**Making the Right Choice! Inquiries into the Reasoning Behind Young People's
Decisions about Education**

Regine Grytnes

Young 2011 19: 333

DOI: 10.1177/110330881101900305

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://you.sagepub.com/content/19/3/333>

Published by:

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Young* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://you.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://you.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://you.sagepub.com/content/19/3/333.refs.html>

Making the Right Choice! Inquiries into the Reasoning Behind Young People's Decisions about Education

Young
19(3) 333–351
© 2011 SAGE Publications and
YOUNG Editorial Group
SAGE Publications
Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi, Singapore,
Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/110330881101900305
<http://you.sagepub.com>

Regine Grytnes

Department of Occupational Health, Herning Regional Hospital, Denmark

Abstract

The article looks at how different types of reasoning about educational choices within a group of ninth graders have influenced their participation in the Danish educational system. The study, based on interviews with 15-year-olds,¹ shows how social background and differing personal experiences and strategies influence young people's ability and desire to engage in the decision-making process. The article identifies six different ideal types of reasoning about educational choice and shows that types of reasoning are a vital component in managing the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education.

Keywords

Choice, educational transition, adolescents, social inequality, biography, reasoning

A Cultural Model of Educational Choice

Choices of post-compulsory education or job are not 'free choices'; they are part of a process of negotiation in which habitual understanding of opportunities is coupled with past experiences and reflections about the role of education. In addition to this process, the educational system itself also influences how choices are made; young people operate within a specific system and negotiate their choices in relation to it. In order to inquire into the different forms of reasoning and how these interact with the educational guidance system to facilitate the transition from compulsory education to youth education, the article takes as its point of departure a European Union study of young people across the continent. In this, Walther (2007) points to three main European educational regimes: the Nordic social-democratic model, the conservative continental model and the Anglo-Saxon liberal model (Walter, 2007: 124). In the Danish version of the Nordic social-democratic model, education has been

understood as being a driver of individual development rather than purely a means of getting a job. This conception leaves each individual ultimately charged with the task of fulfilling his or her own development. However, there is currently pressure towards more structured management of educational choices. In an effort to make young people's educational strategies more effective, ninth graders are compelled, in obligatory guidance sessions and by other means, to make choices about their futures in a certain sequence and to produce a logbook of this trajectory. This particular form of educational regime constitutes, according to Walther and Plug (2006), a model of a comprehensive school system that aims at 'individual initiative coupled with entitlements that also might explain why marginalization of the disadvantaged persists, despite various opportunities for individual educational paths' (Walther and Plug, 2006: 132).

Within this system, individuals need to engage reflexively with their social environment in order to make sense of the increasing range of alternatives. This engagement may open opportunities for social mobility; it also, however, increases the risk of disconnection with an educational system that urges one to make choices in a culturally acceptable manner. Those who drop out of education and who do not manage to enter another educational programme are being labelled 'the residual group' (in Danish *rest gruppe*), young people who have difficulties in complying with the traditional progression to post-compulsory education. This, according to Walther, could suggest that the Danish system of transition demands 'the internalization of a particular cultural model of participation and individual biography construction' (Walther, 2007: 131). This is a process that may prove difficult not only for this 'residual group' but also for others. Those who do not engage in the processes of reflexive biography construction may also find it difficult to respond to this cultural model. They may not actually be excluded from the system but they manage to make only limited use of its possibilities and then make their 'choices' in terms other than those the system presupposes. The questions, then, are: what is an educational 'right choice' for whom? What about those who do not reflexively engage in their educational choice? And how are understandings of differentiated opportunities for educational choice managed?

The article will be structured as follows: First, methods and study design will be outlined, followed by the identification of different types of reasoning. Then, the concept of educational choice will be scrutinized and examined, exemplified with two forms of reasoning from the empirical data. Before exploring the other types of reasoning, we look at the structured opportunities on offer to young Danes. Finally, after presenting the remaining four forms of reasoning, the article elaborates on the implications of young people's differing capacities for participation in the educational system.

