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**Title:** Urban neighbourhoods and guidance counselling in basic education : a spatial justice approach

**Year:** 2023

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Kalalahti, M. (2023). Urban neighbourhoods and guidance counselling in basic education : a spatial justice approach. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 44(7), 1127-1143.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2023.2238908>



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**To cite this article:** Mira Kalalahti (2023): Urban neighbourhoods and guidance counselling in basic education: a spatial justice approach, British Journal of Sociology of Education, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2023.2238908

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2023.2238908>



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Published online: 22 Jul 2023.



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# Urban neighbourhoods and guidance counselling in basic education: a spatial justice approach

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the spatiality and spatial justice of guidance counselling in basic education. The spatial framework was applied to analyse the recognition of diversity and adolescents' positioning in guidance counselling (lessons, excursions and information events). This study used a phenomenological research approach based on fieldwork, observations and lifespan interviews conducted with a class located in a disadvantaged urban neighbourhood in Finland. The outcomes reveal how adolescents adjust or take counter positions to prevailing expectations attached to their neighbourhoods. The transition to upper-secondary education was geographical, social and cultural, and the guidance counselling was able to provide inclusive and affirmative support for transitions. Simultaneously, guidance is vehicle for cultural adaptation to the working-class position and tend to lack a recognition of the diversity and counter positions of adolescents. This paper discusses the multicultural competence of counsellors and the potentiality of group-based guidance.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 November 2022

Accepted 16 July 2023

## KEYWORDS

Guidance counselling; basic education; urban neighbourhoods; spatial justice

## Introduction

Integration into society and the workplace through education has become one of Finland's major policy objectives, especially due to the rapid increase in immigration and the diversification of educational outcomes (MoEC, 2019). Social mobility is diminishing, and divisions between academic and vocational tracks are sharpening (Härkönen and Sirniö 2020; Heiskala, Erola, and Kilpi-Jakonen 2021). Furthermore, some urban Finnish neighbourhoods have experienced learning outcomes and population diversification, which produces reputation hierarchies and vicious cycles of segregation, where some school catchment areas are avoided in residential decisions (Bernelius, Huilla, and Lobato 2021).

Education policymakers have called upon the field of guidance counselling to tackle emerging inequalities in educational trajectories (Varjo, Kalalahti, and Hooley 2022). Guidance counselling addresses both private and public goals since its aim is to support individual competence in career decisions and enhance economies and equity (Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen 2018; Sultana 2014). Guidance counselling is understood in this

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article within the paradigm of ‘life designing’, which endorses social interaction and the co-construction of career decision-making (Savickas et al. 2009). In the Nordic countries, guidance has been a vital part of the Nordic welfare model, promoting equal opportunity and social inclusion (Haug et al. 2020). In Finland, guidance counselling has been established at all levels of education, and it is also a feature of the workplace and youth work offices. The focus of this article is on guidance taking place at the final grades of Finnish comprehensive, basic education (grades seven to nine), where ‘guidance and counselling’ is a school subject with national core curricula taught by university-educated teachers. The special task for guidance counselling is to develop students’ ability to cope with the transitions in their studies and future careers (FNAE, 2023). Nevertheless, researchers have raised concerns about counsellors’ limited competence in recognising and acknowledging the socio-cultural contexts surrounding counselees (Holmberg et al. 2018; Kalalahti et al. 2020; Kurki 2019; Vehviläinen and Souto 2022).

Therefore, this article addresses the recognition of multiplicity and heterogeneity of students by analysing guidance counselling events where students and parents are given guidance counselling, especially for educational choices (e.g. lessons, excursions and parental events) in their specific context of the urban disadvantaged neighbourhood. To capture the socio-cultural contexts, this article pursues the ‘spatial turn’ in career guidance research, which has provided novel knowledge regarding the ways in which the career development and decision-making processes intertwine with spatiality (Alexander 2023). Using ‘spatial framing’ (Massey 2005), the multiple socio-cultural bearings that contribute to life-design processes are analysed. This enables us to analyse the recognition of simultaneously co-existing life trajectories and the positions taken by students and teachers towards prevailing educational expectations. Hence, the overall aim is to add to the knowledge on the ‘neighbourhood effect’ that operates through related guidance counselling events and policies (e.g. Bernelius, Huilla, and Lobato 2021; Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015).

## The socio-spatiality of guidance counselling events

In this article, a set of guidance counselling events was analysed as **social spaces**, borrowing conceptualisations from Massey (2005) and methodological tools from Kennelly (2017) and Thompson, Russell, and Simmons (2014; see also Lefebvre 1991).

