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Educational trajectories of immigrant-origin youths in Finland: a mixed methods analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the educational trajectories envisioned by immigrant-origin youths. The mixed-methods research draws upon quantitative (N = 445) and interview data (n = 112). Whereas most prior research focuses on educational achievement or educational attainment of immigrant-origin youth, this article focuses on their outlooks concerning education and occupation. We determined the educational and career aspirations and expectations immigrant-origin youths have and in the ways their aspirations differ from those of Finnish-origin youths. We also seek to discover how this possible aspiration paradox is reflected in the trajectories envisioned by immigrant-origin youths. We confirm earlier findings showing that immigrant-origin youths have both a strong belief in education and the will to achieve success in tertiary-level education. We also argue for diversity of vocationally oriented youth: whereas Finnish-origin youths often share determinate vocational outlooks, immigrant-origin youths are more likely to aim for tertiary education via vocational education.

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Introduction

In this article, we examine the *envisioned trajectories* of Finnish students during their final year of compulsory education (9th grade). Drawing on mixed methods and data, we approached the issue by describing and contrasting the educational and career aspirations of youths of immigrant- and Finnish-origins. By immigrant-origin youths, we refer to (1) first-generation immigrants, who were born abroad, (2) second-generation immigrants, whose parents were both born outside Finland and (3) youths from mixed-origin or multicultural families, that is, a family consisting of a union between a person with immigrant origins and a native Finn (cf. Rumbaut 2004; Ramakrishnan 2004).

According to an extensive body of research, contradictions and paradoxes characterise the schooling of immigrant-origin youths. Immigrant parents and their children are widely reported as holding positive attitudes towards education and high academic aspirations, despite various difficulties that immigrant-origin youths face within the educational system (Salikutluk 2016; Fernández-Reino 2016; Tjaden and Hunkler 2017; Kao and Tienda 1998). In a similar vein, the educational aspirations of Finnish immigrant-origin youths are often academic (Kalalahti, Varjo, and Jahnukainen 2017; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011), despite their below-average school performance (Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2014), below-average education level and relatively high drop-out rates (Larja, Sutela, and Witting 2015).

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The paradoxical nature of immigrant schooling can be explored from several viewpoints. The attitude-achievement paradox point of view aims to explain why immigrant-origin youths underperform while maintaining positive attitudes towards education (Mickelson 1990, Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012). More significant for this article, however, is the aspiration-achievement paradox point of view, which aims to explore the explanations underlying the high educational aspirations of immigrant-origin youths (Salikutluk 2016, 2013; Fernández-Reino 2016; Tjaden and Hunkler 2017).

Common to explorations of the paradoxes of immigrant schooling is the twofold perception of educational aspirations or correspondingly, educational attitudes. Salikutluk (2016, 2013) distinguishes between idealistic and realistic educational aspirations. *Idealistic aspirations* are free from practical constraints and reflect one's general educational wishes. By contrast, *realistic aspirations* (sometimes referred to as educational expectations, see Fernández-Reino 2016), take practical restrictions into account (Salikutluk 2016, 2013). Correspondingly, Kao and Tienda (1998) distinguish between two main views on the conceptualisation of educational aspirations. On one hand, educational aspirations are considered to reflect 'a state of mind that motivates the youth to strive for academic success'. The youth's significant others and social environment influence this cognitive state. On the other hand, educational aspirations are seen as 'essentially rational assessments of the costs and benefits of possible actions' (Kao and Tienda 1998, 351–352; see also Fernández-Reino 2016).

While we reflect upon the different theoretical explanations of the aspiration paradox to some extent, our main aim is to elaborate on the overall understanding of the contradictions and possible paradoxes concerning immigrant youth's educational aspirations. We use both quantitative and qualitative data to contrast the aspirations of immigrant and Finnish-origin youths, as well as to inspect the nuances of different aspirations and expectations. Utilising the concept of *envisioned trajectories*, we analyse the youths' own perceptions of the educational and occupational pathways ahead of them, and the abstract and tangible aspirations that these imagined trajectories reflect. Integrating a mixed methods approach of the aspirations of immigrant-origin youths offers insights for future analysis on why some immigrant-origin youths are able to attain their educational goals while for others, the expectations do not meet the educational reality.

Envisioned trajectories as reflections of structural factors and subjective perceptions

Aaltonen and Karvonen (2016) refer to certain 'core transitions' in adolescent life that are built around education, work and relationships (see also Heinz 2009; Cieslik and Simpson 2013). Aaltonen and Karvonen (2016) note that the ideal of succeeding in these transitional areas is maintained not only by adult society, but also by most adolescents, while Malmberg (1996) points out that youths express the importance of the main life domains regardless of cultural or subcultural differences. The final year of comprehensive education is commonly understood as 'one of the first transitional points at which young people's future-oriented agency and imagination are called into play' (Aaltonen and Karvonen 2016).

