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# Chapter 21

## Negotiated, Given and Self-Made Paths: Immigrant Origin Girls and Post-compulsory Educational Transition in Finland



Marja-Liisa Mäkelä and Mira Kalalahti

**Abstract** Although Finland still has a relatively low proportion of students with a migrant background, it has not been able to ensure that immigrants and their descendants have equal educational opportunities. Education could enhance integration but migrant backgrounds have a persistent impact. In this chapter, our focus is on post-comprehensive educational decision-making processes of immigrant origin adolescent girls, with the viewpoint of the multifaceted intertwining of gender and ethnicity. We conceptualise the educational decisions as negotiations that adolescents have to have with their families, teachers, counsellors and peers. Within these negotiations, the negotiating parties try to push the adolescent to choose those educational paths they see valued and preferred, and away from the choices they see as unfitting or less valued. As the girls ‘negotiate their identities according to situational contexts’, their agency is constructed with ongoing and reflective negotiations with other people. In this chapter, we show how adolescent girls with an immigrant background in Finland face quite similar difficulties as ethnic minorities in other European and Nordic countries when continuing their education from compulsory education. We also illustrate with three ‘transitional stories’ the key challenges that girls with immigrant backgrounds encounter when making their educational decisions and integrating to education: structural boundaries, social boundaries and acculturation.

Today, approximately 8% of the Finnish population have a recent migrant background.<sup>1</sup> Although Finland still has a relatively low proportion of students with a migrant background, the academic adaptation of migrants is not encouraging.<sup>2</sup> Despite targeted practices and support, Finland has one of the widest gaps between

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native and non-native speakers in learning outcomes amongst OECD countries.<sup>3</sup> Migrant backgrounds also have an impact on the selection and completion of upper secondary education.<sup>4</sup>

The developments leading to the educational underperformance of Finnish migrants and their children are multiple and derive already from the comprehensive education. Unequal educational opportunities are bounded by below-average school performance and complex decision-making processes during and after the compulsory education. Career guidance has not been able to meet the diversity of the pupils at the comprehensive education level and the post-comprehensive transitions of pupils with immigrant background are often multi-phase and delayed due to rejections and additional teaching.<sup>5</sup> Migrants and their children also discontinue their upper secondary studies more often than average, especially in academically oriented general upper secondary education.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, students with immigrant backgrounds are underrepresented in higher education despite the fact that the Finnish education system should produce few inequalities given the low stratification of the primary and lower secondary school system and numerous alternative ways to access higher education.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that young people with immigrant backgrounds are not a generic group and there is considerable variation in the educational achievements of migrants compared with young people with migrant background ('second generation migrants'), as well as between the different countries they migrated from.<sup>8</sup> Researchers have raised concerns about counsellors lacking the competence to recognise and acknowledge the socio-cultural contexts of those they are working with, leading to prejudice and segregation and many negotiations between occupational opportunities, hopes and expectations.<sup>9</sup> In this chapter instead of examining specific migrant groups or migrant young people as one group, we aim to enrich the comprehension of the negotiations of which young people face by portraying three 'transitional stories' of immigrant adolescent girls.<sup>10</sup> Their narratives illustrate three key areas in which equality of educational opportunities is challenged.

## **Our Stories of Three Adolescent Girls**

Our data consists of the follow-up stories of three adolescent girls with an immigrant background. They were interviewed twice. The first time was during their last year of comprehensive school (approximately 15 years-of-age) while they were making upper secondary education choices. The second interview was during the last year of their upper secondary studies (approximately 17–18 years-of-age). The girls were selected from the longitudinal study 'Transitions and Educational Trajectories of Immigrant Youth'.<sup>11</sup> In this project, 445 young people were surveyed over three years from the comprehensive school to the end of the upper secondary education, with 35 of them interviewed twice. The sampling was targeted to schools that represented socio-economically different urban neighbourhood schools with an above-average number of immigrant-origin students.

