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On the Educational Edges of a Learning Society: The Finnish Hinterland as a Framework of Educational Choices for Young People

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On the Educational Edges of a Learning Society

The Finnish Hinterland as a Framework of Educational Choices for Young People

Abstract

In this article, we examine the school-going and educational choices of youth living in sparsely populated regions of Finland that are located far away from educational institutions. We ask the following question: What kind of concrete impact does the geographic narrowing of educational possibilities have on the lives of youth in remote villages? Thirty-five interviewees (15 boys and 20 girls) between the ages of 14 and 18 were selected for this analysis. According to the results, gender and families’ symbolic resources are still strong predictors of youth’s educational choices; however, in the Finnish hinterland, families’ economic resources become a significant reflection of young people’s realistic educational possibilities. The youth in our analysis can be seen as “others” of the contemporary educational and regional policies—that is, members of a learning society who are living in an educational vacuum and are forced to create their educational paths by making numerous compromises and forgetting many of their personal dreams. Their situation is not unique, as Finland’s wide-ranging neoliberal centralisation policies tend to create educational vacuums in certain regions on the edges of society.

Keywords:

rural youth, secondary education, distances, family, gender

Introduction

There aren’t actually that many people . . . few here and there. Like on the road to our home, there’s only one resident left . . . I guess three houses along that road, but one resident moved to a retirement home . . . so there’s
not actually any youth nearby . . . my ex-schoolmate, who is in the same class at my high school, lives nine kilometres from home, so [he/she] is the closest one. (Girl)

Finland is a Nordic welfare state, also described as a learning society (Antikainen 2007), with a discursive belief in the progressive power of formal education in terms of both individual well-being and societal development. However, in the early 90s, Finland began to abjure educational policy that has aimed to give young people equal possibilities to benefit from educational content and merits as they navigate their personal life courses (Naumanen and Silvennoinen 2010, 68). The aim of this policy was to reduce the significant impact of structures, such as family background, gender, and home region, on young people’s educational choices and decisions. In youth’s individual lives, the belief in formal education is rooted in the way in which school-going is taken for granted as a normative choice for them, including after the nine years of compulsory basic education have been completed. This normative choice has been regionally equalised by a nationwide net of institutions that cover basic, secondary, and tertiary education, including in the remote areas of the country (Figure 1). Boarding school system has never been a way to organise young people’s possibilities for school-going.

Figure 1: Education system in Finland. Source: Finnish National Agency for Education


FIGURE 1 HERE
However, the written and unwritten laws of the market economy currently treat the Finnish welfare society in quite a hostile manner: Urbanisation and centralisation have created political turbulence, whereby the societal meaning of peripheral regions has changed (Katajamäki 2013; Hartikainen 2016). The former politics, which focused on keeping the entire country inhabited and educated, has now faded and is being replaced by opposite ideologies, whereby regions on the geographical edges are defined as an economic burden on the welfare state. This has led to a deterioration of infrastructure and a decrease in educational possibilities, especially regarding secondary education, in the hinterland; thus, facilities and services that are important to young people are located far away from remote villages (Aluehallintovirasto 2014, 63). Gradually, a significant number of people, and especially youth, living in remote areas have been forced to leave their home regions to pursue their educational goals (cf. Corbett 2009a). Many have also left voluntarily to seek urban youthfulness instead of remaining in their home villages, which are often defined as “dead” or “dying” (see Farrugia 2016). However, most young people who are choosing to pursue secondary education are merely 15 years old, meaning that they are quite young to be moving away from their families. This is because in remote villages, there are no upper secondary and vocational schools. Consequently, the youth who live in these villages face a number of major questions while making important decisions concerning their participation in secondary education.

In this article, we examine reflections and arguments concerning the school-going and educational choices of youth living in sparsely populated regions of Finland. Our attention is directed towards secondary education because at this stage of their lives, these young people are coming, or have come, to the end of their compulsory nine years of education, which they started at the age of seven. At this stage, they also drop out of the numerous forms of school-
going support provided by the welfare state, from free learning equipment (e.g. school books, pens, folders, notebooks, handicraft materials, and tools) to municipally paid transportation to and from school. The starting point of our scrutiny is that long distances create peculiar baselines from which to make educational choices for the secondary level and challenge political principles regarding educational equality. Long distances are also problematic when reflected against the pedagogical values that emphasise the primality of individual aspirations and competences in regard to making those choices.