While aiming to grasp these conceivable journeys that immigrant youths might take towards adulthood, we use the concept of envisioned trajectories to analyse our data. We understand envisioned trajectories not only as sequences of transitions (e.g. educational choices and transition to work), but more like specific pathways (see Heinz 2009) to the future, seen as significant by the youths themselves. According to Dale and Parreira do Amaral (Dale and Do Amaral 2015), educational trajectories are entanglements of biographical and institutional dimensions of life. They are outcomes of neither solely individual rational choices nor institutional or societal policies and restrictions (Brannen and Nilsen 2002). Future trajectories are always envisaged in a certain context; 'possible futures' become possible in the circumstances within which they are imagined (Aaltonen and Karvonen 2016; Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Behtoui 2016).

The envisioned trajectories of youth with immigrant origin

According to Hegna (2014), young people's educational aspirations reflect their subjective perceptions of personal capabilities and external opportunities, which are influenced by personal and societal characteristics, such as gender, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Hence, educational aspirations are unsettled and are influenced by a variety of structural background characteristics and assessments of capabilities, opportunities, resources and barriers during adolescence (see also Brannen and Nilsen 2002). As for youths with immigrant origins, they reflect upon their opportunities with the surrounding society, construe an understanding of how they are treated as a minority and apply different educational strategies as a reaction (Ogbu and Simons 1998).

Besides the cultural explanations, the variation in educational aspirations has to be understood in the context of national educational systems and institutional opportunity structures, such as the educational system, the occupational structure (especially youth unemployment), welfare regimes and housing markets (see Furlong and Cartmel 2007). As MacDonald has highlighted, the youth transitions of the 2010s are missing safe and straightforward opportunities for work, but instead offer social advancement through extended education (MacDonald 2011). Young people of immigrant origins are less often than average to be able to attach themselves to these safe slow-track high-educated transitions to adulthood.

Salikutluk (2013) discusses several theoretical explanations for why youths with immigrant origins hold higher educational aspirations, while their educational performance is lower than that of their native counterparts and tests their significance empirically. While elaborating various conceivable explanations as immigrant optimism, information bias, blocked opportunities and social capital, Salikutluk (2013) discovered that in the case of Germany's Turkish youth, all the explanatory models except information bias could be used to some extent to explain the paradox. Furthermore, Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi (2012) (see also Kao and Tienda 1995; Salikutluk 2013) point out that variations between different ethnic groups, most significantly the remarkably well-performing East Asian groups, somewhat invalidate the theory of information bias as an explanation of the aspiration-achievement paradox.

Although educational transitions of immigrant-origin youths might have ethnicity-related boundaries that vary according to the country of origin, social classes, migration history, among other things, we have conducted our analysis for the immigrant-origin young people as a single group. We believe that it is theoretically relevant to interpret the future aspirations within the shared experiences of 'otherness', related to formal language skills, access to relevant information, norms and habits, as well as downplaying and discrimination. Immigrant-origin young people share a similar structural position in which they have to take a stance towards the 'ordinariness' (Souto 2011) and to construct their identities from the position of the 'other' (Haikkola 2011; Kivijärvi 2014). Especially in Finland, where the labour markets and education system rely heavily on Finnish-language skills, belonging to Finnish society requires the Finnish language to be mastered. For the immigrant-origin youths, the non-Finnish customs and norms produce the position of being 'other'—something other than Finnish (Toivanen 2013). Therefore, we consider that the young people of immigrant background in our study share the common need to negotiate their educational identities in relation to their Finnish-origin peers (see e.g. Kivijärvi 2014).

Research design

The Finnish immigrant-origin youths within the institutional opportunity structure

After the non-tracking nine-year (compulsory) comprehensive system, Finnish post-comprehensive schooling is divided into two main streams: general (academic) and vocational upper-secondary school. It is also possible to combine these two streams to attain a dual qualification. It is evident that during the Finnish comprehensive education, the safety net works well: the standard deviation of learning outcomes between students is small, and only a small number of such early school

leavers (0.5 per cent) leave without completing their (compulsory) comprehensive education (OSF 2015a). Nevertheless, the drop-out rates increase after the first transition and approximately seven per cent of the 18–24 age groups are early leavers from education and training (Larja, Sutela, and Witting 2015).

Transition to upper-secondary education is a high-stakes situation, one in which immigrant-origin youths often lag behind native youths with their facilities and resources. Generally, the school performance of Finnish students is considered to be quite equal, but differences between immigrant-origin students and the majority population are larger than in other OECD countries and other Nordic countries (Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2014). Learning difficulties, and inadequate facilities and linguistic skills influence the successful transition to upper-secondary education (e.g. Jahnukainen 1999, 2007; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011; Kivirauma and Jahnukainen 2001). The risk for youths with immigrant origins to be positioned outside the education and workforce is four to five times higher in comparison with Finnish-origin youths (Myrskylä 2011). They end up becoming early leavers from education and training more often than Finnish-origin youths do (Larja, Sutela, and Witting 2015).

The socio-economic position of the family is linked to the educational attainment for immigrant- and Finnish-origin youths in many similar ways (Hyvärinen and Erola 2011). Nevertheless, the influence of the social background is interwoven with various cultural, economic and physical distances of the Finnish-origin majority: the more distant the country of origin of the family is, the more likely it is for youths to drop out of school during upper-secondary education (Ansala, Hämäläinen, and Sarvimäki 2014). It should also be noted that there might also be variations within the geographically and culturally distant ethnic minority groups. In Finland's case these nuances are difficult to investigate statistically, since the different ethnic groups tend to be quite small.