*Space* is understood here as ‘a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey 2005, p. 9), which comes across in spatial locations such as guidance counselling events. ‘Spatial frames’ enable us to see guidance counselling events as places in which a specific location (place) has been augmented by cultural and social continuities (Tolonen 2005).

The concept of space is associated with three propositions (Massey 2005). Space is (1) the product of interrelations constituted through interactions. Since space is the product of interrelations and (2) a sphere of multiplicity, it is a constellation for distinctive trajectories that are always (3) under construction. When applied to guidance counselling events, space means that the focus is on the positioning of adolescents with a variety of life trajectories, and these are intertwined with the expectations and adjustments of other students, teachers and families sharing the same neighbourhoods.

The proposition of relationality inspires the analysis of guidance counselling events as *social spaces*. As Thompson, Russell, and Simmons (2014) stated, ‘space is a character in itself, shaping and being shaped by other actors’ (p. 65). Social spaces involve

meaning-making processes that construct social classes, genders, ethnicities and other dimensions of sociality, which are brought to a space by the people sharing it (Holland et al. 1998; Kennelly 2017). As Cresswell (1996, p. 153) highlighted, adolescents position themselves as subjects in 'relation to opposites and differences', and when doing so, they also transmit ideological values. For instance, neighbourhoods and their residents contribute to adolescents' career aspirations and choices through the places where they meet (Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). When meeting other adolescents in guidance counselling events, students and counsellors create the space and attach their educational identities and aspirations to it.

Following the thinking of Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston (2015), the presumption of this article is that living in a particular place, for instance, in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, influences adolescents' aspirations. However, it is not evident how the 'neighbourhood effect' operates. As Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston (2015) argued, both positive and negative effects are attached to the histories and developmental processes of neighbourhoods (e.g. populational changes related to the working classes, migration and the workforce). Socialisation processes taking place in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are affected by class, ethnicity, history and institutions 'that [are] set alongside lived experiences in education and the labour market' (Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015, p. 680).

A key institution for socialisation is the school. In the context of schooling, comprehensive schools have been stated to represent 'middle-class' values featuring 'a range of virtues and positive attributes such as ambition, sense of entitlement, educational excellence, confidence, competitiveness, hard work and deferred gratification' (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011, p. 12). As Reay, Crozier, and James (2011) explained, this attribute of 'middle-classness' is connected to the 'ability to erect boundaries, both geographically and symbolically' (p. 12). Even in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, schools are viewed through middle-class lenses, where students are met with stereotypical ideas held by working-class students and teachers tend to value those students who meet middle-class expectations.

Furthermore, parents seeking the best education for their children tend to evaluate the social, racial or ethnic compositions of schools. Parental attention to reputation in their decision-making processes feeds the segregation processes and emphasises the need to study local social hierarchies (Bernelius, Huilla, and Lobato 2021). Although urban segregation is more prevalently dictated by income and education rather than ethnicity in Finland, migration has increasingly become the major driver of segregation in urban contexts (Page 2020). It is often assumed that upward social mobility and the integration of migrants might require intra-urban mobility from (immigrant-dense) disadvantaged neighbourhoods, if they so desire or are able to do so (Vaalavuo, van Ham, and Kauppinen 2019). For the children of migrant families, this might mean yet another move during their acculturation process.

### **Spatial justice, recognition and positioning within guidance counselling events**

Subjective meanings and meaning-making processes are attached to spaces that serve as arenas for inclusion and differentiation (Ravn and Demant 2017, p. 253). Adolescents in this study made their educational choices during the interactions in the guidance counselling events hosted by a school located in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. They became aware,

negotiated and received confirmation about their abilities and identities (Yoon 2012) and determined what options were viable for them given their individual and structural positions (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). In this work, these positions and students' recognitions are analysed from the 'spatial justice' viewpoint. As Soja (2010) argued, we need a new spatial consciousness that recognises the 'consequential spatiality' of our lives (p. 193). Spaces are places of power and inequalities that interlock geographical areas with a variety of social processes. The social framing perspective used in this article seeks to understand how 'social and spatial processes intertwine to produce oppressive as well as enabling geographies' (Soja 2010, p. 193).