In order to illustrate the relationship between the migrant background and educational transitions in Finland, we discuss three cases. We focus on ‘second generation’ immigrant girls who were born in Finland but had at least one parent born abroad. (See discussion about the concept of *immigrant* in Helakorpi, Holm and Liu in this book, also Mikander in this book). These girls had completed Finnish basic education and formally met the same opportunities as other Finnish-born pupils. Yet their cases illustrate the diversity of opportunity structures of the ‘next generation immigrants’.<sup>12</sup> Based on earlier analysis we selected three viewpoints on educational opportunities: (a) structural boundaries, (b) social boundaries and (c) acculturation.<sup>13</sup>

In discussing these cases, we use the girls’ educational biographies to underline the endless movement and flow of the agencies these girls have and aim for. Their stories and memories are like snapshot moments of historical events, actions and places, and when analysing the snapshots, we can “crack open” some routinised social, embodied and affected processes.<sup>14</sup> The stories were constructed from the girls’ interviews by using a simple question: What can her story tell us about educational transition from the viewpoint of structural/social/acculturation boundaries? Since the girls talked about many topics in their interviews, we made decisions about what the narratives would look like, keeping a focus on our key concerns.

## Jenifer: The Tug-of-War of Opportunities and Challenges

*Structural boundaries* refer here to the practical opportunities available for pupils in Finland. For young people with immigrant backgrounds, it reflects *structural integration*, referring to institutional integration, for instance equal access to education and work.<sup>15</sup> Since the comprehensive education in Finland does not have tracking, the first focal education choice is the application for upper secondary education at age of 15, either at an (academic) general upper secondary school, at vocational upper secondary institutions or preparatory studies for further education. Although all tracks can lead to tertiary education, those graduating from general upper secondary school have much higher probability of higher education enrolment.<sup>16</sup> Generally, the upper secondary education drop-out rates for immigrant-origin young people are higher than Finnish-origin youth. Dropping out rates are high especially at the general upper secondary school, where pupils with immigrant backgrounds seem to enrol with lower grades than Finnish-origin young.<sup>17</sup>

With the story of Jenifer (born in Finland, has ethnic roots both in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa), we illustrate how narrow options for non-Finnish education, tough competition for places, and inflexible transitions often turn educational choices to constant negotiations between options, opportunities and support.<sup>18</sup>

Jenifer lived in Finland with her mother and sister. Her father lived in another country for work, but they visited each other and talk on the phone. Both parents have higher education, yet her mother worked as a cashier in a shop. Jenifer’s father worked in a university. Jenifer self-identified as European rather than African, but was not able to say if she feels Finnish. She told us she had not encountered racism

in Finland although noted she has been the only “foreigner” in her chosen hobby, Scouting.

At the end of comprehensive education (Grade 9) she based her choices for upper secondary education on her school grades, to ensure overall access to general upper secondary schools. Jenifer told us that her family lacked knowledge of the application process and the Finnish education system, since she was the oldest child. Consequently, they sought help from a close family friend who had older children. Jenifer didn’t visit any schools, but used the Internet to find relevant information:

We talked with my godmother, who has four children of which three are in high school, who said to me that I should have at least two high schools [in the application], that I’m sure to get in. She helped with those, because she knows a bit more than my mom does, because I’m the first born and all that.

During her comprehensive education, Jenifer had been studying in classes where the teaching takes place in English, and she would have liked to continue her studies in English at the upper secondary education. The Finnish education system nevertheless offers limited options for post-comprehensive studies for students who have arrived in Finland recently and/or have been studying in English-speaking classes. Vocational education is offered only in Finnish or Swedish (the two official languages in Finland) and besides a few International Baccalaureate (IB) classes there are few general upper secondary schools offering teaching in English (‘English streams’). Although the IB Diploma is completed in English, in the English streams students still need to complete the Finnish matriculation exams, in Finnish. All the international classes and especially the IB classes are highly regarded and entry to them is very competitive. Since Jenifer thought that only top-performing pupils (“10-oppilaat”) got into IB, she did not feel confident enough to apply. She applied to upper secondary school which had an English-stream class, but was accepted in a general class, where all the teaching took place in Finnish.

