the state of the art

111 A review of the state of the art reveals very few empirical studies on decision-making in  
112 educational research, which is far more focussed on performance assessments than on the  
113 decisional process guiding transitions (cf. Walther et al. 2016; Cuconato and Walther 2015),  
114 ‘in which habitus, personal identity, life history, social and cultural contexts, actions and  
115 learning are interrelated’ (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997, p. 46).

116 In Super’s (1990) model of *career development* and *career decision-making*, the emerging  
117 personal self-concept plays a central role. Pointing out that not everyone goes through all  
118 the stages and in the same temporal order, he identifies five developmental periods: growth,  
119 exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement. The growth stage (between 4  
120 and 13 years) and the exploration stage (between 14 and 24 years) are the most important for  
121 identity building, taking place during the youth age. The *growth stage* starts with playing  
122 and imagination, while social activities, hobbies and skills become more dominant later.  
123 Adolescents begin to develop their self-concepts and adopt stereotypes about professions.  
124 Parents, teachers and friends as well as media are the most important sources of information  
125 on the labour market. In the *exploration stage*, interests change constantly while young people  
126 collect specific information about themselves and about the world of work. They transform  
127 the stereotypes of the growth stage under the influence of new knowledge, and they assess  
128 professions with regard to their individual abilities, skills, self-concepts and self-evaluation.

129 Research on choices at the end of compulsory schooling states that students who leave  
130 education early often decide to do so relatively early in their school career (Payne 2003,  
131 p. 16). While their job preferences are still fluid, they show strong interest in the issue and

132 develop a highly instrumental approach to education. Those with no specific career goals  
133 tend to stay in full-time education, mostly because of their good academic performance or  
134 because they do not yet feel ready or confident enough to face the responsibilities of a job.  
135 Those who leave full-time education after compulsory schooling do not expect that staying  
136 on would increase their options. For both groups, employment is a central aspect of their  
137 considerations (*ibid.* 2003, p. 17).

## 138 4 Methodology

139 This study is based on empirical data from a sub-project carried out in five of the eight coun-  
140 tries participating in the GOETE project: Finland, France, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands  
141 and Slovenia.<sup>1</sup> The project adopts a mixed method approach, combining both quantitative and  
142 qualitative sources of data. In the following, we briefly present quantitative findings regarding  
143 all the countries, analysing more in depth the qualitative ones that are more connected to the  
144 focus of this article.

145 In the final months of lower secondary school, a student survey ( $N = 6390$ ) was conducted  
146 by each national team in 24 schools (three schools in three cities per country), differing in  
147 terms of the socio-economic conditions (affluent, average and disadvantaged) of the young  
148 people attending them. After that, in the first 2 months of upper secondary education in each  
149 city, qualitative case studies were conducted, focussing only on disadvantaged ‘local school  
150 spaces’ (cf. Maroy 2004), involving not only school but also extra- school educational actors  
151 as well as extra-curricular learning opportunities integrating or complementing the school  
152 curriculum. Of course, such a poor or rich educational environment influences the educational  
153 trajectories of young people with less individual resources. To rebuild their interactions and  
154 decision-making processes, individual in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions were  
155 conducted with students after they had left lower secondary education ( $N = 109$ ), recon-  
156 structing their (either smooth or ruptured) trajectories up to entering the post-compulsory  
157 stage. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Codes referring to decision-  
158 making were transferred into a synopsis, providing an overview over different constellations.  
159 In terms of the coding paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (1009), the following dimensions  
160 emerged as key categories:

- 161 – *Criteria of decision-making* refer to young peoples’ dominant reasons for their decisions;
- 162 – *Actors involved* refer to the role of and relationship with other persons (significant others  
163 and/or institutional gatekeepers) in the decision-making process;
- 164 – *Choice and constraint* refer to the relationship between individual preferences and con-  
165 textual influences emerging from the young people’s narratives.

166 Other important elements were the *timing* of decision-making, i.e. when the process started  
167 and how long it took, the *strategies* that young people adopted and the *ways* in which young  
168 people talked about this (implicitly or explicitly, more or less reflexively). The analysis  
169 includes contextualisation with regard to the national dominant educational and economic  
170 discourses. As the samples were not representative, comparative analyses in the GOETE  
171 project rely on interpretation by contextualising specific findings with regard to different  
172 cultural and structural contexts adopting the two typologies presented in Sect. 2.1.