Much of the literature concerning spatial justice deals with the dynamics between rural and urban areas. For instance, Alexander (2018a) shows how the balance and coverage of public and private support for equal access to (higher) education problematises spatial justice, thus affecting urban and rural adolescents. As Rosvall (2020) noted, geographic mobility often implies social mobility and requires a variety of resources. Aside from economic support, staying or leaving familiar geographical places for educational transitions requires the ability and willingness to be distanced from one's cultural background (Beach et al. 2018; Rosvall 2020). Corbett (2010) and Alexander (2018b) conceptualised these resources as 'mobility capital', which has economic, educational and social dimensions. Mobility capital enables adolescents to be mobile but mobility itself may work as a capital for future mobilities (Alexander 2023).

Mobility capital is neither evenly distributed nor evenly expected. In particular, some adolescents living in scarcely populated areas face the 'imperative of mobility' when reaching for their educational aspirations, which requires competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes) to meet the imperative (Farrugia 2016; Kiilakoski 2016). The decision to leave a familiar neighbourhood requires not only knowledge of options and economic resources but also self-confidence and social recognition. In the peri-urban contexts of this article, the question of spatial justice concerns not only equal access to educational opportunities but also the recognition/misrecognition of the heterogeneity and expectations (Massey 2005) of the adolescents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. As we know, urban neighbourhoods face multiple forces, such as racism, prejudice and school segregation, which challenge spatial justice (Soja 2010, p. 199). Neighbourhoods play an important role in dictating educational choices through social forces and 'locational sense', since they might not provide equal access to a city's resources (Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015).

This study discusses the complex dynamics between expectations and decision-making processes by analysing adolescents' positioning in guidance counselling events, more specifically during three excursions to further educational institutions (upper secondary schools), parental information events and guidance counselling lessons. Following the methodological adaptation by Thompson, Russell, and Simmons (2014; see also Lefebvre 1991), these events are viewed from three dimensions. First, viewing events as *spatial practices*, or 'perceived spaces', gives this research an empirical focus on the social activities and interactions that occur between a place (guidance counselling lessons and excursions) and the surrounding urban context. Second, the events are illuminated as *representations of spaces*, or 'conceived spaces', which provide the abstractions and models used by policy makers to frame the guidance counselling practices by institutional structures (curricula texts, teacher training, guidance criteria and the school culture). Third, guidance

counselling events are viewed as *spaces of representation*, or ‘lived spaces’, where the focus is on the experiences of the people using the spaces (students attending the lessons and excursions).

## Research approach

The research approach used in this article is *phenomenological* in nature. The fieldwork-based research design combined observations and interviews. These methods focus on the everyday spatial experiences of adolescents and were modified to capture the spatiality of guidance counselling practices (e.g. the interaction and use of space taking place during excursions and lessons, and the physical appearance of institutions). The interview data and spatial observations enabled a better understanding of the historical and contextual framework (see Kennelly and Poyntz 2015). Furthermore, the spatial perspective enabled the recognition of the intersubjectivity of guidance counselling events, the shared social world and the resources adolescents use in their meaning-making processes (Kennelly 2017).

The leading research questions were: ‘How are the multiplicity and heterogeneity of students and their life designs recognised in guidance counselling events in urban disadvantaged neighbourhoods?’; ‘How do students and counsellors position themselves with regard to the prevailing educational expectations within these events?’

## Context

Fieldwork was done at *guidance counselling* events that occurred during the ninth grade, which is the final grade of lower-secondary education. In Finland, the education system divides general upper secondary (GUS) education from vocational education and training (VET) after students complete nine years of lower-secondary education. The guidance counselling practices examined in this article support these transitions from lower- to upper-secondary education. The focus of the subject ‘guidance and counselling’ is twofold: to support students in their studies and to prepare students for further study. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education defines the objectives for guidance counselling (FNAE, 2023). In the ninth grade, there is typically one weekly lesson per year, and the practical task is to complete the joint application for the move into GUS or VET. Students familiarise themselves with multiple professions by visiting upper-secondary institutions. Lower- and upper-secondary institutions provide information and introductory events for parents and students. Students receive personalised guidance counselling, which often involves parents. In some cases, students can be directed to receive psychological guidance. Some schools also have additional guidance counsellors, often with the aim of assisting students in ‘vulnerable’ positions (‘at risk’ of dropping out or being indecisive).<sup>1</sup>

## Data

Selective observations (field notes and memos) were made during one year of fieldwork in a ninth-grade class. Students were approximately 15 years old and were making their choices about upper-secondary education. The case school was selected to represent a culturally diverse lower-secondary school. It was located in a relatively deprived and multicultural

urban Finnish neighbourhood (< 40% of the population had higher education qualifications, the average being > 50% in the municipality; and > 30% of the population spoke a foreign language, the average being > 16% in a municipality in Southern Finland [OSF, 2016a, 2016b]). The neighbourhood was a 'peri-urban metropolitan area' (a relatively separate residential community, sometimes referred to as suburbs) with a close commuting distance to the urban centre (Beach et al. 2018).