Lack of means to support immigrant students’ language proficiency creates multiple structural barriers to pupils with immigrant backgrounds, both in their mother tongue and in the language of instruction at school.<sup>19</sup> According to Jenifer, studying in Finnish in upper secondary school affected her studies in multiple ways. She used English as her main ‘social’ language with friends and family and felt that studying in Finnish was difficult since all her familiar concepts and academic thinking took place in English. She emphasised how hard it was to study in Finnish and how she lacked the study motivation, even in her favourite subject, natural science. Her grades dropped. Nevertheless, she thought that studying in Finnish would be beneficial for the Finnish matriculation examination. Studying in English would be harder, if not even impossible:

Well, I did somewhat manage, or I mean, there were some difficulties, like ... I still have some difficulties, like because I overall, my whole life is in English and I think everything in English and now I need to translate it all in Finnish. [...] But now if I think of it that if I were now in an English-speaking class in school, I don’t think that I would do any good in the matriculation exam [...], I wouldn’t know anything because I don’t use Finnish language.

Besides the teaching language, the decision to study “Finnish as a second language” instead of “Finnish as a mother tongue” is consequential in the upper secondary education. ‘Finnish as a second language’ teaching is not always realised as intended and the young people are not able to optimise their development of academic language skills.<sup>20</sup> Jenifer studied in the ‘F2’ group and planned to take that exam in the matriculation examination. Her reasoning was that she did not feel creative in Finnish and had difficulties writing essays in Finnish. Nevertheless, it was not evident whether her Finnish skills would enable her to study in Finnish at the tertiary level.

Jenifer’s case also exemplifies lack of support for study planning. A recent evaluation of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre on students with an immigrant background in higher education acknowledges that higher education institutions lack special support for immigrant-background students.<sup>21</sup> For instance, communication about various application methods and studying opportunities do not reach these young people, and they do not receive adequate support for their studies. Jenifer was also confused about how her studies could prepare her for further education. Overall, the reality of her studies had been unexpected to Jenifer. She was surprised to learn that a student was expected to already know what they want to study at university by the beginning of upper secondary school in order to choose the subjects that are needed to get the points to get in to university.

Jenifer’s narrative revealed disappointment in multiple ways. Her view of studying was not very favourable and she questioned her choice to go to general upper secondary school instead of vocational school. Yet she admitted that vocational school was not her choice, since she did not know what to study there. She felt that she was not the perfect ‘high school’ student, and contrasted herself to some image she held of that perfect student:

The high school hasn’t been for me ... like I don’t get excited about it. I don’t like hate it or anything, it just something neutral to me, I just go there and that’s it. I’ve thought about it [changing school] many times, like ... sometimes I do think that I should have gone to vocational school. [...] but I don’t know what I would study there. But many times, I have thought why I’m in high school, like I’m not the world’s best student or anything.

Her main subject choices had been natural science subjects, but she had some regrets about choosing them and claimed that it would have been easier if she had chosen religion or history instead. She had also noticed that she was good in language studies, and showed interest in different languages and multilingualism. One of her biggest disappointments about her studies seemed to be that even though English was her second strongest language, she did not achieve the level she aimed for in the matriculation examination.

At the end of comprehensive education, Jenifer’s post-secondary aspiration was to continue to university to study medicine. At the end of the secondary education, she expressed a wish to take a year off and maybe do some voluntary work abroad, but her parents were pushing her to go to university. She felt it was not good to apply to university without a clear study plan. Nevertheless, she planned to apply to study English at university and hoped that her future profession would have something to

do with languages and cultures. She also said that it would probably be good if she had some 'Plan B' but at the time of the interview, she did not yet have one. Her parents had told her that she should "just apply at least somewhere [university]" and she feared they thought she had "given up", which annoyed her. If Jenifer could not get in the university on the first try, she would continue to work at the petrol station and maybe participate in some online courses. She did not see her future in Finland, but did not yet know where she would like to live as an adult.