Research question and data

In this research, we ask: what educational and career aspirations and expectations do immigrant-origin youths in Finland have? We answer our question by integrating research methods (see e.g. Bazeley 2018), analysing both quantitative ($N = 445$) and qualitative data ($n = 112$) and contrasting young people with immigrant origins to Finnish-origin youths. Although our mixed methods approach reaches a common theoretical goal analysing the consistency of tangible and abstract educational aspirations and expectations, our quantitative data offer the primary outcomes by analysing explanations and effects, whereas the qualitative analysis complements these explanations.

Our data source was compiled as a *selective sample* (or *homogenous purposive sampling*, see e.g. Palinkas et al. 2015; Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007) from eight municipal lower-secondary schools located in large cities in southern Finland. Sampling was designed to include young people with both immigrant and Finnish backgrounds. Since the population of immigrant origins in Finland is still quite small, including the younger-aged groups, the sampling was made selectively, targeting schools with higher proportions of immigrant-origin students. The selective sampling aimed to reach and engage equal numbers of schools and student with immigrant and Finnish origins, as well as different socio-economic positions (see e.g. Teddlie and Yu 2007).

The socio-economic composition of the schools' neighbourhoods was both below and above the average. Five schools were located in neighbourhoods with an above-average proportion of highly educated people (classified by their postal code), and three schools were below the average on this measure (9 per cent) (OSF (Official Statistics of Finland) 2015b). The proportion of the immigrant-origin youths in the selective sample varied from 18 to 67 per cent, whereas the proportion of non-Finnish-speaking students among the selected schools varied from 10 to 59 per cent (OSF 2016). Among the municipals studied, the average of non-Finnish speaking students in municipal schools was between 11 and 16 per cent, compared with 5 per cent in all

Finnish schools. Therefore, the selected schools represent the socio-economically different urban neighbourhood schools with an above-average number of immigrant-origin students. Since the proportion of respondents was reasonable (67 per cent), we utilised statistical methods with significance tests. Nevertheless, we cannot generalise our outcomes to the whole 9th grade population and the external validity of our study needs to be evaluated within the mixed methods frame and in the context of transferability (see e.g. Palinkas et al. 2015, Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007).

The sample consists of 445 students. Of these, 284 (64 per cent, 148 girls and 136 boys) were Finnish-origin majority, that is, both parents and their offspring were born in Finland; 161 (36 per cent, 84 girls and 77 boys) were youths with immigrant origins, that is, in broad terms, youth born abroad, youths whose parents were born abroad or youths from mixed-origin or multicultural families. A majority (69 per cent) of the youths with immigrant origins were second generation; they were born in Finland, but one or both parents had been born abroad. The ages of migration of the first-generation youths varied quite evenly between the ages of 0 to 16, the mean age of migration being seven years old. The majority of the immigrant-origin youths, around 72 per cent, lived in a multilingual household. When asked whether Finnish was the only language spoken among their friends, 14 per cent of the first-generation youth and 33 per cent of the second-generation youth answered yes.

For this article, we analysed the questionnaire data ($N= 445$) and thematic interviews ($n= 112$), executed during the final year of comprehensive school (9th grade, 2014–2015). The themes of the questionnaires and interviews included school experiences and orientations, educational aspirations, future orientations and family and peer relationships. All the young people who participated in the study answered the questionnaire before the joint application for upper-secondary education, but the final choices had not yet been made.

From the survey sample, 112 students were selected for the thematic interviews. We chose equally students in terms of origin, gender and academic or vocational orientation (54 young people of Finnish origin and 58 youths with immigrant origins, 66 girls and 46 boys). Twenty-six youths were first-generation immigrants (born abroad): nine of them were born in Eastern Europe, two in Western Europe, seven in Asia, four in Africa and one in South America. Three students did not tell us where they were born. Of the interviewees, 32 were second-generation immigrants: there were 12 young people with African, 10 with Eastern-European, 9 with Asian and 1 with Oceanian roots.

The interviews were conducted at schools during the school day by the researchers. They lasted from 30 to 60 min. Most of the interviews were held in Finnish and few in English. Most of the interviews were with individual students, but 20 of the interviews included groups of between two and four students, since some of the students preferred group interviews with their friends. The researchers asked some opening questions and the students were free to talk about their experiences without any tight structure. All participation were voluntary and from schools and the identity of the youths was fully anonymised for the analysis. Students could call off the interview and their participation at any time.

Concepts and methods

The key concept that was operationalised and empirically analysed was a breakdown of *envisioned trajectories* (see Table 1). Quantitatively ($N= 445$) these were measured with two indicators, *career and educational aspirations in adolescence* and *upper-secondary choice expectations*. Career and educational aspirations consisted of two factors, compiled from a set of statements through which the respondents envisioned their lives as 21-year-olds (see also, Aaltonen and Karvonen 2016). The factors analysed here were *academic aspirations* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$; e.g. 'I have completed my matriculation examination') and *vocational aspirations* ($\alpha = 0.68$; e.g. 'I have a vocational qualification').