<sup>1</sup> These five countries are representative of the three types of education systems relevant in the GOETE project as well as three types of transition regimes plus the post-socialist case of Slovenia (Table 2). The other countries participating in the project are France, Poland and the UK.

## 173 5 Students in transition

174 Both quantitative and qualitative analysis of our data sources have identified considerable  
175 diversity regarding ruptures or smoothness, choice or constraint and the destinations of stu-  
176 dents after lower secondary education. In the eight countries, *quantitative analysis* has shown  
177 that—already during lower secondary education—the socio-economic background of the  
178 family structured the experiences of ruptures as well as the expectations regarding future  
179 destinations and the choice they concretely made (34% of students from disadvantaged  
180 family backgrounds and 57% with a migration background experienced unexpected school  
181 changes compared with 27% of those from affluent families), the socio-spatial context of the  
182 school and the structure of the education system. Students from countries with differentiated  
183 education systems were also less satisfied with the lower secondary school they attended.  
184 Compared with 18% of students in Finland and Slovenia, 31% in Germany, France and The  
185 Netherlands would have preferred a different lower secondary school but their prior achieve-  
186 ments were not sufficient to enter it. Regarding their expectations for the future, girls (59%)  
187 worried significantly more than boys (46%), while the fact that young Dutch and young Finns  
188 worried less may result from better labour market prospects and reliable welfare mechanisms.

### 189 5.1 Constellations of decision-making

190 After this brief presentation of quantitative findings emerging from the whole sample, we  
191 concentrate on the four constellations of decision-making we reconstructed when analysing  
192 the *qualitative data* (cf. Walther et al. 2015), considering only the sample of disadvantaged  
193 students. We present them by introducing four overview tables reporting the educational tra-  
194 jectories of some example students. Where possible, the examples offer a contrast between  
195 students in different school systems and welfare transition regimes. Key aspects of the  
196 decision-making processes are analysed using relevant quotes from interviews.

#### 197 5.1.1 'Family convoy': family as protection and constraint

198 In this constellation, the family offers outstanding but also ambivalent support, as it protects  
199 but at the same time limits young people's choices. From the narratives, it emerges that,  
200 for these students, the wish for security is more important than realising a profession of  
201 one's own choice. Of course, the degree of protection and channelling differs between cases.  
202 However, all these students opt for extrinsic over intrinsic goals and—compared with other  
203 constellations—in this case, the influence of school guidance is quite insignificant (Tables 3,  
204 4, 5, 6).

205 *Julia* (Germany) comes from a family with low socio-economic background and left lower  
206 secondary school with the *Hauptschule* (the lowest track of the German education system)  
207 certificate at age 17. Her original wish was to attend training to become a nurse in a geriatric  
208 home. However, due to critical factors in and outside the workplace, she abandoned the  
209 compulsory internship while still at school and had to find a new one. She explained how  
210 she ended up in an internship and—in consequence—an apprenticeship for salespersons in  
211 a bakery as follows:

212 Through the internship ... I always wanted to become a saleswoman ... and then I had  
213 the idea with the bakery, through my mum and my aunt. They do the same ... they  
214 advised me a lot ...



**Table 3** Key aspects of cases of 'family convoy' decision-making processes

Name (alias)	Strategy	Main actors	Criteria of decision-making	Choice/constraint	Original plan/actual destination
Julia, D	Compromising occupational aspirations to avoid unemployment, internalising parental advice and initiative as own wish	Family contacts and initiatives	Avoiding unemployment, securing trustful social relationships	Turning the adaptation towards 'realistic' options into own choice	From geriatric nurse to saleswoman in a bakery
Giovanna, IT	Internalising mother's fears of failing, renouncing enrolment in the school she likes	Mother	Avoiding stressful school experience and learning demands, low self-esteem, self-fulfilling prophecy effect	Mother's decision experienced as deviation from own wishes	From vocational school for fashion to general upper secondary education (arts profile)