## Sahra: Expectations, Demands and Support

Structural boundaries intertwine with *social boundaries*. Gender and ethnicity affected the negotiations the girls faced when choosing their educational paths. For instance, families' overall high-aiming educational expectations might prevent young people from applying to vocational education. The occupational gender divisions in Finland are some of the highest in the EU. Young female students tend still to choose occupations that are traditionally seen as suitable for women, mostly in the fields of social work or healthcare. Career decisions are often made according to the idea of occupations appropriate for her/him.<sup>22</sup>

Different social arenas and connections affect the multiple conscious and unconscious choices we make in our everyday lives. Families, friends, peers and teachers in schools are the main people that young people negotiate with to construct their realities. Young people move every day from homes to classrooms, from schools to shopping malls and from hobbies to friends' houses, and they have to adapt their behaviour, ways of speaking and choices they make, from one setting to another. These movements and adaptations are mostly taken for granted, even though these transitions acquire active effort and multiple skills, especially if the social contexts young people find themselves in have values and norms that differ significantly from one another.<sup>23</sup>

Here we concentrate on the narrative told us by Sahra, who was born in Finland, but her parents came from Sub-Saharan Africa. Both parents had higher education. Sahra applied as her first choice to a general upper secondary school that had specific emphasis on natural sciences. All of her choices were general upper secondary schools, she had not even considered vocational studies. Sahra believed that she would get in to her first choice and planned to continue to university to study medicine.

Sahra told us that at the end of comprehensive school she had hesitated to apply to the general upper secondary school specialising in natural sciences, since she thought it was too high achieving for her. Her parents encouraged Sahra to visit the school and went along with her. It made Sahra realise that the school really offered the best courses and was the best choice for her. She also found out that the extra courses would benefit her when she would later apply to university to study medicine:

In the autumn, I was like, I'll choose for my first choice a different school. I thought that natural sciences, it'll be too hard for me. I'm not going to make it. But then my parents were like, it's your own decision, but wait until we visit the school first. [...] Then we went there to visit the school and I noticed, ok, this school is better, that I should try to get in there.

Research has shown how agency in the decision-making processes concerning education is influenced by different ethnic-related factors, for instance, familiarity with the education system.<sup>24</sup> In Sahra's case, her parents seem to be able to guide their daughter to choose the best route to tertiary level education. As we saw earlier, it was more evident that Jenifer's parents did not have the knowledge to help with her choices.

Previous research has also shown that in immigrant families, parents have often strong belief in education and tend to push their children towards academic education, with a preference to become a doctor or a lawyer.<sup>25</sup> Yet families have different positionings from which to advance these aspirations. Sahra's parents encouraged her to apply to a school with a high academic reputation as they believed that school would be beneficial to Sahra's future aspirations. In the interviews, Sahra herself mentioned that she would like to become a doctor, so her parents' hopes and her own plans seem to be similar. In Sahra's case, it was important that her parents got involved with her application process, since it seems she might not have otherwise had the courage to apply to the school.

Sahra was accepted in the school specialising in natural sciences and her mother helped her to choose the courses she would take for the first year. That first year was fun and exciting, but during the second year, Sahra became bored and more stressed as the matriculation examination got closer. She had heard from friends that studying in the upper secondary level would be harder than in comprehensive school, but it was still somewhat of a surprise how much work it required from her. She still enjoyed the natural science subjects and had performed well in her studies.