Table 1. Conceptualisations, data and themes/variables of envisioned trajectories.

Conceptualisation	Data	Theme/variable
General career and educational aspirations	Interview data (thematic interviews)	Career aspirations
Career and educational aspirations in adolescence (age 21)	Survey data (closed question)	Academic aspirations Vocational aspirations
Upper-secondary choice expectations	Survey data (open-ended question) Interview data (thematic interviews)	Expected choice (2–3 months prior to the choice)

We analysed the distributions of the aspirations by origin and gender (χ^2 -test, t-test and analysis of variance) and analysed the schooling and family-background factors prevailing over the aspirations. For this purpose, we categorised the youths into two groups within each factor: (1) approximately 30 per cent of those who possessed the strongest academic and vocational aspirations and (2) others. We then analysed the probability of belonging to each high-aspiration group (using logistic regression analysis). Since school experiences and study difficulties have long-lasting influences on students' self-esteem, self-perceptions and school engagement (e.g. Archambault et al. 2009), we utilised them as schooling-related factors. In the survey, *school appreciation* was measured with a single question ('At the moment, do you like going to school?'), that has been widely used, by the World Health Organization (Currie et al. 2012). *Study difficulties* were examined through seven statements concerning different kinds of problems such as difficulties in following teaching in the class and performing tasks that require reading (see e.g. THL 2015). Being bullied or discriminated against were measured through two statements concerning whether the respondent agreed with the statement 'I have been bullied or discriminated against at school or during leisure time'. Family background factors were *origin* and the *parents' highest education level* (typologised from open-ended questions concerning parents' education levels and occupations). *Gender* was also included in the analysis.

We analysed these envisioned trajectories qualitatively ($n= 112$) with content analysis that focused on interpretation and classification of *general career and educational aspirations* in relation to *upper-secondary choice expectations*. First, we analysed youths' comments about their occupational aspirations and produced nine *career aspiration* categories by specific occupation (a nurse, a police officer, an electrical engineer) or a broader sector (healthcare and social services, education) and the qualifications required. To understand the strategies intertwined with the envisioned trajectories, we then analysed youths' talk about their upper-secondary choices and construed different combinations of upper-secondary choice expectations and career aspirations. We utilised the interpretation of these envisioned trajectories in relation to origin and gender and complemented the results with data from the quantitative analysis.

Classifications and prevalence of career and educational aspirations

Career and educational aspirations in adolescence was measured (questionnaire data) with two separate dimensions, academic and vocational aspirations, that were not exclusive. Therefore, all the youths possessed aspirations within both of these dimensions, to greater or lesser extent. Table 2 explores the mean differences of academic and vocational aspirations among youth with immigrant and Finnish origin.

Career and educational aspirations were analysed (interview data) also in relation with upper-secondary choice (see Table 3).

Table 2. Analysis of variance of aspirations by gender and immigrant origin (questionnaire, $N= 445$).

	Finnish origin	Immigrant origin	Finnish-origin girl	Finnish-origin boy	Immigrant-origin girl	Immigrant-origin boy
Academic aspirations (mean)	3.03	3.20	3.12	2.94	3.29	3.10
$F_{(1,443)} = 3.76, p = 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$						
Vocational aspirations (mean)	2.82	2.92	2.87	2.77	2.91	2.93
$F_{(3,441)} = 2.76, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$						
$F_{(3,442)} = 1.72, p > 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$						
$F_{(1,444)} = 3.04, p > 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$						

Table 3. Career and educational aspirations by upper-secondary choice (interview data, $n= 112$).

		Occupation based on Master's degree	Occupation based on Bachelor's degree	Occupation based on vocational degree	No plans for education or employment
Immigrant-origin boys	General upper-secondary	6	2		3
Immigrant-origin girls		13	3		
Finnish-origin boys	school	6	3		5
Finnish-origin girls		10	6	1	5
Immigrant-origin boys	Vocational upper-secondary		7	6	2
Immigrant-origin girls			8	3	9
Finnish-origin boys	school			4	3
Finnish-origin girls			2	9	1

Analysis

Academic aspirations

Academic aspirations were more prevalent among the youths (Table 2) than vocational aspirations. In other words, the youths envisioned themselves studying at university or at least having completed the academic (general) upper-secondary education by the age of 21 years, more often than having a vocational degree or being employed. The youths with an immigrant origin had academic aspirations more often than the Finnish-origin youth.

Logistic regression analysis gives a more detailed interpretation of the prevailing academic aspirations (Table 4). Our first model introduces the factors that are statistically intertwined with the academic aspirations: apparently, a parent's relatively low education level decreases the odds ratios for academic aspirations. The odds ratio for students from vocational or basic-educated families was 0.36 in comparison with the reference group, university-level education (value 1). For the second and third models, we analysed the odds ratios separately for immigrant- and Finnish-origin youths. Although we cannot compare the odds ratios between the models, we can conclude that the correlation between the family's education level and academic aspirations was more apparent among the Finnish youths, as was the correlation between academic aspirations and study difficulties. Within the group of Finnish youths, the absence of study difficulties, as well as having university-level educated parents, increases the odds ratios for academic aspirations. This dependence was not statistically significant among the immigrant-origin youths. Immigrant-origin girls had a higher odds ratios (1.7) for having strong academic aspirations, in comparison with immigrant-origin boys (1), but this difference was not statistically significant.