The data comprised observations made during guidance counselling events for one class (13 students) and interviews. Selective observations were made at all events (2–3 h each) related to guidance counselling (e.g. lessons, excursions and parental events), and four of them are introduced in this article (three excursions, one parental information event and one 'guidance and counselling' lesson). In all, the observations covered the final six months of basic education and included eight lessons, three excursions and one information event at the case school, and two open days and one information event for parents at nearby upper-secondary schools.

Most of the students in the class belonged to ethnic minorities, and Finnish was just one ethnic position among the many. Of the total 13 students, 8 were from visible minorities (they were non-White), and they explained to the researcher their migrant background or had a language other than Finnish as their mother tongue. The other five students were considered to have Finnish origins based on the interviews or observations (White students spoke fluent Finnish). This classification of ethnic minorities and a Finnish majority was artificial, and this was not used in this article for any purpose other than to show that the class was multi-ethnic. Hence, the group was multi-ethnic and more heterogeneous than the average Finnish school class. Within this school, approximately 37% of the students were foreign-language students, with the average being 5% across the country and 16% in the municipality studied (OSF, 2016a). All the students used Finnish or a mixture of Finnish and English in class; the group was so heterogeneous that they did not share any other common language(s).

During the fieldwork, interviews ( $n=8$ ) were conducted with all students who volunteered during the final month of the ninth grade.

The study follows a structured analysis with the three dimensions specified by Thompson, Russell, and Simmons (2014, see also Lefebvre 1991): *spatial practice* (perceived space), *representations of space* (conceived spaces) and *spaces of representations* (lived spaces). Whereas the discursively constructed conceived spaces of guidance counselling events always involve questions of power, ideologies and rhetoric, lived spaces are open for counter-cultural expressions, underlying resistance, symbolism and embedded cultures. The positioning/counter-positioning of the adolescents were analysed as 'master narratives' and 'counter narratives' (Bamberg 2004). The analysis produced one prevailing meaning category ('master narrative') in which the adolescents positioned themselves as members of the urban disadvantaged neighbourhood's adolescents. Three typical counter positions ('counter narratives') were identified, and four students were selected to illustrate these counter positions. These adolescents resisted, felt tension or felt misrecognised regarding the offered positions.

### **Research ethics**

This research project followed the ethical guidelines established by the Ethical Review Board in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Helsinki.



According to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, the research design did not require an ethical review from the Ethical Review Board, but the design was reviewed by the principal investigator of the research project instead.<sup>2</sup> The students were informed about the research, and permission was sought from the municipality's educational authorities. Consent letters for the interviews were sent to the parents, and all students were informed about the purposes and procedures of the research. All students provided oral agreement to be observed. All the analyses and data were anonymised to ensure the privacy of the students, school, neighbourhood and municipality. Only limited information about the students' migrant backgrounds by nation was acquired, and all recognisable information (e.g. gender) was changed when necessary. This study also aimed to avoid any unnecessary categorisations between genders, social classes or immigrant groups. The students' feelings and emotions were discussed during the observations, and they knew they could stop and cease participation at any time.

## Findings

### *Guidance counselling as adjusting for (working-class) disadvantaged neighbourhoods*

The school was located in a suburb built around the 1960s. For decades, it had been labelled a disadvantaged, working-class neighbourhood with below-average income and education levels. When migration increased rapidly in Finland in the 1990s, the neighbourhood also gained a considerable migrant population. Most migrant-background students in the class had lived in the neighbourhood most of their lives and attended local day care centres and primary schools.

- Student 3: At first [moving here] was strange with the new surroundings and shops and all. But soon, I got used to it. It wasn't hard. (...) I went to the day care first and then to primary school for the first and second grades. (...)
- M: And then you came here. Do you have some friends from primary school?
- Student 3: Yes, like [student 4]. We are still friends.
- M: Were there any important adults?
- Student 3: In primary school, there were teachers who I still know, I have visited there to say hi to them and all.