Unlike Jenifer, Sahra did not study 'Finnish as a second language' but attended the 'Finnish as a mother tongue' classes at comprehensive school. She acknowledged that Finnish skills were important, because in general upper secondary schools you have to write essays in Finnish. Sahra used Finnish with her friends, so it was part of her social life as well as her "professional life" in school. However, at the upper secondary education, she started in the 'Finnish as a mother tongue' group, but changed to the 'Finnish as a second language' group. She expected this would provide more points for her higher education application.

Sahra also studied advanced mathematics and English courses. She would have preferred Basic English, but her guidance counsellor advised her to choose the extended level since that would give her more points. She also planned to take extra subjects in the matriculation examination to enable multiple options for the best grades when applying to the university, again following the guidance counsellor's advice. Sahra's guidance counsellor was actively encouraging her to choose courses that would help her to apply to university, sometimes contrary to Sahra's own account of her strengths and aspirations:

I've got advanced math. And also advanced English. Like you can do either advanced or basic English in the matriculation exam. I was thinking to do the basic level, but my guidance



counsellor was like, you don't get enough points that way, you need to do the advanced one. I was like, ok. [...] I did the basic level Swedish. Only the compulsory courses. I don't like language studies.

Sahra seemed to have a supportive and active guidance counsellor who has listened and tried to help her reach her dream of becoming a doctor. This is not the case in every school and with every guidance counsellor. Other studies have shown that girls with immigrant background are often pushed towards lower-level health and care industry professions and that their hopes to become a doctor or lawyer (or some other profession requiring advanced education) are not supported by their teachers or guidance counsellors.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of Sahra's upper secondary studies, she planned to continue to university to study medicine, but also had a 'Plan B' to study pharmacy or mathematics if she did not get in to medicine. With her mother, she planned to take a coaching course after finishing the matriculation examination to help get into university. She said her parents were very excited for her, as she was the oldest child of the family and the first one to go to university. She spent a lot of her free time with her family and her parents helped her with her homework. Her father was a mathematics lecturer, but her mother had not been able to find a job with her bio-technology degree, so she was studying a new profession in childcare. Sahra wanted to become a paediatrician or a dentist one day, but also perhaps a teacher. Her parents did not want her to be a teacher, because they feared it would be less secure as an occupation:

- Interviewer In the medical school, you can choose your field of medicine, so do you already know what you would wish to do?
- Sahra Maybe a paediatrician. Maybe, I'm not still sure if I'll go to study dentistry or medicine.
- Interviewer Has there been some other profession in addition to becoming a doctor?
- Sahra Teacher. [...] I've always wanted to be a teacher.
- Interviewer For your parents, is it a good thing this doctor, like are they supporting your choice?
- Sahra Yeah, because they are, like, the employability is so good, like you can always get a job. But if you are a teacher, it's more touch and go.

The way Sahra's mother had struggled to get a job in the area of her first degree may have affected the parents' view of preferable professions for Sahra. Previous research has indicated that parental unemployment can lead to children to refuse to invest time and effort into studies that may not lead to success, even if they themselves would prefer those areas. At the same time, parental unemployment might mean that parents strongly encourage their children to study further, believing that a good education is the best protection against stratified labour markets.<sup>27</sup> This seemed to be happening in Sahra's case as well.

As her grades were good, Sahra had a strong belief that she would get in to university to study mathematics if she didn't get into medicine. She thought she could try again the following year and that mathematical studies would only be beneficial for medicine as well. She thought her future would be in Finland, and saw her background as an immigrant wearing a headscarf being useful in a doctor's profession, since Finland was becoming more multicultural over time. Her positive view of being an immigrant in Finland may be because she had not experienced racism

herself or witnessed it in her social surroundings. However, previous research has shown that wearing the headscarf makes Muslim women targets for gendered ethnic discrimination or blatant racism.<sup>28</sup> Instead of fearing this, Sahra saw her headscarf as a social cue of intercultural competence that she might be able to use in her future work as a doctor in multicultural Finland.