The findings from the interview data (Table 3) support the image that is portrayed of youths with immigrant origins as young people with high professional aims. In particular, the girls with immigrant origins aimed for the academic professions and professional fields. Nevertheless, there were many academic aspirations. Not all youths have clear and focused aspirations of occupations requiring a high level of education, but rather the overall will to have university-level education. The youths had three categories of academic aspiration: a specific profession that requires

Table 4. Academic aspirations by background factors, study difficulties and school appreciation (logistic regression analysis, odds ratios).

	All youth				Immigrant-origin youth				Finnish-origin youth			
	<i>p</i>	OR	95% C.I.		<i>p</i>	OR	95% C.I.		<i>p</i>	OR	95% C.I.	
Immigrant origin		Ref.										
Finnish origin	0.06	0.54	0.29	1.03								
Boy		Ref.				Ref.				Ref.		
Girl	0.54	1.20	0.68	2.13	0.28	1.70	0.65	4.45	0.92	1.04	0.50	2.18
University level education (parents)		Ref.				Ref.				Ref.		
Vocational or basic	0.00	0.36	0.19	0.68	0.13	0.45	0.16	1.28	0.01	0.32	0.13	0.80
Tertiary	0.02	0.39	0.18	0.88	0.22	0.36	0.07	1.83	0.05	0.39	0.15	1.00
Bullying and discrimination	0.87	0.92	0.34	2.51	0.67	0.73	0.17	3.20	0.70	1.33	0.31	5.68
Study difficulties	0.10	0.67	0.42	1.09	0.75	1.10	0.61	2.01	0.02	0.25	0.08	0.79
School appreciation	0.12	1.40	0.92	2.14	0.85	0.94	0.51	1.74	0.07	1.77	0.96	3.26
Nagelkerke R^2	0.14				0.06				0.24			

a university bachelor's or master's degree, a professional field that typically requires an advanced degree or an unidentified future profession after university study.

A typical feature among youths with academic aspirations was that they saw no alternative to applying to general upper-secondary school. However, in their envisioned trajectories, upper-secondary school played several roles. General upper-secondary school was often seen as a place where one could identify and specify their as-yet vague occupational interests. In this interpretation, vocational school was seen as a quick route to a fixed profession, whereas general upper-secondary school was seen as 'buying time' and figuring out the next step. One student commented:

I don't really know yet what I want to do, so it wouldn't really make sense to go to vocational school. Some of my friends are going to a graphic designer thing [...] and then my other friend, she went to a business school or something like that [...] But for myself, I don't know yet what I want to do and I think that, well, going to general upper-secondary school maybe could give me a more clear view of everything, like a better perspective. But I don't really have anything that I'm really expecting, I'm just expecting to get a clearer view of what I want to be when I grow up, or something like that. (Interviewee #1, immigrant-origin girl)

For those determinately striving for specific academic professions, general upper-secondary school seemed like an obvious choice. Nevertheless, these youths also perceived general upper-secondary school in various ways, as this interviewee demonstrates:

I want to go to medical school after my general upper-secondary. I wish I would be able to take extra courses in mathematics, physics and chemistry, and so on. (Interviewee #2, immigrant-origin girl)

For this respondent, general upper-secondary school held instrumental value, as it provided an opportunity to improve the skills required for her dream occupation. To proceed on their envisioned trajectories, the youths with academic career aspirations might try to 'play it safe' with their school choice to ensure a place in any general upper-secondary school.

I was just like, this school is good enough ... All the general upper-secondary schools are basically the same in the end; you study the same stuff. I have no other options; I just need to get into general upper-secondary. (Interviewee #3, immigrant-origin girl)

This aspiration reflects the equality of the educational system in Finland. The education system is commonly perceived as generally equal and of uniform quality. Although certain upper-secondary schools maintain higher ranking positions and have high-quality reputations, all upper-secondary schools follow the same national curriculum and provide equal access to tertiary education. The respondent, also aspiring to a medical degree, acknowledges the conventional educational route to university studies via general upper-secondary school.

The parents' educational experiences in the country of origin can also be reflected in the youth's speech as this young woman elaborates:

My parents are always telling me, like if I have a test coming up and I'm tired, that it is so much easier for us than what it was for them. My mom didn't even finish school when she was young because there was no money. But when we came here she started studying and graduated; it was so much easier here in Finland. (Interviewee #3, immigrant-origin girl)

Contrasted with the opportunity structure of the country of origin, Finland is perceived as a country of educational opportunities. The respondent is optimistic about the benefits of a medical degree, as it provides financial security:

I'd like to be a doctor so that I could help people, travel and buy a big house and a cool car. [...] But you know, I wouldn't mind if I didn't get the big house, as long as I would be healthy, and everything was okay, I don't need anything special. [...] But a nice house and a car would be a nice bonus. (Interviewee #3, immigrant-origin girl)

A typical feature of immigrant-origin youths is having positive attitudes and high expectations towards education, regardless of the experienced difficulties in school. This respondent represents the typical example of academically-driven immigrant-origin youths:

Q: Why do you want to go to a general upper-secondary school?