The data used in our analysis consist of 31 interviews with 35 young people from 14 to 18 years of age who are living in remote, sparsely populated villages in eastern Finland. The youngest interviewees are still considering their future educational choices, and the older ones, who have already completed basic education and have experienced school-going far from their homes, are reflecting on their decisions. The catalyst for this research was the desire to understand how long distances and lack of transportation services define the educational decisions that are made by young people living in the societal hinterland after they complete basic education.

**The Hinterland as the Edge of the Learning Society**

In this article, the terms hinterland, regional edge, and remoteness refer to places that are located far from regional towns but are still inhabited, even though they are currently sparsely populated, often with only some tens of families. The vivid history of these regions includes numerous young inhabitants, local labour markets, secondary education institutions, and a structure of welfare services. However, in the last decades of the 20th century, people began to be tempted away from these areas and towards the urban lifestyle and surroundings, and today, this tendency has intensified as intra-national migration has a coherent direction: from
the remote rural areas to the growing centres of southern Finland (Statistics Finland 2015).

Remote villages, which are increasingly becoming the areas in which primarily retired people live, suffer from deteriorated infrastructure, loss of labour, and a decrease in welfare services, including schools. An important loss for people who live in the hinterland is the shutdown of public transportation as a consequence of systematic reductions in public funding (cf. Sadler, Akister, and Burch 2015). For the few young people in the hinterland, this is a serious loss; they depend heavily on transportation possibilities because the services that they need are now located far away.

In keeping with the focus of this article, the most topical notion is that the educational possibilities of youth living in remote villages have been decreased due to the dismantling of the regionally balanced net of learning institutions. This tendency can be seen at each level of educational policy and its associated decision-making organs. (Käyhkö 2016, 76; see also Tuuva-Hongisto, Pöysä, and Armila 2016.) This is legitimated by the economic rationality that highlights the costliness of a scattered nationwide net of educational institutions. The ongoing educational discourses of unlimited learning possibilities, open-ended educational paths, and wide freedom of choice thus actively ignore youth’s everyday living realities and their material nature. In spite of their living conditions, hinterland youth have a responsibility to “reach their dreams, to become something” (Käyhkö 2016, 77).

Participation in secondary education is an important life-political decision, as choices concerning secondary education are critical life-course moments that have far-reaching consequences (Thomson et al. 2002; Carcillo et al. 2015). As growing members of the learning society, the youth in this analysis have to make this decision in an environment in which there are no nearby schools from which to choose. Consequently, they are in an
unequal position compared to the youth in urban areas, where educational institutions are plentiful and varied. In this sense, hinterland youth can be seen as special targets for education and youth policies within which they also become potential objects of inequality. However, minimal attention has been paid to this perspective. Within the frameworks and principles of educational equality today, the following question is central: What kind of concrete impact does the geographic narrowing of educational possibilities have on the lives of youth in remote villages? Formal national educational policies produce personally lived, informal educational policies; however, the possibilities of responding to the discursive demands of a learning society seem unequal.

We have described the educational, political, and material contexts of the study and have explained the need for it. Our analysis focuses on how family background and resources, as well as gender, intersect in a significant way with place in regard to hinterland youth’s educational choices and school-going. The aim of the scrutiny is to shed light on their concrete life choices from different angles in an inductive way. Research and sociopolitical discussions dealing with out-migration from remote areas exist. However, the contribution of our analysis concerns a group of very young people, as well as the experiences and negotiations of their everyday school-going. This methodological approach has been chosen because of the lack of research concerning hinterland youth’s living realities. As such, this study can be seen as an opening to an empirical life world about which we do not yet know much.
The Sites and Data of the Analysis

*Place as the main focus and starting point*

Historically, youth research has received a great deal of attention with regard to various attitude measures, as well as youth groups, subcultures, and their mutual relations. Consequently, focus has been placed on research sites, where there are numerous young people, including in different groups. Youth in sparsely populated regions have been present in these analyses less frequently than youth in crowded cities and town centres. (Armila forthcoming.) In addition, in Finland, youth’s education and educational choices, as well as the unequal structures that affect them, have primarily been examined in urban contexts (Järvinen 1999; Seppänen et al. 2015). Thus, we turn our attention to places and youth whom researchers have seldom investigated. The empirical focus is on the edges of the learning society—that is, regions that are located in eastern Finland and suffer from long-term population decline and the closing down of their educational institutions (Pöysä and Tuuva-Hongisto 2017; Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016). The three municipalities (Figure 2) that form the site of this research offer basic but no secondary education. Thus, the sites of our research can be defined as environments with scarce educational opportunity structures within which youth can plan their future.