The social and economic disadvantages within the population have been acknowledged by the school. Because the school's dropout rates were above average and learning outcomes were below average, it had been targeted for several support measures, such as additional guidance counselling programmes. Many of the students in the class were receiving additional support from the 'special counsellor', who supported their excursions, choices and transitions to upper-secondary institutions. Two of the observed excursions were to VET programmes in logistics, social and healthcare education. These excursions were made by train; the locations in which these programmes took place were not geographically close to the case school. Taking a train was a symbolic departure from a familiar comprehensive school. We met the students at the station, and although the trip was only a few stops in length, they brought snacks to consume on the train. They messed around and made jokes about their ethnicities and their languages. They seemed to bridge the 'weak ties' among

their school friends who came from similar socio-cultural contexts. They formed a local supportive group ready to confront the upcoming transition to upper-secondary education (see also Kalalahti 2020). The counsellor and me chatted with the group, discussed their wishes, listened to their stories and told them about studying in a VET institution. We helped them find the institution and generally eased the tension. The counsellor was there to make this transition secure and safe, and they accepted the support.

With regard to spatial practice, both VET institutions had evidently worked on their abilities to recognise the diversity of the students, and they recognised the variety of religions, ethnicities, genders, ages and cultures (Guo 2010; Sultana 2014). The students and teachers engaged in a process to break down the stereotypical issues in which they were involved. Females were introduced to male-dominant fields and vice versa, and tutors came from multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds from a range of life stages. The teachers introduced their special teaching options and explained how the students' studies were being supported. The social and healthcare institutions emphasised overall inclusion and recognition: all the visitors had their hands shaken or were hugged. Multiple languages were heard, and the institution provided spaces for prayer for students of different religions.

The students quickly familiarised themselves with the group involved in the excursion and were evidently interested in and happy with the guidance counselling and the institution that they would be attending in the future. During the interviews, they expressed how they had shared their educational trajectories and eased their anxieties about earlier educational transitions by talking to their classmates. The representation of space (conceived space) of the excursion was secure and familiar to the students, and their lived space blended easily with the conceived representations of guidance counselling, in which diversity was recognised and even cultivated.

The excursion solidified the students' lived spaces of educational transitions despite the fact that they acknowledged and joked about the underlying symbolism of the socio-cultural spaces and the positions they were offered. They did not really contest the positions offered but adjusted their future aspirations to the socio-economic culture prevailing in their neighbourhoods. Localities empowered these adolescents, and their transitions were secured with institutional support. However, they were also learning about the labour force and adjusting their aspirations to their working-class positions (see Reay 2006; Willis 1978).

### ***Dismantling the presumptions of disadvantaged neighbourhoods***

Quite close to the case school, there was also one GUS institution. GUS and the Finnish national matriculation examination at the end provide students with extensive general knowledge and readiness to begin studying at a university or a university of applied sciences (Kettunen and Prokkola 2022;<sup>3</sup> MoEC, 2021). GUS is commonly considered to be more academic than VET, even though both provide formal eligibility for subsequent higher education. The choice between and the support offered in vocational and general education are a highly contested issue in Finland (Niemi and Laaksonen 2020), and this tension has also prevailed in the spatial practices of guidance counselling. The GUS and VET counsellors attended the information event aimed at the students and their parents at the case school. Whereas the counsellor from the VET institution highlighted the openness and flexibility of the system and encouraged all to follow their dreams within vocational education ('from nurse to medical doctor', fieldnotes), the counsellor from the GUS institution portrayed

GUS studies as time-consuming and demanding. He emphasised many of the attributes of ‘middle-classness’ (ambition, competitiveness and hard work) (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011) and explained how no special education might be available in GUS. The dominant assumption of the conceived space was that most of the students studying at the case school were applying to VET, and the ability to become a GUS student was reserved only for high-aiming and well-performing students (although 65% of Finnish ninth graders continue in GUS). GUS studies demand self-guidance, which was also outlined in the guidance counselling lessons. Attending some information-sharing events and excursions was obligatory for all students, but only the VET students were supervised, and their visits were controlled. The students aiming for GUS could and should participate independently in their excursions (fieldnotes from lessons and parental evening).

The fact that the school was in a disadvantaged neighbourhood reinforced assumptions guiding its targeted practices and stereotypical expectations, as illustrated in the parental evening event. With a few others in the case class, Student 1 contested the dominant assumption during the observed lesson. She wished to seek admission to GUS without being an exceptionally well-performing student (she was scarcely achieving the scores needed for entry to the nearby GUS institution). She openly challenged the guidance counsellor along with two other students (all three from migrant families) and claimed that the guidance counsellor was being discriminatory since she was not supporting them to apply for GUS. They connected the prejudices to the tensioned discourse raised by the media and researchers, in which young girls from immigrant families feel they are guided stereotypically towards the social and healthcare sectors (Kurki 2019; Mäkelä and Kalalahti 2020). With Student 1, they took a counter-position towards the dominant expectation of choosing the (female-dominant) VET field, which is affected by multiple dimensions (e.g. being a girl from a family with a migrant background).