**Table 4** Key aspects of cases of ‘step-by-step’ decision-making processes

Name (alias)	Strategy	Main actors	Criteria of decision-making	Choice/constraint	Original plan/actual destination
Tim, NL	Knew very early in his school career that he wanted to go into the sports sector	Coach support necessary; Family members as role models	Although sport specialisation is evident for him, he does not exclude the possibility of switching to something else later on	Struggling against being downgraded during first transition	Vocational education in sports sector
Matteo, IT	Every school careeropening a university path, giving at the same time a qualification directly leading to the labour market	Teachers’ advice and mother’s emotional support	Avoiding the most ambitious general upper secondary path (liceo); opting for intermediate level and status	Compromising between moderate upgrading, subjective aspirations, weak socio-economic background and low self-confidence	Original: vocational school for hotel, then general upper secondary with business profile
Joonas, FIN	Education as an obstacle on the way to self-assured adulthood and working life. Aiming to go into same work field as father, granting an easy life and enough time to spend with friends	Affirmative support by the student counsellor; father as role model	Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; combining interest and prospect of a good job in a garage	Own decisions without compromising	Vocational training as car mechanic

**Table 5** Key aspects of cases of 'fighting for dreams' decision-making processes

Name (alias)	Strategy	Main actors	Criteria of decision-making	Choice/constraint	Original plan and actual position
Ana, SL	Determination, effort and sacrifices to fulfil own dreams; little external constraints but social disadvantage	Family support	Intrinsic motivation and interest; self-responsibility	No constraints perceived; always stuck to her dream of becoming a doctor	General upper secondary school with medical profile
Sirin, NL	Both downgraded from grammar school to lower vocational school, where they develop ambitious aspirations	Active families support first, later also teachers backing	Ambitious goals, despite still vague professional ambitions	Both felt downgraded at first, but later supported by teachers	Vocational school with an economic profile according to mentor's suggestion for facilitating transition into higher professional education
Rabia, NL					Vocational school for care profession according to her own wish
Rami, FIN	Scarce interest in learning at the beginning, motivating turning point and then individual engagement in further education	Biographical turning point when parents sent him for one year to Somalia	Aims to get an education that would lead to a good job; elder brother as role model	Self-concept as self-made man; too low grades for general upper secondary; plans to achieve higher degree via vocational school	First general upper secondary, then vocational studies which include the opportunity to continue for a higher degree

**Table 6** Key aspects of cases of 'too weak to follow own plans' decision-making processes

Name (alias)	Strategy	Main actors	Criteria of decision making	Choice/constraints	Original plan and actual position
Lemi, D	Drifting between unclear interest, lack of opportunities and experience of cooling out	Parents, teachers (positive and negative), personal advisor, career guidance	Avoiding dropping out and unemployment, renouncing intrinsic plans	No development of intrinsic plans, trying to rationalise cooling out	Original: increase school qualification for better choice  Actual: Pre-vocational measure
Tiia, FL	No clear and linear decision-making; following what she feels right at the moment	Study counsellor (not useful); she states that she made all the decisions by herself	Changing interest, subject to external factors; no reflection on links between education and the future	Too low grades for desired school in both transitions	Original: general upper secondary (arts)  Actual: (pre-vocational) interim course to improve grades

215 Female family members provided vocational orientation, access to a company and sup-  
216 port during the internship. Julia developed motivation and performed so well that she  
217 obtained the apprenticeship place. It is striking that the family exerted so much influ-  
218 ence, although Julia had much institutional support inside and outside school. Obvi-  
219 ously, in her case, the involvement of significant others was crucial for making the  
220 decision. Also in Giovanna's case, teachers and other professionals played a marginal  
221 role.

222 Although in both cases parent(s) and family are seen as significant actors in the  
223 decision-making process, there are differences in the extent to which students expe-  
224 rience family dispositions to school as supportive or over-protective. In the case of  
225 Julia, her second choice for training results from parental advice and contacts (family  
226 as a support network): decision-making implies *adopting opportunities provided by the*  
227 *family*.