Figure 2: Population density and three research sites in eastern Finland

FIGURE 2 HERE

The epistemological perspective

In keeping with the critical perspective emphasising the unequal opportunity structures that affect people’s everyday lives, we formed a research setting comprising an inductive framework of phenomenological understanding aimed at capturing experiences and meanings in individuals’ lifeworlds (Husserl 1964). The data collection consequently consisted of features of multi-sited ethnography, the principles of which encourage the combination of data collected from several places (Marcus 1995). Even though the young informants in this study live in quite varied everyday conditions, we pay attention to the commonalities among them in terms of the issues that they face, thus following the logic of the generalisation of phenomenological interpretations. Individual experiences are always reflections of more general societal structures and conditions. A general perspective has also been sought within a conceptual dialogue between our notions and the corresponding international research (see Koski 2011).

Data collection

A total of 35 interviewees (15 boys and 20 girls) between the ages of 14 and 18 were selected for this analysis. This age distribution allowed us to examine notions from the educational planning period and from concrete experiences of school-going. Twenty-six of the youth were interviewed during their final year of basic education, and the content of their interviews focused on their reflections on further education. Nine interviewees had already started their secondary education and were able to shed light on what it means to study far away from their homes. The interviewees were from working-class families, none of the fathers and only one
mother had completed university education. The parents had gender-based jobs: The mothers worked in the service and care sectors, and the fathers often worked in factories, as farmers, or as forest machine contractors. The interviewees can be defined as ordinary young people with a generally positive attitude towards education, no major problems coping with their social environments, and no references to any subcultural memberships. They primarily described their relationships with their parents and other family members as warm and close.

The data for this analysis were selected and combined from interviews conducted during two different research projects: *Youth in Time* (Youth Research Society 2015–2025) and *Syrhy* (Forgotten Minority? Young People in Remote Villages and Municipal Welfare Services 2015–2016),¹ both of which share an interest in exploring the meaning of the living environment for young people’s well-being. The authors of this article have worked in these environments and have participated in the data gathering in these projects. The shared interest of these projects has been the aspiration to inductively analyse a topic in youth research that has seldom been examined, including its empirical contents, in which the same issues are discussed.

The interviews were conducted in three village centres, which are marked on the map above (Figure 2). The centralisation of economic vitality into big cities has led to structural homogenisation of their populations, as there are no versatile working possibilities any more, especially for highly educated and female inhabitants. These places with their empty shop windows and abandoned houses are not tempting immigrants either. It is also notable, that

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most of the young interviewees lived on the outskirts of the three village centres. The youngest interviewees, who were still pupils of basic education, attended school in the centres, and the distances of their trips to school ranged from a few to approximately 60 kilometres. The students who were pursuing secondary education often had to travel to the nearest town for school-going, and the lengths of their daily trips were anywhere from approximately 10 to 60 kilometres.

Contact with the interviewees was made primarily via their schools. Formal permission was obtained from municipal school officials and the youth’s parents. The interviews were organised and conducted according to the following themes: youth’s life-histories, everyday lives, family relationships, school-going, friends, hobbies, and visions for the future. One main reference that permeated the interviews was location: the remote region as a young person’s framework of living. For this research, the data were analysed through a lens directed towards expressions focusing on school-going or plans related to it.

**The logics of analysis**

After inductively organising the informants’ meaningful and education-oriented expressions, the aim was to convey their interpretations and experiences of their educational realities in as authentic a manner as possible. Thereafter, the conceptual discussions within the basic frameworks of our study, as well as the discussions regarding the thematic analysis, took place (see Koski 2011). In reading the data, we paid our analytical attention to expressions where Hinterland as a place could be interpreted as the topical reference, either explicitly or implicitly. Validity and reliability for the analysis was guaranteed by a method of researcher triangulation where interpretations were tested in a mutual dialogue of three different analysers. In this kind of interpretative analysis generalisation follows the logics of
conceptual transformability: it is most obvious that lives of young people, who live in the same kind of hinterland conditions also elsewhere than in Finland, face the same kind of issues and questions (see, e.g., Kvale 1989).