## **Khadra: (Not)Belonging?**

Another problem sometimes faced by minority youth is an ‘acculturation *dilemma*’.<sup>29</sup> Integration through education has become a major policy objective especially after the rapid increase in immigration in 2015.<sup>30</sup> The multiple fields of study underline the importance of successful integration to improve school achievements, educational attitudes and overall well-being beyond schooling.<sup>31</sup> Since it seems that pupils adjust to schools more easily if they favour assimilation, they are often expected to adjust to mainstream school cultures. This might lead to acculturative pressure and distance-taking to ethnic communities and heritage. Although assimilative orientation would enhance integration, the acculturative pressure can burden psychological adjustment.

Belonging somewhere and holding a (valued) social position is something we all more or less strive for. Positioning offers a specific way to understand the educational agency of immigrant background youth, highlighting how an individual’s positioning as a learner is related to how they are positioned by others.<sup>32</sup> That is to say, depending on a student’s positioning and the value it has in the classroom, the student can either take an active learner position, or alternatively step in to the margin. Not all effects of being on the margins are negative, students who become more aware of their ethnicity through being made to feel different by classmates or teachers can also be motivated to learn by thinking that they need to work extra hard.<sup>33</sup>

Here we look at Khadra’s story. She was born in Finland and her parents’ origins were in Sub-Saharan Africa. Her first choice was to apply to study a dual degree (general upper secondary and vocational studies combined), but she only got into the vocational school.

In comprehensive school, Khadra had some issues and quarrels with some of her teachers, mainly when she felt that the teachers were unfairly favouring some pupils. She also felt fundamentally different. She thought this was not because she was “not a Finn”, but admitted that not being a Finn may have some bearing on it, because she viewed things from a different angle than the Finnish origin pupils and teachers:

But it’s the truth, I’ll always be different. It’s not because I’m not a Finn and all. But it’s a bit of true that I’m not the same [as the others]. Like, there are some Finns, like I do get in contradictions [with them] because I see things in a different way that they see them.

She had encountered racism in the comprehensive school, even from her own classmates. She felt they may not have meant to be racist but were not thinking what they were saying. Khadra thought she was not in a position to say anything against them. Research indicates that for minority students exposed to long-lasting acts of

discrimination or racism, there may be negative impacts on their educational paths, often leading to countercultures further marginalising them.<sup>34</sup> In Khadra's story, feelings of belonging were important. When visiting her new school for the first time, Khadra mentioned that it had a good atmosphere and visible multiculturalism. She felt accepted there. So, even though she did not get in to do the dual degree she had planned, her experiences of belonging seemed to be important to her, and she enjoyed her schooling.

Family was important to Khadra, who had five siblings. She strongly asserted that she was not a Finn, but still felt somewhat mixed emotions about her parents' home country. She acknowledged that having only once visited that country she had little knowledge of it and was not sure if she would like to "return" there:

Interviewer What country do you see as your home country?

Khadra I don't know if I can call it my own home country, like I've been there once, like me and my mom. My mom is kind of used to it and all, but me, when I went there, I wasn't. Was it that I hadn't been used to the weather, because I'm used to Finland, like I live here and all.

Such mixed feelings of belonging are quite common among immigrant origin children. These feelings can impact their future, if they do not know where they want to live when they are grown up and are left somewhat between two origins.

Khadra's parents were encouraging her in her studies, but did not ask after her grades or check up on her progress. They trusted her. She lived at home and helped her mother with the younger siblings, willingly, she said, and with know-how from her studies. Khadra seemed to spend a lot of her free time at home:

It is sometimes hard for me, since I have to help my mom more [now that her older sister has moved from home]. Sometimes I do feel that the boys [brothers], I'm the only girl there. They don't ... when I live with five boys it gets hard sometimes, when all you hear is shouting for games. [...] I have to go to libraries or somewhere if I have something important in my studies. Like I do have my own room. The walls don't ... the noise gets in anyway.