Methods and Study Design

The interviews this article draws on were conducted as part of a larger epidemiological study investigating pathways to social inequality in health within a cohort

comprising 3,500 individuals born in 1989² and their parents. Interviews were conducted a year later, in 2005, to supplement the quantitative data with in-depth knowledge about the lives of these young people at the time of ending compulsory education. Participants were recruited from three³ different school classes, selected on the basis of differences in parents' income (economic capital) and educational status (educational capital). Private compulsory schools had the highest score on both education and income. These schools were excluded because we wanted to compare ordinary public schools.⁴ Consequently, the segment with the highest score on social status is excluded from this material. The purpose of this selection of schools was to gain data that could show differences in young people's reasoning and ways of dealing with the challenges they were facing at a time just before they left compulsory education.

In all, 37 pupils were interviewed, 12 individually and 25 of them in six different focus groups. Prior to interviewing, observations in the three classes were conducted. Given that the theme of the interviews was future perspectives, with an emphasis on educational paths, utterances in the interviews may be somewhat biased towards this area of aspiration and away from others (family formation, work, leisure or travel).⁵ If the interview is understood as a specific social context, this is not surprising, as the interview itself becomes a part of the process of negotiating a meaningful social identity (cf. Riessman, 2002).

With the purpose of developing a set of types or forms of reasoning at this point in life, an analysis developed of the interview material that used a thematic, study-specific coding. This focused mainly on habitus and social status of the family, the function of education in each interviewee's future perspective, the degree to which they reflected on their choice and the way in which they participated in the decision-making process set by the educational system (i.e., their reasoning about the coming change in their school life). Six different ideals and typical forms of reasoning were formed on the basis of the specific patterns of reasoning identified in the empirical material. These were: (i) 'unconcerned choice', (ii) 'obvious choice', (iii) 'keeping choices open', (iv) 'ambitious choice', (v) 'safe choice' and (vi) 'restricted choice'. The types represent an accentuation of essential tendencies and traits in the ways the interviewees deal with the 'choice' of post-compulsory education. In the article, these forms will be illustrated and discussed through six case studies. The interviews used as cases were chosen because of their exemplary power in relation to the specific types.

We will now look at the Danish educational system which constitutes some of the context of young people's educational choices.

The Educational System

The Danish educational system is based on a comprehensive school system, going from first to ninth grade; a voluntary 10th-school year is offered in public schools and in private residential schools. Thereafter, young people can continue in different

forms of post-compulsory education⁶ with either an academic or vocational orientation. Additionally, there are so-called production schools which aim to support young people with no formal education who need means of access other than those the mainstream education system offers. The vast majority of all educational programmes are free of charge. For several years, unemployment among young people under 25, and particularly among those under 18, has been almost nonexistent since the guidance system and the social services work together to find places in either education or the job market.

The empirical data used in this article is drawn from interviews conducted in a medium-sized town in the west of Denmark. A wide range of youth education programmes is offered in the town as well as certain kinds of short- and medium-cycle higher education programmes, especially in subjects related to business, technology, design and fashion.

In the literature on transitions and decision-making, the focus is predominantly on transition from school to work or from compulsory school to higher education (i.e., Ball et al., 2002; Hodkinson et al., 1996; Heinz, 2009; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Lehmann, 2005; Walther and Plug, 2006). This study, however, focuses on the transition from compulsory schooling to post-compulsory youth education. In the Danish context, this transition is understood as being important because it is the first time young people are obliged to make choices that will influence their educational path (Pless and Katznelson, 2007). It can thus be understood as the first 'structural turning-point' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) that young people experience as regards future careers.