The following chapters contain the empirical core of our analysis and describe the issues that our young informants tabled when discussing their school-going and educational choices. We begin the analysis by presenting the educational reflections of the young students that can be interpreted from the perspective of cultural and social resources; this approach is used in numerous other studies of the sociology of education. This brief scrutiny is followed by a thematic description of the notions evolving from the meanings given to remote living areas and the everyday demands and consequences that they create. This is because the place and its special character have been a fundamental and consciously chosen point of perspective for the scrutiny. During the analysis, gender appeared to permeate both the general, “place-free” reflections and those linked with the remote home location; therefore, we have given it a subchapter of its own. This thematic division is a methodological and analytical solution, as in the life world of these youth, their living environments have a significant effect on the processes through which different resources become meaningful. The links between the themes become obvious in regard to how the question of leaving or staying makes structural features—such as sociocultural and material resources, as well as gender—visible.

RESULTS

Social and Cultural Heritage in Choices

When educational paths are planned far away from schools, the choices not only emphasise the youth’s learning preferences or personal passions but also have to be considered in light of
the numerous restrictions that are linked to the youth’s sometimes complicated and challenging everyday realities. The choices that the youth make are of a pragmatic nature (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Käyhkö 2016), and in this case, pragmatism takes numerous forms: available transportation, length of school days, dormitory possibilities or other living arrangements, the amount of financial input, and the significance of grades with regard to applying for entry to certain educational institutions. Moreover, more psychosocial questions arise concerning the emotional insecurity that is linked to moving to a strange school district, the social atmosphere of an unfamiliar urban environment, and the doubts about one’s ability to navigate new everyday surroundings.

However, in spite of their rural geographic location, some structural factors and the main issues determining youth’s educational choices do not lose their meaning, even among young people in remote villages. The main crossroad regarding the choice of upper secondary or vocational education (see Figure 1) seems to be a choice for which the strongest determinant does not inevitably arise from the remoteness of the youth’s home area. Regarding choices at this level, the availability of vocational or upper secondary education is not the main issue, but those who have chosen the upper secondary option have “always known” that they wanted to do so, and those attending vocational school have “always known” that they did not want to attend upper secondary school. While discussing this issue with the informants, we heard a number of arguments about this main choice. The points that were raised related to learning style and student identity, which are familiar themes from many sociological analyses of education (e.g. Houtsonen 2000). In these discussions, relationships with reading, learning, studying, theory, practice, and educational success were reflected. Upper secondary education is linked in a culturally familiar way with diligent studying, with the willingness to read, and often with success at school (Houtsonen 2000; Lappalainen, Mietola, and Lahelma 2010).
In addition, the youth who aim to choose or have chosen vocational education reflected general life-political trends that seem not to be linked with their remote home locations. Among these youth, their educational choices appear to be based on interests that have their origins in the work experiences and schooling stories heard from relatives or close friends and associates. In this sense, in our analysis, vocational education seems to be socially inherited. When vocations have been seen in practice close up, they become concrete and familiar and are viewed as safe choices, especially for those who wish to remain in their neighbourhoods in the future.

*Well, if you have lived your whole life nearby the factory, and you have been there many times and so on [. . . ] you just have to go [to study to become a process operator] and later to work at the factory. There are people retiring from the factory continuously because they are getting older, and they probably want younger ones there to continue [their work].*  
(Boy)

**When Place Becomes Meaningful: To Leave or to Stay?**

Despite the basic choice between vocational or upper secondary education, the most focal choice related to the young interviewees’ home areas was the theme of leaving or staying. The tension between moving away from home and daily school-going from home is an issue that is discussed extensively when hinterland youth are planning their educational paths (Käyhkö 2016). Choosing to move leads to concrete secession from many familiar everyday-life issues, and choosing school-going from home forces the youth to make many compromises between their day-to-day realities and their dreams—that is, to forget all the possibilities that exist too far away.

Moving away from home at the age of 15 or 16 is a major step; it is a leap into the unknown
that is faced with either angst or excitement (Käyhkö 2016). Those who feel negatively excited wish to continue school-going while living at home and to begin their daily school trips from familiar bus stops. Their wish is to remain framed by a familiar everyday-life order; thus, they usually choose the nearest—although it is not actually near—learning institution, in spite of the often limited range of subjects it offers. Those who feel positively excited would like to leave, but this is not always possible for many reasons (e.g. parents deny permission or are unable to finance this choice), as is evident in our analysis.