However, when Khadra talked about home she was quick to mention that her mother did not ask her that much to help but that she herself was actively choosing to help: "*She [mom] doesn't want to bother me. Like, I usually say to her, like do you need some help?*" This may well be true, but can also indicate that Khadra knows that Finnish origin girls do not have that much obligation to help at home and was therefore more eager to emphasise that helping was her own active decision. Students with immigrant origins often face the need to adapt to the culture of the country they live, meaning that the youth need to find a way to hold on to their home culture and the same time learn how to apply the cultural values and norms of the host country.<sup>35</sup>

In the second interview, Khadra described her future in a positive light. She seemed to be happy in her school and in her relationship with teachers. She no longer experienced racism or discrimination, she felt accepted and her relationship with teachers had improved a lot. This all had a positive effect on her motivation to study. It is clear from her story that the school's multicultural student population and the intercultural competence of teachers had an effect on her feelings of belonging and acceptance, and this is also likely to be true for other minority students.

## Conclusion: Paths to the Future?

The three stories we have illustrated here are important lessons to be learnt for the future development of both guidance counselling and teaching in (multicultural) schools. Despite the vivid discussion of individual experiences, starting points and abilities, which need to be carefully considered for every student, our stories indicate that the individual adolescent is sometimes lost in the reality. The structural, social and acculturation boundaries can have a negative impact on the student's school performance, educational motivation and self-image as a student, and hence hinder the student's possibilities to successfully continue his/her educational path. Schools as social environments should support the multifaceted educational agency that students have (and grow into), in order to enable the educational transition and paths to higher education in the future. Integration of the young people with migrant background into the Finnish society is a much-emphasised target of schooling, but the ways to improve integration have proven to be insufficient.<sup>36</sup> There seems to be lack of multicultural competence in education and communication.<sup>37</sup>

Mainstream schools and other educational institutions can maintain minority students' marginal status and social position by using the majority culture as the basis of national curriculum, upholding language hierarchies in classrooms, having segregated groups and classes for immigrant youths, or placing them in lower academic tracks.<sup>38</sup> School pedagogies are still mainly monolingual and languages have traditionally been kept separate from each other. Multilingual classrooms are considered mainly challenging instead of resource.<sup>39</sup> The constant feeling of an outsider impacts negatively on self-esteem, self-image, educational identity and agency.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Finland, the macro level (the national curriculums) supports the multilingual approach as a national educational policy (e.g., emphasis on additional language learning, and immigrant students' native language learning and native minority languages have official status and support). However, at the micro level (the teachers and classrooms) the reality is somewhat different: many of the teachers feel that they lack the required skills to maintain their students' multilingual abilities, and the curriculums are too abstract to offer much-needed tools to work in a multilingual and -cultural classroom reality.<sup>41</sup>

Finland has a long history of a welfare system that is built on an assumption of equality of all people, and the educational system is long seen one of the key elements to re-produce and maintain this equality for all. However, even here Finnish society is changing, the gap between the "well-to-doers" and the "low incomers" is growing, and at the same time the political pressure to maintain and even more importantly, to "fix" the welfare system, is getting more urgent. Our three cases illustrate different ways in which the inequalities are generated for immigrant youth. Structural boundaries affect the practical opportunities the students have to transit successfully to secondary level education; social boundaries have specific push and pull effects and many times force the immigrant origin youth to negotiate their educational paths more multidimensional than Finnish origin students, and finally the acculturation boundaries can cause the immigrant students to respond to the felt 'assimilation

pressure' either by distancing themselves from their own ethnic community/culture or being isolated and marginalised from the majority community/classroom culture. Nevertheless, as we see from the narratives of our three girls, the counselling, extra support and available resources they received do make a difference in the lives of the individual. We just need to make sure that the impact of such measures is going to be positive and make the educational path easy to access and easy to pass. We also need to ensure that at the end of that path there is a reward that follows: the career path.

## Notes

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