228 In the case of *Giovanna*, from low socio-economic background like Julia, instead,  
229 the mother intervenes because she is sceptical about her daughter's learning skills and  
230 self-confidence. This intervention makes it difficult for Giovanna to accept and inter-  
231 nalise the new directions as her own choice. The role of the family as a protective  
232 factor affects the professional choices of their children. Giovanna attended general  
233 upper secondary education with an arts profile. Asked if this was her first choice, she  
234 answered:

235 G.: 'No, *I wanted to go to another school, but...then it became different.*'

236 I.: 'May I ask you why it became different?'

237 G.: 'Because I was told that there were some subjects like chemistry, which....'

238 Giovanna's poor self-confidence is linked to her dyslexia and (re)produced by her mother,  
239 whose main goal is to protect her from any challenging school and life experiences. Gio-  
240 vanna internalises the fear of failing and follows her mother's advice to choose general  
241 arts school. The dominance of this orientation and a lack of intrinsic motivation are also  
242 reflected in her somewhat random professional (gendered) ideas: '*simple jobs, hairdresser ...*  
243 *babysitter, or kindergarten teacher, things like this*'. Concerning the experience of *choice*  
244 *and constraint* in the decision-making process, family influence is ambivalent. In these  
245 two cases, a lack of accessible options and effective institutional support is evident and  
246 results in renouncement of initial intrinsic professional interests. However, the constella-  
247 tion differs significantly: Giovanna enters upper secondary education, which gives her a  
248 wide range of options for the future, including higher education. Julia succeeds in entering  
249 apprenticeship training, yet in the lower segments of the gendered German dual training  
250 system.

251 In terms of an overall interpretation, on the one hand, families protect young people by  
252 helping them to avoid experiences of unemployment and school failure; on the other hand,  
253 this implies reducing professional aspirations to the areas to which parents have access. This  
254 leads to reproduction of the (low) educational and occupational status of parents as well as  
255 gendered trajectories. Security as a main criterion for decision-making rather than intrinsic  
256 interest corresponds to the passive and opportunistic transition strategy that Evans (2002)  
257 calls 'wait and see'. A noteworthy aspect is the apparent irrelevance of institutional support  
258 such as career guidance and counselling. For Italy, this is not a surprise, as Italian families  
259 have to compensate for the structural deficiencies of transition-related support structures. It  
260 is more surprising in Germany, with its broad and highly differentiated system of support  
261 measures. This could mean that institutional support measures are only marginally perceived  
262 as useful by young people and need to be complemented by *trusted* significant others.

264 This constellation refers to students who have ambitious goals but, due to structural con-  
 265 straints, low socio-economic background, unfavourable labour markets as well as scepticism  
 266 regarding their own abilities, decide to take one qualification step after another without  
 267 losing sight of further or higher education. With this strategy, their decision-making is  
 268 in line with the institutional logic of transitions and trajectories. This cautious approach  
 269 to decision-making and progress through the educational system seems to be relevant  
 270 for many students, both in selective education systems (in our sample, Tim from The  
 271 Netherlands) and in comprehensive systems (Matteo from Italy and Joonas from Fin-  
 272 land).

273 The existence and use of support and the attachment of the students to the *institutional*  
 274 *logic* of their respective education system is characteristic for this constellation. All stu-  
 275 dents received considerable support from teachers and career advisors. In general, support  
 276 included messages of *cooling out* (Goffmann 1959), adapting to 'realistic' institutional per-  
 277 spectives, which however in the students' narratives represent only the initial step (back) in  
 278 their long-term plans. They all moved 'step-by-step' into upper general or vocational edu-  
 279 cation with the perspective of possibly going on further. Apparently, these students met at  
 280 least once a 'special teacher' (or counsellor), who believed in them, recognised their ambi-  
 281 tions and aspirations and took care of them in a personally engaged way. However, the  
 282 educational attitudes of the students differed. While *Joonas* showed a combination of self-  
 283 esteem and a relaxed attitude towards school, *Matteo* and *Tim* were less confident regarding  
 284 their skills. The decision-making processes of this constellation are also characterised by  
 285 family support, albeit not playing such a determining role as in the 'family convoy' clus-  
 286 ter.