Self-identification—some of the youth define themselves as “people from small places”—can be interpreted as a region-specific argument related to schooling choice. A “person from a small place” feels uncomfortable in urban environments and in big-city schools and tends to remain as close as possible to his or her home location. A relationship with one’s home location, including with its physical smallness and the close social relationships that exist within it, is linked to its security, safety, and familiarity, which are valuable, desired, and provide emotional and affective safety (Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016; Jamieson 2000). In our discussions with the youth about their home places, factors such as their silence, peacefulness, nature, and animals were mentioned as positive and emotionally meaningful markers of remote villages (cf. Glendinning et al. 2003; Manzo 2003; Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, and Jetson 2014, 306). The young interviewee cited below has chosen the nearest possible school, neglecting to move to a regional town centre. In response to the question, “Do you see yourself more as a small-place or a big-city girl/boy?” the interviewee stated the following: A small-place girl. I’ve lived all my life in a small place like this, and I like the communality. I guess there are not many people in our municipality I don’t recognise. (Girl)

Youth’s educational choices are not merely their own but are influenced by and connected to
the whole family and its everyday arrangements (Harinen 2015). Even though the young interviewees emphasised their independence in choosing their educational paths (also Ball, Maquire, and Macrae 2000, 144), their parents still have influential words to say when the reflections turn to the question of moving away from home or arranging daily school-going to make living at home possible. Some of their future dreams have to be forgotten, as the parents refuse to let their offspring apply to schools that, from their viewpoint, are located too far away. It is an emotionally challenging decision for parents to allow their children to move away at such an early age (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, and Jetson 2014, 304):

They [parents] said it was too far away [450 km]. In the end, we thought . . . Dad thought that if I apply closer [150 km] . . . they [parents] would be a little happier than this city option. They kind of told me not to go there. (Girl)

Overall, with regard to their life choices, because of their age and dependency on their parents (cf. Evans 2002), young people have to negotiate extensively with adults, but youth in remote areas have additional issues to navigate in the “series of negotiations” (Panelli 2002, 118). The parents of our informants had a great deal to say about the issue of staying or leaving. Some of the girls who go to school from home would have liked to have moved to the towns in which their schools are located; however, their families could not afford to rent apartments for them, and student dormitories were not available for them all. Daily school-going from remote villages often means facing early mornings when feeling tired, as well as long days and short nights. Consequently, there is little time left for hobbies, and tiredness becomes a constant in their lives (see also Abbott-Chapman et al. 2014).

Well, there is some [type of] bus service here, but I’m pretty pissed off and would like to move away already because my school days will be so long . . .
. if you leave at 7 am to be at school at 8 am or even a little earlier, and you will be back home at 5 pm or 6 pm . . . you must be like really tired in the evening, and it would be much easier if I lived in town then. (Girl)

Some of these youth end up having conflicts with their parents, who do not want to let them go:

*It would be nice to see another kind of life as well. To see new cities, become familiar with them. [. . .] I don’t want to look at the same place my whole life. [. . .] We have lived here for 15 years, so it’s time to leave.* (Girl)

Both the symbolic and material resources of the youth’s families (e.g. Henderson 2005; Tolonen 2005; Carcillo et al. 2015)—especially financial resources in the context of this analysis—are significant frameworks for the youth’s life choices and possibilities. The remote home area with no schools or public transportation makes the question of families’ resources especially visible. Our interviewees appeared to be conscious that their schooling and living arrangements during the school years are closely tied to money. Transportation is costly, renting an apartment is expensive, and buying a residence is impossible for most (also Abbott-Chapman et al. 2014). For the youth, daily school-going from home is often a consequence of the fact that they cannot afford any other solution. They also seem to have accepted the lack of money as an explanation for not being allowed to move nearer to school:

*My dad would not like to pay it [the rent in the town centre], and I can’t get any loan or anything like it either.* (Girl)

The economic realities that have become familiar from sociopolitical discussions illustrate their discursive power, including at the level of individual life politics, as they appear to be arguments that cannot be abolished. The youth who cannot afford apartments in town choose
the nearest possible schools to attend from home. From their points of view, other options are unrealistic or involve a high level of discomfort. Student dormitories do not attract many youth, as they are perceived as a social risk with regard to well-being, privacy, and the ability to study diligently. Negative stories about dormitories are shared among the youth and are strengthened as a result of the reflections between them and their parents. The image of dormitories resembles that of a kolkhoz-like coexistence with no peace or privacy and where students risk ending up in “bad company.” Dormitories are not appealing choices for the youth, even though daily travel from home to school is exhausting and time-consuming.