Notions of Choice (VS No Choice)

The individualized culture of choice mentioned earlier is fostered by an educational guidance system that focuses on individual clarification or preparation which is supposed to be based on information, practical on-the-job training and planning. This process implicitly assumes that when information is given, young people will consider their individual abilities, resources and aspirations, assess the available opportunities and make their own decisions. From this perspective, choice is intimately linked to 'action' which is considered to be the effect of thinking. But this sequencing of events is rare. Rather, choice takes the form of a flow of actions that is rationalized only in retrospect and only then appears as a series of rational(ized) choices. The consequence of making too close an association between action (choice) with conceptualizations, acts, intentions, purposes and reasons is, according to Giddens, that acts are abstracted from their location in time and the way in which they are regularized in situated practices (Giddens, 1979: 55–56). Instead of referring to decision-making as a rational, individual and planned process, Hodkinson and Sparkes refer to it as neither technically rational nor irrational but rather as 'pragmatically rational'. In so doing, they understand choice as taking place in interaction with the social environment and emphasize that choices should be interpreted within life-courses (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 32). Pragmatism means that young people are using the information they have at hand from family and friends in the

workforce as well as their own workplace experience (Taylor, 2005: 496). Drawing on these un-official sources of information is a natural way of envisaging the future and answering questions such as: what can I manage; what can I become; what do I want?

In considering the above questions, the issue of meaningful choice is pertinent. Addressing this, Du Bois-Reymond refers to choice as a 'biography' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Biography is understood as the way in which (young) people link their current situation to past experiences and future expectations and thus personalize choice. The literature discusses two different forms of biography. 'Choice biography' refers to young people considering all different possibilities and reflecting on the available options and justifications for these; a 'normal biography', on the other hand, is characterized by a more linear and predictable mode of consideration and is rooted in an established life world (Ball et al., 2002: 57).

A normal biography is characterized by an absence of decisions, if these are understood as 'reflexive choices': the choice of a certain form of education has been naturalized and appears the only possible course as an inevitable continuation of something that started a long time ago. For young people with a normal biography, choice of education or job orientation is something that comes naturally or easily, fitting into the everyday flow of actions without the need for subsequent rationalizations, except perhaps for those needed for an educational logbook. A choice biography, on the other hand, will generally be based on subjective understandings of opportunities and awareness of the provisional nature of a choice made at a particular moment, that is, a reflexive choice.

It is important to remember here, however, that a habitually limited range of options may be addressed in resourceful and ingenious ways, even if these contribute to reproducing a family tradition (Lehmann, 2005: 345). As Giddens notes, situating agency (choice) in 'time and space' provides for different forms of consciousness: that is, practical vs discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1979: 250). Practical consciousness about future plans, in this sense, emphasizes the agency involved in even normal biography construction.

The Unconcerned Choice: 'It's Not Something I Worry About'

Two of the boys interviewed, David and John, provide further insight into how educational choices are made and agency acted out within a normal biography framework. Their cases illustrate aspects of 'choice' at the margins of the cultural model of participation and biography construction. David⁷ is tired of school, and at the time of the interview he does not know what he wants to do after compulsory education or what kind of job he wants to do.

His indecision about these questions does not worry him, particularly. For David, the most important thing in school is his friends: 'They keep me going,' he says. He talks about himself as 'not too bright', so for him the worst-case scenario is to be in an educational setting where he feels others are 'cleverer'. Jokingly, he says, there has to be someone 'as stupid as me', indicating that being socially comfortable is the most important thing for him when it comes to choosing post-compulsory education. He says:

I talk with my friends about what they are going to do because then I can perhaps enrol at the same place. [It is important] to know someone there.

This consideration is the most developed reasoning in David's narrative. When it comes to his friends, he knows what he wants. He has developed a sense of what he can achieve and of what to avoid so he can feel accepted among people like himself. He articulates a plan that aims at preserving things as they are: he will follow his friends into a new school.

David is the younger of two children in his family, and he experiences a certain pressure to do as well as his sister who is at the 'gymnasium' (upper secondary). His father dropped out of school early and has worked as a meat factory worker whereas his mother is a teacher who, according to David, 'has an extremely long education'. Although his mother is concerned about his grades, and urges him to read books and engage in schoolwork, she does not sit down with him or communicate any specific ambitions for his education. He feels pressured by his mother's attempt to discipline him, but he says he understands her because, 'Every parent wants their child to do well.' In fact, he says, it is not only the parents who want this:

I think everyone wants good grades, but not everyone can be bothered to do something to get them.