287 Looking at the *criteria* influencing the students in their educational and vocational deci-  
 288 sions, we see that, in all cases, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation played a role. Compared with  
 289 his peers who—as often happens in disadvantaged school environments—mainly enrolled  
 290 in vocational schools, Matteo decided for a more ambitious path:

291 I have this passion of preparing myself for future life. Even though I think about several  
 292 hypotheses. I imagine myself wearing a suit and tie, being a chief executive officer or  
 293 a shareholder in a big firm—I hope. I like thinking, I think a lot.

294 Joonas, instead, differs inasmuch as he displays a leisure and peer-oriented lifestyle. His case  
 295 reminds us of Paul Willis' lads, for whom the reproductive route into manual jobs implies  
 296 a gendered life course that symbolises cultural distance from academic and middle-class  
 297 norms.

298 In sum, the 'step-by-step' constellation is defined by a demanding balance between interest  
 299 and institutional logic. This makes it evident that systemic flaws can be compensated only by  
 300 individual counter-strategies: individual ambition (agency), individual and engaged coaching  
 301 teachers and highly supportive families. In two cases—one from a selective system (Tim)  
 302 and one from a comprehensive system (Joonas)—students experienced discrepancies between  
 303 institutional mechanisms and personal orientations in the earlier stages of their trajectory.  
 304 Joonas experienced the school as preventing him from developing the adult life he wanted,  
 305 and in the beginning, Tim felt misjudged by school in terms of his learning potential. In  
 306 Matteo's case, there was not so much a discrepancy between personal ambitions and school  
 307 advice, but rather being left alone in deciding how far he may aim.

308 5.1.3 'Fighting for dreams': resisting cooling out

309 This constellation includes students whose decision-making involves struggling against  
310 unfavourable external conditions in following one's own goals. In these cases, young people  
311 show either a concrete dream profession or a more general ambition to reach an economically  
312 secure and fulfilling position in life. Strong self-determination, entailing both the will to take  
313 personal responsibility and a balance between adaptation and resistance, characterises their  
314 decision-making process. Four students from three countries (*Ana* from Slovenia, *Sirin* and  
315 *Rabia* from The Netherlands and *Rami* from Finland) are emblematic of this constellation. All  
316 these students have in common a low socio-economic and an immigrant (or ethnic minority)  
317 background, combining lack of resources with ascriptions of being *others*. However, they  
318 apparently succeeded in re-interpreting disadvantage as a challenge, motivating them to react.

319 Looking at these cases, one immediately notes that the experience of being an immigrant  
320 or facing unfavourable conditions has been influential in various ways. Despite their difficult  
321 educational trajectories, the different transitions and experiences are lived by the student as  
322 significant events giving them strength and persistence.

323 *Rami*, a male student with a Somali background living in Finland, was in a vocational  
324 school at the time of interview. As he created all sorts of trouble during his first year in  
325 secondary school, in grade eight, his family sent him for one year to Somalia. This year  
326 turned out to be a *turning point* for his decision-making process:

327 And then I have understood how I was always into trouble at school and school did  
328 not give me any satisfaction. So there I decided that once I get back to Finland I would  
329 start studying and talk only during the breaks. And on ninth grade I got better grades  
330 and studied more calmly.

331 The stay was a rough experience that made him think how good and easy things were in  
332 Finland. His teachers rewarded his noticeable change: '*Everybody noticed it and [...] the*  
333 *Swedish teacher said you're really calmer now than before.*' *Rami* talked about his life as a  
334 success story of insight and change, highlighting his own efforts and choices, while support  
335 appears marginal.

336 The attitude of these students to adjust to their life conditions is noteworthy, even though  
337 they are not in the career position they had hoped for. Showing remarkable independence and  
338 trust in their own effort, they recognise as well that they gained much support from significant  
339 others both in school and in their social environment (except *Rami*).

