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School to work transitions in Europe: choice and constraints

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

1 Introduction

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

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

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

2 Theoretical framework

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

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

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

2.1 Educational transitions: constraints and support

Young people's educational trajectories are structured differently across Europe, with varying numbers of transitions to be coped with, and varying levels of permeability and status differences between different educational tracks and levels. Therefore, reference has been 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

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

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

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

2.2 The interactive nature of decision-making in transitions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Methodology

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

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

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

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

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[1] 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.

5 Students in transition

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

5.1 Constellations of decision-making

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

5.1.1 *'Family convoy': family as protection and constraint*

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

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

> Through the internship … I always wanted to become a saleswoman … and then I had the idea with the bakery, through my mum and my aunt. They do the same … they 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 career opening 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

Female family members provided vocational orientation, access to a company and support during the internship. Julia developed motivation and performed so well that she obtained the apprenticeship place. It is striking that the family exerted so much influence, although Julia had much institutional support inside and outside school. Obviously, in her case, the involvement of significant others was crucial for making the decision. Also in Giovanna's case, teachers and other professionals played a marginal role.

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

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

G.: 'No, *I wanted to go to another school, but...then it became different.'*
I.: *'May I ask you why it became different?'*
G.: *'Because I was told that there were some subjects like chemistry, which....'*

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

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

5.1.2 'Step-by-step': balancing interest and institutional logic

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.1.3 'Fighting for dreams': resisting cooling out

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6 Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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