Education plays no real role for David either as a way to realize a plan for a future job or as a route to personal satisfaction. For David, the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education or a job involves no real choice but is rather an inevitable event that he will consider as he goes along. He has, however (like his friends), decided to apply for the vocational school, though he has no clear idea which branch to choose. He says he wants to try some things and knows for certain he does not want to build houses or engage in long educational programmes. 'I just want a job and to feel good', he says.

For David, future education is frankly absent as an ingredient in 'the good life'. His 'choice', at this point, is to follow his friends into post-compulsory education. This means he chooses to stay on in education, a choice that on the surface corresponds with the discursive notion of education as a good and as a vehicle for a 'better life'. But David's considerations about his future are disconnected from the premises of the educational system, and his reason to stay in education therefore diverges fundamentally from its presuppositions. This disconnection between education and a reflexive engagement in future plans in David's case contrasts with that of John as we shall see in the following.

The Obvious Choice: 'I have wanted this since I was a Kid'

John experiences a 'perfect fit' between aspirations and 'choice' of education and future job. This is an intrinsic part of his biography construction. He wants to become a mechanic working with cars or motorbikes. To achieve this, he explains, he will attend the 'logistics and transport' branch of the local vocational school. He is already

experienced in his future trade, thanks to a traineeship with the local bicycle repairer and through his part-time job in a car garage. Besides, his father is a lacquerer and a car mechanic, and he has always wanted to follow in his father's footsteps.

John clearly draws on the experiences of his family, friends and workmates in order to articulate what he wants for himself. Not only is he familiar with the work of a mechanic, he is also inspired by the way workmates organize their lives, as the following quote indicates:

I also like the idea of driving for a security company. They drive around to companies at night to check on things. I would really like to do that. There is someone at my work who does that. He is a car mechanic and a security guard at the same time.

His aims are very much in line with his family background but it is important to note that his reasoning is based on what he likes to do: it is not legitimized by the family tradition. His agency is to be found in the ways he looks to his network when assessing what he would like to do rather than exhausting the guidance systems in place or seeking information from educational institutions. It is not because his father is a mechanic that he wants to become one, but rather, the family tradition is incorporated in his habitus, and this informs his preferences and competences. His reasoning lies within a normal biography construction, and since he is continuing into youth education, neither he nor the educational system challenges his choice. But education and future work are already incorporated into his habitus and are thus not reflexively considered as options among a range of others.

The examples of John and David show how reasoning within a normal biography construction at the margins of the educational system functions. These forms of reasoning are at the margin in the sense that John and David fail to engage reflexively in choices about youth education in the way that the educational system presupposes even though they both 'choose' to stay on in youth education for the time being. In David's case, choice of education is determined entirely by non-educational aspects: that is, his friends. Future goals will remain unaddressed within the educational system even if he enters an educational programme. These cases show how choice can be contingent upon aspects utterly different from those the educational system focus on and pose questions about the ways in which differences in the experiences of limitation and opportunity are structured.

Structured Opportunities

Choice of educational path is acted out within structural and individual constraints and therefore often becomes an exercise in 'making a virtue of necessity' (Payne, 2003: 8–9; Rabo, 1997; Reay and Lucey, 2003). This means intellectual, cultural and other kinds of limitation restrict individuals' choices, making the notion of a 'pickn'mix' of all the possible options more true for some than for others (cf. Reay, 1996). This is clearly illustrated in the interview with Marianne whose case is presented below. Her academic performance was low, and she was tired of school,

so most of the youth education programmes were not readily accessible for her. Making a 'choice' thus became more of an obstacle race. She tried to find alternatives to education, arguing that these alternatives would support the possibility of education in the future. However, structural limitations are not an explanation in themselves. Insight into the actual decision-making process of individuals is crucial in order to understand more fully how choices are actually made, since 'young people can actively shape some important dimensions of their experience' (Evans, 2002 in Lehmann, 2005: 329).