Because of Student 1’s inability to present the attributes of a well-performing student, her wish to apply for GUS was not recognised in the conceived spaces of guidance counselling. Hence, she needed to ponder ‘costly’ choices (Reay 2006), that is, between prioritising her own subjective image of a well-performing student and objective expectations with institutionalised support. When I met her later during the fieldwork, she told me she had applied to VET but was happy with her choice.

M: You applied for [VET institution]?

Student 1: Yes. I will study business and when it ends, I’ll take a gap year.

M: Yes (...).

Student 1: And I will study drama. And then I will apply to university or to a university of applied sciences.

The counsellor actively unravelled in the class some of the stereotypical assumptions prevailing in the conceived space of guidance counselling. She questioned the dualism between GUS and VET with the class and used different methods to raise awareness of gendered careers. She explained in detail what skills the students might need in various fields, and she encouraged the students to look at the situation in multiple ways. Yet, she did not recognise or was unable to address the counter-position, where a group of students questioned partly the same assumptions that were also observed at the parental events. The counsellor continued guidance in personal meetings with the students and did not dismantle the assumptions the students had raised with the class (see Souto and Sotkasiira 2022).

### **Learning to leave disadvantaged neighbourhoods**

Whereas Student 1 seemed to lack recognition of her competence in GUS, Student 2 was supported by his visions. He was born in a neighbouring country, and his family was closely connected to their country of origin. Student 2 was quite talented and expressed that he would like to see how his talent would lead him through the levels of education. He was going to move to his country of origin after completing his education. He belonged to the same peer group as Students 3 and 4, and they had shared schools and neighbourhoods since childhood. Nevertheless, in the guidance counselling lesson, he prepared for the application on his own and chose to sit apart from his friends. He was spatially separated from this group during the guidance counselling lessons, being the only one applying for GUS from this peer group (see Kalalahti 2020). During the interview, he emphasised his will and need to distance himself from the neighbourhoods.

- M: Where did you apply?  
Student 2: Far-away GUS, like with no friends, so I will begin with zero.  
M: Where is it located?  
Student 2: In [next neighbourhood].  
M: What are your expectations?  
Student 2: I want to become much smarter than I am now. And have lots of new friends.  
(...)  
M: How did it feel to begin here at [current school]?  
Student 2: I was like nervous, with all the unfamiliar people and all.  
M: How about now, are you worried about next fall?  
Student 2: Yes, I really feel tense about next year.  
[continues to explain his lifespan]  
Student 2: And then GUS for three years. (...) Then moving abroad and university.  
M: Where would you move?  
Student 2: Probably to [parent's home country].  
M: Will you study there?  
Student 2: No, university here first.

The educational aspirations and the learning identity of Student 2 could easily be characterised as the conceived image of the GUS student, as expressed during the parental evening. However, he had mixed feelings about leaving and staying and evaluated the socio-cultural gains and losses that would be produced by staying in the local neighbourhood. In the interviews and during the lessons, he expressed the view that others have conceptualised 'learning to leave' (Corbett 2010; Rosvall 2020), which has often been used to describe rural adolescents attempting to choose the educational options pursued in urban contexts. He was facing the 'imperative of mobility' early in his life design (Kiilakoski 2016). He needed to distance himself from the safe and familiar local neighbourhood, and being talented gave him the needed mobility capital (e.g. self-confidence and social recognition) to do so. Family's mobility for work and education served both reason and capital for further mobility. Furthermore, both the *acculturation* process and the position of the *returnee* made the 'learning to leave' process even more complex, since he needed to depart from the familiar neighbourhoods first to pursue an academic education and then move to his parents' country of origin.

### **Local life designs and inaccessible education**

A group of students sought to blend different life domains (e.g. school, family and hobbies) into their local life designs—in practice, to turn their football hobby into a career. They were applying for VET (business) or a double degree that combines GUS and VET (here, sport). Students 3 and 4 found their strengths and competence through the local football club. Having migrant-origin families, they found the club to be important in their acculturation process, and they sought a way to turn this competence and the socio-cultural context of football into a living (sport business or football player). Student 3 was encouraged to merge these life domains by his relative, who had also played football in his country of origin:

- Student 3: I started football in preschool, because my [relative] had been a professional player in [country].  
 [Explains his football career and continues explaining his future lifespan]
- Student 3: And then [I will do] business studies and start a business (...).
- M: What kind business would you start?
- Student 3: Sports or something.