A: I want to aim high with my studies, I want to go to a university, to study some entrepreneurial stuff. I want that; my whole family has gone to upper-secondary school and I want to follow in their footsteps.

Q: What do your parents think about it? Do they also want you to go to upper-secondary school?

A: Of course, they want me to go to general upper-secondary, but they also want me to make the decision myself. And I've made the decision, I want to go there, and they want that, but it's not their decision; it's mine to make. (Interviewee #4, immigrant-origin boy)

Despite experiencing difficulties at school and even discrimination, the respondent has an optimistic attitude towards education and sees the general upper-secondary school as the only option for secondary education. Although he highlights the independence of his choice-making, his perceptions of upper-secondary education seem to be much affected by family members and close (immigrant-origin) friends, who also hold high academic aspirations.

Q: How do you expect general upper-secondary school to differ from comprehensive school?

A: In general upper-secondary, people are interested in studying and everybody wants to aim high so I think the study atmosphere will be way better than in comprehensive school. [...] All my brothers and sisters have been to general upper-secondary school and they have told me that there are no problems with friends or anything like that. Everyone is there together, and you get to choose the subjects that you're interested in; it's just generally better there. It's good to study there and it's easy if you just are interested and you have motivation. (Interviewee #4, immigrant-origin boy)

Because the respondent received enough remediation to cope with the difficulties experienced at comprehensive school, he expects the same from upper-secondary school.

A: Always when I've had some issues with grades or tests, I think I've always gotten help. And of course, I've had difficulties. Like all the stress about tests, especially now in the 9th grade, when you need to try to raise your grades. But yeah, I think I've always gotten help.

Q: Do you think that you will get help if you have difficulties in general upper-secondary school?

A: Yeah. (Interviewee #4, immigrant-origin boy)

From the aspiration paradox point of view, the respondent portrays the paradoxical combination of difficulties experienced and high academic aspirations, characteristic of immigrant-origin youths. However, inspected more closely, the academic aspirations and the school choice of general upper-secondary school seem justified and rational. The hope of academic success is grounded partly on the support and optimism of family and friends, but also in the experience-based trust of the provision of remedial education if needed. It could be argued that the paradox lies not in the attitudes themselves, but rather in the statistically proven

mismatch of the high aspirations and the hardships of educational attachment of immigrant-origin youths.

Vocational aspirations

Vocational aspirations about the future were almost as common as academic aspirations (Table 2). Whereas academic aspirations measured the will to accomplish the matriculation examination and study at the university, vocational perception captured the aspiration to complete a vocational degree and 'being at work' at the age of 21. In the survey data, vocational aspirations did not divide the immigrant and Finnish-origin youths; instead, youths shared vocational aspirations equally. Nevertheless, as the vocational upper-secondary track also leads to a lower level of tertiary education and it is common for students to be employed, the indicator might not have captured the actual aspirations for early transition to work. This might explain why the youths consider a vocational future equally but have different aspirations for undertaking university studies. We will elaborate on this possible explanation later with the qualitative data.

Although immigrant- and Finnish-origin youths shared vocational aspirations almost equally, the logistic regression analysis offered origin-related interpretations similar to the ones concerning academic aspirations (see Table 5). The key determinant factor behind the vocational aspirations was the education level of the parents. Those youths whose parents had no higher than basic or vocational education (OR 5.8) had vocational aspirations especially in comparison with the university-level educated families (1). In accordance with the interpretation of academic aspirations, there were statistically significant determinants only among the Finnish-origin youths: Finnish-origin youths from vocationally educated families as well as youths with multiple study difficulties, had vocational aspirations. Immigrant-origin youths had vocational aspirations more evenly despite their parent's education level or studying difficulties.

With the qualitative data, the youths pondering their career aspirations were interpreted in relation to upper-secondary choices for portraying the envisioned trajectories. First, we analysed the aspirations of youths who aimed towards professions or sectors for which a university of applied sciences or a bachelor's degree is typically required. Again, they aim to qualify for a specific profession or for a certain sector for which a university of applied sciences or bachelor's degree is required, or just to study at a university of applied sciences without further specific plans. Second, we focused on the youths applying to vocational upper-secondary school after their compulsory education. Our analysis produced three typical vocational trajectories: Youths who were aiming for a certain occupation with vocational qualifications or a broad vocational field. The latter group had no specific plans concerning career or employment.

Table 5. Vocational aspirations by background factors, study difficulties and school appreciation (logistic regression analysis, odds ratios).