340 *Ana* and her family moved from Bosnia to Slovenia at the end of her primary school in  
341 order to improve their life conditions. Since then, she has learned Slovene and changed school  
342 again because her family moved to another city. At the interview time, *Ana* was attending a  
343 medical upper secondary school. Her decision-making process was characterised by strong  
344 self-determination and intrinsic motivation to realize her dream of being a paediatrician. She  
345 describes herself as the most influential person in her life:

346 I had the most influence on myself. I wished for this since 5th or 6th grade and my  
347 parents said that I should enrol where I wanted. They also told me that a medical school  
348 is very difficult, but I said I am ready for it, and that I will do everything to become a  
349 physician because that is what I really wish to do.

350 While *Ana* and *Rabia* are motivated by *specific* dreams, *Sirin* and *Rami* have more *instrumen-*  
351 *tal* job orientations centred on economic security and a good life. All of them had talked about  
352 their career choices with their parents, who emotionally supported their decision. However,

353 in the way they presented themselves, *personal motivation* was the main factor leading to  
354 their decision-making processes.

355 Characteristic of this constellation is how the students overcome adverse structural con-  
356 ditions, marking the importance of personal investment of time and effort. Although they  
357 faced challenges such as transmigration or school's misjudgement (Sirin and Rabia), they  
358 emphasised their own actions in reaching the goals they desired and the ability to adapt to  
359 current circumstances. Apparently, the tension between vulnerability and resistance inherent  
360 to migration biographies can become a biographical resource if young people become aware  
361 of it. Another similarity within this cluster is the ability to mobilise and accept support from  
362 different kinds of adults, partly by re-interpreting support relationships in terms of friendship  
363 and recognition.

#### 364 5.1.4 'Too weak to follow own plans': decision-making under conditions of cooling out

365 This pattern applies to students who are not able to realise their more or less pronounced edu-  
366 cational and vocational wishes due to external constraints and a lack of individual resources.  
367 Teachers or counsellors channelled them into courses or occupations differing from their  
368 interests but that were 'more realistic' in terms of lower entrance thresholds. This constella-  
369 tion is illustrated through the cases of *Lemi* from Germany and *Tiia* from Finland, who are  
370 stuck in pre-vocational courses.

371 *Lemi's* educational trajectory has been full of ruptures since the early start. Only with  
372 difficulties did he achieve the leaving certificate from *Hauptschule*. Attempting to upgrade  
373 his qualification in a full-time professional school for computing, he received denial from both  
374 his teachers and from career guidance: 'She told me right in the face, 'you will not make it' ...  
375 Just like this. How can she? I do not like that.' Coming from a Turkish background, his family  
376 supported him emotionally without being able to advise him in terms of decision-making.  
377 At the same time, as first-born son, his parents imposed on him the burden of expectations  
378 regarding career and income. Thus, Lemi was fully dependent on institutional advice and  
379 support. In a way, he reconstructed his educational biography by distinguishing between  
380 teachers and experts who believed in him and those who disrespected him. However, also  
381 those professionals who encouraged him and prevented him from dropping out contributed  
382 to reducing his aspirations. Finally, he resigned himself to accept any training:

383 She said, yes the [pre-vocational course] is a good option ... For me there are two ways:  
384 the unreasonable and the reasonable one; criminal world—normal world. Criminal  
385 world would mean no family. That would be dramatic. Main thing now is to find any  
386 training place.

387 The role of *significant others* is diverse. The educational trajectories of these students are  
388 strongly influenced by external opportunities and constraints. Lemi in particular is struggling  
389 with interventions from significant and institutional others. In contrast, significant others seem  
390 to be absent in *Tiia's* case. *Tiia* applied for vocational studies in cosmetology and hairdressing,  
391 but as her grades were not enough good, at the time of the interview she attended tenth grade,  
392 a preparatory class for students who want to improve themselves. Although she states that  
393 she decided by herself, her decision-making process does not show a clear strategy. It seems  
394 that she lacks parental support, and she describes her study counsellor as useless.