Their aspirations followed the branch of lifelong-learning discussions, in which life courses are based on ‘learning experiences from all life domains and life phases are integrated and attain meaning’ (Diepstraten, Du Bois-Reymond, and Vinken 2006, p. 176). Blending a variety of life domains and the will to find a workable career from football seemed reasonable, since the local socio-cultural contexts had enhanced the student’s acculturation processes and life designs.

- M: You play football?
- Student 4: Yes. Before it, I tried lots of things, hockey and athletics, but they were not my thing. Then football was, and I still play and am serious about it.
- M: OK. What does the ‘serious’ mean?
- Student 4: Like, I want to go as high as I can.
- M: Are you a good player?
- Student 4: Well, yes!
- M: What is your goal with football, what is the top? To go as high as you can?
- Student 4: Yeah. As far as I can, to be able to play abroad. And to study.  
 [continues explaining his future lifespan]  
 There is football. After basic education to VET (...) and then a good job. If successful, I will be a professional football player. And at some stage, I could have my own [sport] business.
- M: Are you worried about the future?
- Student 4: Yes. I would like to be accepted to the [VET] because the sport is there.

These students had also an excursion to a VET institution (business). As a perceived space, the event was like that provided by the logistics and health and social care programmes. Nevertheless, as a conceived space, it embodied different presumptions and as a lived space, it was exclusive. The school’s profile was international, but in the introduction, Western European languages and contacts (e.g. experiences of exchange programmes) were emphasised. Student 3’s and Student 4’s cultural backgrounds (their parents came from Africa and Asia, respectively) were not recognised as cultural capital in the event and they lacked the mobility capital gain from the exchange programmes (e.g. language travel or high school exchange), which were not achievable for them due to language or

economic barriers. Students 3 and 4, who were Finnish, used a mixture of Finnish and the languages spoken in their homes, and they became worried about the forthcoming interview.

The visit to the business school made visible the power of the information events to recognise or disregard the variety of students. Whereas other information events introduced a plural and broad mode of multiculturalism, some events cultivated a narrow set of languages and ethnicities. These hierarchies were also present in the lived spaces of the adolescents. Students 3 and 4 expressed being socio-culturally excluded at the information event. They aimed to blend the variety of life domains, empowering localities and their multiculturalism through their career designs, but were afraid of being socially and culturally restricted from accessing the institution next to their neighbourhood. Drawing from their views, they had the necessary academic skills and grades, but their other competencies went unrecognised and misrecognised.

## Discussion

This article framed guidance counselling events with spatial framework (Kennelly 2017). It sought to analyse how the multiplicity and heterogeneity of students and their life designs were recognised in guidance counselling events in urban disadvantaged neighbourhoods and how students and counsellors positioned themselves with regard to prevailing educational expectations. It was concluded that neighbourhoods influenced educational choices. Adolescents tied their local life histories together during guidance counselling events and found inclusive and affirmative support for upper-secondary transitions. The conceived spaces of guidance counselling, framed by institutional structures as targeted practices and multicultural work, offered options for supporting these local identities and unravelling hierarchies, as was illustrated with the excursion to the VET institutions. For the adolescents, the transition to upper-secondary education was both geographical and social, and the guidance counselling practices were able to strengthen their mobility capital, for instance, by arranging collective excursions and culture-conscious spaces for the excursions. The guidance counselling practices were stretched into informal social spaces (hallways and excursions), and the different dimensions of space (perceived, conceived and lived, see Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014) strengthened each other.

Nevertheless, the results also indicate that counselling practices made some students to take counter positions and left some without support. Guidance practices and supportive action follow the presumption that students would not really be mobile geographically, socially or culturally. As it turned out, the conceived spaces involved assumptions that steered the adolescents to select VET in general and some specific VET fields in particular. In many of the guidance counselling events, the adolescents living in a disadvantaged peri-urban neighbourhood were positioned as VET students in non-competitive fields and those who applied for GUS were described as well-performing students with the 'middle-class' attributes (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011) of ambition, competitiveness and willingness to work hard.