	All youth			Immigrant-origin youth			Finnish-origin youth					
	<i>p</i>	OR	95% C.I.	<i>p</i>	OR	95% C.I.	<i>p</i>	OR	95% C.I.			
Immigrant origin		Ref.										
Finnish origin	0.26	1.47	0.75	2.91								
Boy		Ref.			Ref.			Ref.				
Girl	0.86	1.06	0.57	1.95	0.59	0.75	0.26	2.16	0.71	1.16	0.53	2.55
University-level education (parents)		Ref.			Ref.			Ref.				
Vocational or basic	0.00	5.83	2.64	12.9	0.09	3.11	0.85	11.36	0.00	8.32	2.9	23.89
Tertiary	0.00	4.08	1.64	10.14	0.39	2.21	0.36	13.55	0.00	6.03	1.91	19.04
Bullying and discrimination	0.15	1.95	0.79	4.82	0.21	2.73	0.57	12.99	0.40	1.65	0.51	5.28
Study difficulties	0.14	1.42	0.90	2.25	0.34	0.7	0.34	1.45	0.01	2.54	1.29	5.00
School appreciation	0.13	1.41	0.90	2.22	0.08	1.86	0.92	3.74	0.54	1.22	0.64	2.31
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	0.16				0.12				0.26			

Determinate vocational outlooks

When analysed by their intertwinement with gender and immigrant origin, there were some characteristic differences between the envisioned trajectories of Finnish- and immigrant-origin youths. First, few immigrant-origin youths with aspirations about the future were determinately vocational, heading for traditionally professional worker occupations or even becoming an entrepreneur. During the final year of their compulsory education, youths of immigrant origin aimed for occupations that are qualified by vocational education were exceptions in our data.

The qualitative data shed light on some of the ways in which the vocational aspirations of Finnish-origin youths are linked with parents' lower educational status and study difficulties. A respondent who had adjusted her occupational aspirations from an academic field (psychology) to a vocational one (practical nursing) discusses her challenges:

Q: Did you consider applying for entry to general upper-secondary school?

A: I did think about it, but I don't know, I'm not that good at school. It's so difficult for me and upper-secondary would be even more difficult. Those who have taken the 10th grade, their grades have dropped in upper-secondary school. So, I don't think that I want a bad outcome from general upper-secondary school. It wouldn't be that useful for me. (Interviewee #5, Finnish-origin girl)

The respondent's plan to apply for entry to vocational school was well informed. Her mother, who worked in manual labour, had offered her perspective when consulted. Reflecting on her mother's experiences, the respondent had ruled out both highly challenging academic studies and fields of overly difficult manual labour. In her case, the school had provided plenty of information:

Yeah, there has been a lot of discussion about all the options. I even made a presentation about them. It was a bit too much already [...]. We've heard all these things too many times. (Interviewee #5, Finnish-origin girl)

When asked about future worries, the respondent pondered about the opportunity structure in Finland. Her plan to navigate to the health-care field seemed to be based not only on personal interest, but also on a rather realistic estimation about the employment sector as well.

Q: Is there something that worries you about the future?

A: Maybe not having work, because there is a lot of unemployment in Finland. But in practical nursing there is always work. That's the good thing about it: people always get sick so there is always someone to take care of. But you need a job. Maybe the money worries me a little, like will I have enough. That's a bit worrying. (Interviewee #5, Finnish-origin girl)

The respondent's envisioned trajectory reflects both the institutional structures of education and employment rates and her biographical factors of individual interests, schooling experiences and family background. Her plans can be interpreted as well-informed and realistic; alternatively, they can be seen as reproducing her family's social status with a strong influence coming from her vocationally-educated mother. However, these interpretations do not necessarily need to be seen as exclusive. Either way, the respondent's case illustrates the ways in which the biographical and family background factors intertwine with the youth's own interpretations of the opportunity structure they face.

The fragmentation of immigrant-origin trajectories to vocational education

While Finnish-origin youths aimed for professions that require vocational education, the youths of immigrant origin often tried to attain expert positions; these positions typically require a university of applied sciences or bachelor's degree. These youths had a clear view of the educational trajectory ahead of them, as this interview demonstrates:

- A: I've decided to continue studying after vocational school. I'm going to a university of applied sciences to challenge myself.
- Q: So, you're going to finish the three-year vocational training first?
- A: Yeah, and then I'll get a job for at least a year to get some work experience. And after that I'll proceed to a university of applied sciences.
- Q: So, you'll get a polytechnic degree in nursing?
- A: Yes. (Interviewee #6, immigrant-origin girl)

The immigrant-origin youths aspiring for expert positions in vocational fields seemed determined in their career goals and willing to expend the necessary effort in order to achieve them.

- A: [...] I want to work as a nurse or something similar. I have heard that during the first year they introduce all the options to you; after that, you have to choose your own way.
- Q: So, you don't have any other plans than the health-care sector? What will you do if you don't get in?
- A: Then I'll go to 10th grade to raise my grades, although I think my grades are already good enough to get in. (Interviewee #7, immigrant-origin boy)

It is noteworthy that the immigrant-origin youths seem to be aware of the possible trajectory from vocational school to further education. Generally, vocational education is considered to be less demanding academically, but nevertheless offers it the opportunity to proceed to tertiary education. Thus, vocational school might well be a reasonable option for those immigrant-origin youths who experience difficulties at school but still want to aim high.