Me and Dad was like [for] so many who have moved to a dormitory, their grades have started to decline because the youth in the dormitories basically just drink and smoke. My friend and I were thinking it would be that like 70 percent of those who live in a dormitory smoke there. I would like to stay healthy and fit, so the group pressure would be pretty high. My friend and I thought that there’s no way he would move to a dormitory since your personal items might get stolen. (Boy)

In the case of hinterland youth and their families, different “anchor people” are ascribed special meanings as their sources of social and emotional capital. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, cousins, and other adult relatives or family friends who live in the school towns that are located far away can be significant factors affecting educational choices because they can guarantee some amount of social security for youth who are in a strange environment. They also often facilitate negotiations with parents, who are more willing to unbridle their children if they know that a reliable adult will keep an eye on them.

I’m not sure, but when I start high school, I will probably move to my grandfather’s place [in the town in which the school is located]. (Girl)

Sometimes, moving away from home is the only possible decision. In our data, this is seen
among the youth whose future schools are located up to hundreds of kilometres away from their homes, and daily trips from home are impossible. However, our data do not indicate a high degree of frustration regarding the pursuit of educational dreams in locations that are too far away; rather, the youth have accepted that it is necessary to make compromises and limit the scope of their selections beforehand to enable them to make rational and pragmatic choices within it (also Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Financial issues are not the only argument in every case: Some of the interviewees (primarily the boys) felt that they were not ready to move, or they realised the benefits of living at home within the circle of their parents’ emotional and material support (also Lahelma and Gordon 2003; Tolonen 2005, 350):

*My parents did not quite endorse the idea of moving anywhere, and I agreed with them since I would then have to live alone, and I would not like to take my computer with me, so it would be pretty boring then . . . and no moped either.* (Boy)

**Feminised out-migration**

Gender order as a social structure determines people’s life-political decisions in various ways, and based on our data, it becomes more visible when life choices coupled with home location are under scrutiny. In our data, gender was initially linked with success at school and its related choices in a way that is familiar from statistics: Girls obtain better grades and often strive to attend urban upper secondary or vocational branches that they feel are their “own,” even if the schools are located far away (see also Corbett 2007a). Among these hinterland youth are girls who have clear plans at quite an early age and who aim to achieve their goals by investing in learning and saving money.

Critical youth research emphasises the analytical risks of simplification that are hidden behind
the categorical division of “boys–girls” (Gordon 2006; Lahelma 2009). However, in light of our data, the meaning and significance of gender cannot be ignored. While we are aware that gender categories intersect in many other social divisions, in this case, gender appears in various traditional forms and representations, as other social background categories (social class, ethnicity, etc.) do not “confuse” the dichotomy of boys and girls. The youth in our study are quite socially homogeneous: native Finns from primarily working-class families who have mainly lived their whole lives in remote areas.

However, notions of gender differences in youth’s choices and visions for the future are not typical only among the informants in our analysis: Several studies show a trend whereby girls’ orientation towards the future is longer, wider, and more mobile than boys’ (Dahlström 1996; Glendinning et al. 2003; Alston 2004; Dunkley 2004; Haugen and Villa 2006; Corbett 2007a; Donkersloot 2012). In public discourse, these differences have been explained with regard to girls’ social competences, coping abilities, communicative abilities, and readiness for autonomy (Lahelma and Gordon 2003). These kinds of gendered representations carry discursive power and are known among the girls in this analysis, who tended to emphasise their own courage (see also Cairns 2014) when choosing options that are located far away, unlike the boys in their immediate neighbourhoods.

*My mother was like “You shouldn’t move out yet since you’re only 15 years old and your bigger brother is 17 years old and still lives at home” [but] still, I want to go . . . Dad said, “You can go. Who are we to keep you home if you want to go for real?”* (Girl)

One example that strengthens the interpretations of boys’ unwillingness to make major moves (cf. Ní Laoire 2001) and changes during the secondary-education phase is offered by an 18-year-old boy, who started his upper secondary studies in a town located 210 kilometres from
his home. His life in that town ended quickly, in spite of the presence of an “anchor person” from the very beginning:

I went to study [in a faraway town] for the first year of the high school period. I lived with my brother, but then I fell out with him and moved back here. Maybe I was too young to leave, so it did not work out, and then I came back. There were many activities to take part in, and I liked those, but here, there were many more good buddies, and I was so young, so I didn’t quite know what I would like to do [in the town]. (Boy)

For many hinterland girls, the towns themselves are interesting, exciting, and lively places that “bustle” (see also Rye 2006). This interest has a gendered nature: Getting away from their home areas—which, based on their experiences, have become stagnant and feel small in many ways—is the main argument guiding the girls’ educational choices (see Ní Laoire 2000, 239; Dunkley 2004; Rye 2006). Studies in secondary education can open anticipated doors that lead to bigger places, more people, nearby services, and “life,” all of which offer a release from the limits of certain socially restricted locations (also Alston 2004; Baeck 2004; Haugen and Villa 2006; Cairns 2008, 239, 243). Studying in towns can mean making new friends, shopping, and having possibilities to “hang around,” none of which are available in sparsely populated villages. Thus, studying also provides a legitimate reason to retreat from home. Some of the youth are able to secure apartments in town to achieve a weekly retreat from their home surroundings, and those who still live at home are happy to experience at least a part-time absence from their former limited daily surroundings. The “vacuum life” of the hinterland has plagued some of the girls in our study, and they have longed to be in environments in which they can blend into the social mass of city people (Glendinning et al. 2003, 141–145; Farrugia 2016).
In the town, there’s like everything, and then there’s that centre nearby
where you can pay a visit after a school day or.. so, it is rather important if
you have lived here in the hinterland since you were four years old. (Girl)

One interpretation framework for the gender differences in our data can be attributed to the
narrow and gendered labour markets of the hinterland (also Ní Laoire 2001; Alston 2004;
Baeck 2004; Corbett 2007a; 2009b; Farrugia 2016). The local labour markets are dominated
by traditional masculine competences that are linked with agriculture, physical work, and
machine entrepreneurship (also Paulgaard 2002). The local conditions reflect a gendered
model and teach hinterland girls that sooner or later, it will be time for them to leave (Corbett
2007b; 2009a). Consequently, the girls’ visions of the future are not restricted to secondary
education only; rather, their long-term plans are based on their willingness and readiness to
move much farther away from their home regions (cf. Dunkley 2004; Käyhkö 2017). For
many boys, their long-term plans include ideas of returning home or to home-like regions
after completing their secondary education (see also Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016):

It would be nice if I could get a job at the factory one day so I could go to
work from my home [in the hinterland], and I would have only a short
journey to work. (Boy)

In spite of their dreams of returning to the hinterland, many of the boys in our study still felt
obliged to move away from their home areas to find work (cf. Baeck 2004, 109–111). In their
interviews, there was a certain recognisable tension between their close relationships with
their home areas and the idea of the mobility imperative (Farrugia 2016). Symbolic features—
namely, the environments that they have experienced as their own and the familiar activities
within them—tie these boys to their home regions (also Dahlström 1996; Glendinning et al.
2003); however, structural reasons force them to consider leaving (also Jones 1999):
I don’t like big cities. Just visit them occasionally. If I could decide, I would like to live at home all my life. If I could decide. (Boy)

Conclusion: The Silent and Silenced in the Learning Society

The starting point of this article was the geographically unequal possibilities that are open to young people when they are forced to make concrete life plans and find solutions, especially with regard to education; these are the actions that have to be taken to enable them to cope in a learning society. Youth’s individual choices are connected to their own resources, those of their parents, and societal structures. Today, as economic aims dominate different social policies, home regions are becoming an increasingly significant structural factor that influences different life possibilities. Nevertheless, in analyses of youth’s education, regionality has been paid minimal attention (Allen and Hollingworth 2013, 501). The aim of our scrutiny has been to stimulate discussion concerning the positions, possibilities, and conditions of youth who live at the geographical edges of the society.