The adolescents either adjusted to this position or took a counter position. Students who took the counter position against the offered choices and applied for GUS were expected to have self-motivation and self-guidance, although they expressed anxiety and worries about upcoming social and/or geographic mobility. Another counter position the adolescents

expressed was towards some more competitive VET fields. This position was recognised among the peers and their counsellor but was bounded by narrowly defined multiculturalism and selectively valued mobility capital in guidance practices. As perceived and conceived spaces, the guidance counselling events had an impact on the lived experiences of the students, who needed to find additional support for their choices.

The first discussion emerging from the outcomes concerns equal access to education in peri-urban neighbourhoods. Following Soja's (2010) idea of consequential spatiality, the conceived spaces of guidance counselling interlock the social processes to the local neighbourhoods. There is a risk that the supportive policies and practices employed by the schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods restrain intra-urban and upward social mobility (Vaalavuo, van Ham, and Kauppinen 2019), and maintain cultural adaptation to local working-class positions. Although there are multiple upper-secondary institutions in the case city, not all are equally accessible, even if school achievements and orientations enable students to apply to these institutions.

The second discussion concerns *learning to leave* (Corbett 2010) disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Adolescents applying for GUS expressed similar departure narratives as those noted in rural areas (Corbett 2007, 2010; Rosvall 2020). Talented adolescents face the need to separate themselves from their socio-cultural contexts and to make self-guided and uncertain choices between their aspirations and ensured transitions (see Reay 2006). Students who were leaving their safe and secure neighbourhoods, peers and hobbies felt anxious about their decision. They faced the 'imperative of mobility', which not only includes geographical distance and social mobility but also the personal task of facing the imperative (Kiilakoski 2016). Within urban contexts, the geographical distance might be short (e.g. 2 km for most students in this study), but the socio-cultural distance is significant and requires acknowledgement in guidance counselling practices.

The third discussion concerns acculturation. Lifespans of adolescents from migrant families involve multiple mobilities, which intertwine not only with geographical mobility but also with acculturation processes. These adolescents have a double 'development task' attached to their decision-making processes, as their life design process engages with their family's acculturation process (Turjanmaa and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2020). In this study, adolescents from migrant families emphasised the importance of familiar neighbourhoods, peers, hobbies and neighbours. Their acculturation process was attached to local neighbourhoods, and they acknowledged the imperative of leaving, which contributed to tension in their choice-making processes. Beyond this, the intra-urban mobility affecting social mobility further complicated their acculturation with the questions of leaving and integration.

## Conclusion

Elaborating the perceived, conceived and lived dimensions of guidance counselling practices show the complex interaction which they have (Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014) and stresses the possibilities and pitfalls of guidance practices. The group-based guidance practices that are stretched outside schools provide novel solutions to dismantle the assumptions prevailing in the power relationships of the conceived space of guidance counselling (see also Souto and Sotkasiira 2022) and to provide peer support for life designs. Nevertheless, this potential was not fully used in the observed events. The individualistic trend of guidance counselling in Finland (Varjo, Kalalahti, and Hooley 2022) might override the potential

which the group-based practices have, that is, if counsellors are not encouraged to meet the 'difficult' issues in the class. More guidance practices beyond the school premises and spatial research of these practices are also needed to bring the life design closer to local everyday surroundings.

However, the diversity of students can enhance both their sense of belonging and otherness. If differences in cultures, languages, religions, countries of origin, ethnicities, gender and so on, are unrecognised, diversity can become a source of isolation and exclusion. Significant increases in multicultural competence (Farook 2018), the recognition of 'omitted' discourses (Haugen 2021) and critical spatial justice perspectives (Soja 2010) on the conceived spaces of guidance are needed to enhance culturally responsive practices of guidance. This applies to all counselling practices where counsellors and school authorities meet students and parents during information events, parental evenings, school visits, classroom practices and individual guidance.

## Notes

1. In 2021, the guidance counselling practices were reformed, and additional support for students was broadened to cover the eighth and ninth grades and offered to a wider group of students.
2. Following the guidelines, the review from the board is not needed if the participants have turned 15, and participation does not deviate from the principle of informed consent. In this research, participants had turned 15 and they had given their informed consent (participation was voluntary and the participants were given sufficient and correct information about the research). For detailed criteria for the ethical review see [https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical\\_review\\_in\\_human\\_sciences\\_2020.pdf](https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical_review_in_human_sciences_2020.pdf).
3. In practice, only a small share of students from VET institutions continues their studies in higher education. Higher education is comprised of universities and universities of applied sciences. As Kettunen and Prokkola (2022) emphasised, the choices for upper-secondary education largely determine educational attainment.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant numbers 275324 and 277814.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Data availability statement

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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