If I get a vocational qualification for electrical engineering or plumbing, whichever, if I get into a vocational school... Then I will definitely aim for entry to a university of applied sciences within that field and be an engineer. [...] My goal is to proceed [to tertiary education]; maybe it has been going a bit badly recently or maybe not... It's been okay. But if I get into a vocational school, it will be a fresh start and I'll do my best and proceed to a university of applied sciences from there. (Interviewee #8, immigrant-origin boy)

Irrespective of the immigrant-origin youths with clear career aspirations, it is important to highlight that a considerable number of youths with immigrant backgrounds, especially girls, were applying for entry to vocational education programmes without any plans concerning career or employment. In this respect, the group of youths of immigrant origin is apparently divided between those who have career goals to become highly educated professionals and those who drift into vocational school without a plan for their forthcoming careers.

Conclusions

Our approach for this article was methodologically pluralistic: we aimed to reveal some explanations and effects with multivariate analysis of quantitative data and to complement these explanations with content analysis obtained from interview data. Our selective sampling aimed to achieve ethnically rich data to portray similarities and differences among youths that come from the same neighbourhoods and share the same classes taught by the same teachers.

The first outcome validates and enhances the notion of immigrant optimism and strong academic aspirations of immigrant-origin youths. Likewise, as suggested in international research (Salikutluk 2013; Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012; Kao and Tienda 1995), in Finland immigrant-origin students aim high professionally. Although the future perceptions and trajectories were most often envisioned via tertiary-level education among all the youths, this strong trust and will to achieve lower tertiary or upper tertiary-level education was even more typical for immigrant-origin youths, in both the questionnaire and the interview data. Girls shared the highest hopes concerning career orientations and academic perceptions.

Our second conclusion portrays how determinate vocational outlooks (aiming for traditional worker occupations or that of an entrepreneur) were typical of the group of Finnish-origin youths

choosing vocational school. Few immigrant-origin youths envisioned a future in these occupations, although there were those who were applying for vocational school. Arguably, some of the Finnish-origin youths share a working-class identity, according to which they typically follow their parents' (working-class) occupations and orient themselves determinately towards an early transition to work. The lack of these vocational outlooks among immigrant-origin youths can be explained with international research: since many of the Finnish migrants may have been *positively selected* (Heath, Rethon, and Kilpi 2008) for their drive and ambition and are not recruited less-skilled workers, they might have higher educational expectations for their children in general. As Heath, Rethon, and Kilpi (2008) have theorised, the positively selected migrant parents might also base their aspirations, on their relative standing in their country of origin rather than on their standing in the Finnish opportunity structure. We might not have immigrant-origin working-class families in our sample, despite the fact that often their parents work in low-level jobs.

Our third outcome highlights observations that concern contradictions or obstacles within the opportunity structure that the immigrant-origin youths reflected through their envisioned trajectories. Above all, immigrant-origin youths seemed to hold strong academic aspirations even if their individual resources (e.g. learning difficulties) and resources from the family (e.g. family's education level) were scarce (see also, Kalalahti, Varjo, and Jahnukainen 2017, 2017). Finnish-origin youths seemed to make choices between (academic) general upper-secondary and vocational school more often according to their (subjective) studying difficulties. Immigrant-origin youths more often envisioned transferring to general (academic) upper-secondary education even if they felt they had difficulties in studying. Findings confirming many aspects of the 'paradox of immigrant schooling' (see e.g. Mickelson 1990; Kao and Tienda 1995; D'hont et al. 2016).

We conclude that our data support the theoretical notions and research findings concerning both immigrant optimism and immigrant paradox. Many of the immigrant youths in the study had persistent high academic aspirations that seemed to be more idealistic than realistic; they may have been expressed as hopes and were often free from practical constraints. The academic aspirations are paradoxical in the sense that these students often had learning difficulties that make the academic studies challenging. In another view of this paradox, our data also portray how many young people with immigrant origins, unlike their native counterparts, were reaching for the tertiary education via the combination of vocational school and university of applied sciences.

Further, there was variation in how the youths comprehended the whole *educational opportunity structure*. We concluded that the immigrant-origin youths were apparently about to utilise the vocational trajectories more often, while aiming at professions that required lower tertiary education (a university of applied sciences or bachelor's degree). Finnish youths' trajectories rarely aimed at these professions in the first place and if they did, their trajectory entailed a general (academic) route to the lower level of tertiary education. Evidently, youths with immigrant origins have interpreted the Finnish opportunity structure differently from their Finnish-origin counterparts: they acknowledge the possible trajectory to tertiary education via vocational school.

The recognised trajectory which chains vocational education and lower tertiary education and is prevalent especially among immigrant-origin youths is an internationally interesting peculiarity of the Finnish opportunity structure. From this point of view, the immigrant-origin youths are able to comprehend the Finnish educational opportunity structure thoroughly, which supports the suspicion about the validity of the information bias theory, elaborated by Salikutluk (2013; see also Kao and Tienda 1995; Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012). Drawing on Heath, Rethon, and Kilpi (2008), this trajectory might be enabled by the Finnish education system's late tracking, lack of high stakes testing after comprehensive school and the absence of educational dead-ends. This kind of trajectory can be one local solution to the above-mentioned paradoxical positions.

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