The youth in our analysis have internalised the cultural belief in education, and they attempt to fit their own possibilities and dreams within its scope. As young people who are born into a learning society, they are socialised within the norms of educational participation and do not rebel against nor question them, in spite of the sparse opportunity structures for participation in their home regions (cf. Lappalainen, Mietola, and Lahelma 2010, 43–44). While collecting data for this analysis, we encountered no reflections dealing with the possibility of retreating from secondary education. To some extent, the hinterland youth’s wishes and solutions are in keeping with the general structural trends that are seen in several other analyses; however, they also strongly reflect the educational choices, the bases of which are the remoteness of the youth’s home areas, the long distances they travel, and the poor transportation facilities.
In choosing to pursue an education, the youth living in the regional hinterland also have to make numerous other choices, some of which are determined by their remote home locations and some of which are more general (cultural, structural, and discursive) or personal (experience-based and linked to their families’ everyday realities) (also Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Gender and families’ symbolic resources are still strong predictors of youth’s life solutions, but in the hinterland, families’ economic capabilities become very significant with regard to reflecting young people’s realistic educational possibilities. The hinterland lacks many welfare services—for example, those organised by youth clubs and public transportation. The lack of these services makes the youth especially dependent on the resources of their immediate family members and other relatives, as well as these individuals’ willingness to offer assistance (also Harinen 2015; Evans 2002; Thomson et al. 2002). This also means that the same distant village can provide very different opportunities to its diverse youth.

As social scientists, we are not allowed to merely present notions based on the experiences we have analysed; we also have a duty to reflect on them against the backdrop of the societal structures that are not visible to our young informants. Youth’s educational choices are often discussed as abstract, rational, and ambition-based solutions without considering young people’s everyday environments. However, young people’s choices do not simply exist in abstract “possibility files” (cf. Bourdieu 1994), even though they share a societal duty to choose to educate themselves to cope with life (Käyhkö 2016, 77). In a way, the youth in our analysis can be seen as “others” of the contemporary educational and regional policies—that is, members of a learning society who live in an educational vacuum and are forced to create their educational paths by making numerous compromises and forgetting many personal dreams. Moreover, because of the long distances to their educational institutions, their school-
going can become an endless series of extremely long and tiring days.

However, the young people whom we met during our fieldwork did not express any significant dissatisfaction with their circumstances nor recognition of their societal otherness. They did not discuss their unfair situations, did not demand any structural changes, and seemed not to suffer from a lack of agency (Käyhkö 2016). We were told about their own, free, voluntary, and independent choices (cf. Gordon and Lahelma 2002; Thomson et al. 2002, 351; ibid. 2003, 33–34, 45; Cairns 2013b). The youth followed the current discourses of the learning society by emphasising rational individualism (e.g. Apple 2006). Only a few articulated their concerns about compromises or lost possibilities (see also Käyhkö ibid., 79).

It seems that in the hinterland, children are raised with sparse services and are subjected to long travel distances and to a kind of mobility imperative (cf. Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016).

The youth whom we met also seemed to be carefree and trusting with respect to their life plans: They did not question the educational demands of the learning society nor their abilities to cope within it. However, this trustfulness does not grant researchers permission to keep quiet about the grievances, inequalities, difficulties, and special demands that the youth face because of their distinct living conditions. One aim of this article has been to make visible the contemporary developments that adversely affect the principles and practices of educational equality in a society that expects formal educational participation from its growing members. The general discussion around youth demands detailed questioning to reveal the different realities and living conditions in which choices are made and from where school-going occurs. It is, consequently, time to analyse “the geography of education” by moving from urban contexts to sparsely populated regions of society (Cairns 2013a; Corbett 2014, 15; Pini and Mayes 2015). This is especially critical today because these regions have become areas of
a systematic “economic rationalisation” of educational possibilities, which then have concrete consequences for youth’s life plans. As Cairns (2013b) has noted, neoliberalism is lived in concrete places, and the youth of remote villages, therefore, have to compete for education in a socially unjust competition.
References


Statistic Finland. 2015.  


On the Educational Edges of a Learning Society

The Finnish Hinterland as a Framework of Educational Choices for Young People

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Population Density 2013

Data source: Eurostat, NSIs

Population Density at NUTS3 level in 2013

Average value per region as of January 1st

- < 8.0
- 8.0 – 12.5
- 12.5 – 25.0
- 25.0 – 50.0
- 50.0 – 100.0
- No data

100.0 – 250.0
250.0 – 500.0
500.0 – 1000.0
> 1000.0

Map shows inhabitants per km². Regional area (km²) estimates: AL, BA, XK. Land area used whenever possible, otherwise total area figures.

Population data for 2013, except:
2012: AL, MK, Republika Srpska (BA), RO, UK
2011: Mecklemburg-Vorpommern (DE), RS
2010: BiH Federation (BA)

NUTS3/SNUTS3 regions, except: MD: national level; BY, RU, UA, Republika Srpska (BA): SNUTS2