395 Lemi and *Tiia* share the experience of being diverted from their original interests and plans  
396 because they were deemed 'too weak' by teachers and counsellors, because their plans were  
397 not fully developed yet, or their qualifications were too low, or because they lacked supportive  
398 persons encouraging them to stick to their subjective aspirations. Their decision-making was



399 characterised by the challenge of rationalising or internalising the actual choices as their  
400 own. However, different contexts played a determining role in reproducing social inequality.  
401 Tiia benefits from the Finnish comprehensive education system, where even students in  
402 preparatory courses still have the full range of opportunities in front of them. In contrast,  
403 Lemi suffers from the highly stratified and standardised German education and training  
404 system, where poor school performance, lower social and cultural capital of the family, or  
405 failing applications for apprenticeship are translated more or less directly into destinations  
406 of reduced status and/or choice. The institutionalised mechanisms of cooling out result from  
407 the ‘unspoken alliance’ of teachers, personal advisors and careers services.

## 408 6 Conclusions

409 Starting from an understanding of decision-making as ‘goal-directed behaviour in the pres-  
410 ence of options’ (Hansson 2005, p. 6), we have illustrated the tension between choice and  
411 constraint—or structure and agency—and the different ways in which young people deal  
412 with this tension during their decision-making process at the end of lower secondary school.  
413 Emerging from the data as well as relating to theoretical models, key categories were estab-  
414 lished, along which constellations of decision-making were elaborated. The four resulting  
415 constellations emerging from this analysis represent different procedural dynamics, actors,  
416 resources and opportunities but also different students’ interests, criteria, reflections and  
417 strategies.

418 However, we want to stress that these constellations represent neither persons with their full  
419 biography nor their whole trajectories. Instead, they focus on single situations and processes  
420 of decision-making. This means that the young people in these constellations may decide  
421 differently in other biographical moments or in other biographical areas. Of course, the  
422 boundaries of and between these constellations are fluid rather than clear-cut. Only a few  
423 cases are unambiguous; For example, Giovanna could also be interpreted as being ‘too weak  
424 to resist cooling out’. Finally, the constellations themselves can be questioned; for example,  
425 is the ‘family convoy’ constellation sufficiently distinguished from constellations such as  
426 ‘step-by-step’ or ‘too weak to resist’, especially as the family always influences students’  
427 decision-making? In fact, the boundaries between the constellations have to be interpreted  
428 in terms of *different emphasis* rather than exclusiveness. They represent ‘frozen’ pictures of  
429 dynamic decision-making processes, which may not be completed yet: what looks like ‘too  
430 weak to resist/cooling out’ may turn into ‘step-by-step’ or ‘fighting for dreams’ at a later  
431 stage in the educational and vocational/professional career of a student. The main purpose  
432 of any attempt to elaborate ‘typical’ from single cases is heuristic.

433 Regarding social inequality, we can underline that, given similar life conditions and edu-  
434 cation systems, we find different decision-making processes, and the other way around,  
435 i.e. similar decision-making occurring in rather different contexts. Many cases in our sam-  
436 ple show that lack of resources narrows the opportunity space and weakens the power to  
437 maintain intrinsic interests, however others demonstrate that, in the presence of structural  
438 constraints, students develop transversal skills to resist. With regard to institutional struc-  
439 tures, the ‘family convoy’ constellation was found both in Germany, representing a highly  
440 standardised and stratified education system, as well as in Italy, with low stratification and  
441 standardisation (cf. Allmendinger 1989). This reveals that cooling-out mechanisms are not  
442 limited to institutional systems and actors, and our cases show that such barriers can be  
443 either complemented (Germany) or replaced (Italy) by family members. Nevertheless, there

444 is clear evidence of the different 'logics' of the education system in the decision-making  
445 processes. The examples of Lemi and Tiia show that the biographical implications of being  
446 caught in cooling-out processes differ considerably between more comprehensive and more  
447 selective systems. However, our findings seem to demonstrate that, in the framework of a  
448 generous welfare transition regime, active intervention of school staff, support from external  
449 pedagogical staff and active cooperation between teachers and family can succeed in mit-  
450 igating the differences between selective and comprehensive education systems more than  
451 educational and political discourses suggest. For analysis (and planning) of policies target-  
452 ing social inequality in education, this implies that, regarding educational choices, the 'cause  
453 and effect' paradigm should be replaced by more elaborate models which take into account  
454 more seriously and at an early stage the biographical and interactive perspectives. An inter-  
455 national longitudinal study, ideally exploring wider transitions amongst young people from  
456 different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, would help to provide firm theoretical  
457 development in this respect.

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