Present choices can also be thought of as being linked to earlier experiences through embodied habits, ways of orientation, cognitive forms, aesthetic tastes, normative ideas, etc. (Bourdieu et al., 1981 in Harrits, 2005: 126). To conceptualize differences in experiences, Bourdieu's concept of 'distance to necessity' is useful (Bourdieu, 1984: 372 ff) because it acknowledges that social practices are shaped by the daily life of groups, families and individuals. For example, a life regulated by systemic demands as a consequence of social welfare dependency would be a life characterized by closeness to necessity. These circumstances are part of the concept of habitus and are structuring practices (ibid.). Closeness (or submission) to necessity is thus associated with a position in a 'dominated' social class. In a Danish setting, submission to necessity is associated with relative poverty (not being able to participate in the consumer society) as well as with cultural or social 'deprivation', such as unemployment, illiteracy and/or lack of familiarity with the educational system or the labour market.

The consequences of living in conditions marked by closeness or distance to necessity may impact on a person's orientation towards the future. In theory, distance from necessity enables a tendency to engage in the world in reflexive and abstract terms. Submission to necessity, on the other hand, leads to a more practical and concrete 'aesthetic' where focus is placed on the ultimate goal rather than on the process leading to it. In justifying their educational choices, young people's reasoning can thus be characterized according to the value they put on certain choices above others. A social situation characterized by submission to necessity would, in theory, influence individuals into valuing education as a means of securing a job or an acceptable position in society in the future, focusing on ideas and forms rather than content (Bourdieu, 1984: 374–76). This difference was reflected in the interviews with Marianne and Mille. Both are unsure about their future education and career but because Marianne spends her daily life close to necessity, she reasons in a more concrete way. For example, finding a job that can support her is her highest priority, even though, ideally, she wants to 'do better than her parents'. For Mille, though, the most important thing is to find out what she really wants to do, and until she does, she chooses to attend a residential school and 'develop herself'. The desires and interests of these individuals are therefore socially constructed and promote different dispositions to act. There are, however, no simple relations between past experiences and present actions/practices (cf. Harrits, 2005: 130). It is by focusing on young people's subjective interests and how these have been formed, as well as on what

lies before, that socially stratified choices of education can be revealed (Hutters, 2004). As Hodkinson and Sparkes argue: 'Using habitus allows us to place school-work transition processes in a framework that can account for the active formation of dispositions for certain educational and occupational choices' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: 332).

Types of Reasoning: Forms of Participation

The above enables us to point to three central elements in young people's processes of making educational choices: (i) habitus and the person's distance or closeness to necessity, (ii) reflexivity or their form of participation in the process of biography construction and (iii) their form of reasoning in relation to their choice(s). Or, to put it the other way round, young people's forms of reasoning are influenced by their form of participation in individual biography construction as well as by their relation to necessity. The interviews have been analyzed with this in mind, and each individual account has been associated with one main form of reasoning. In Table 1, these elements are displayed and categorized into six different forms of reasoning. It is also shown how these forms are distributed among the three schools (high, middle and low, in terms of economic and educational capital). These types should be understood as ideal types in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1949: 90ff). Consequently, they are not meant as descriptions of how specific individuals act in real life. The types are used here to compare and to show, using empirical cases, how different 'real-life' strategies correspond or contradict with these types. The first two forms of reasoning are specifically concerned with choice vs no choice, and have already been discussed, in the cases of David and John. The next two forms, (iii) 'keeping choice open' and (iv) 'ambitious choice', are forms of reasoning in which education is an end in itself. They illustrate different forms of aesthetic choice focused on how to get the most relevant and fulfilling education, (v) 'Safe choice' and (vi) 'restricted choice', on the other hand, represent forms of labour-marked orientation towards education, focusing on education as a means of securing a job. The last four forms are all forms of 'choice biography construction', and in what follows we will look at how these different forms sit with the discursive understandings of what the educational choice is.

Keeping Options Open: 'I haven't Settled for Anything Specific Yet'

As already mentioned, Mille's central concern is with choosing something she really wants. She has not settled on any specific form of youth education yet, but she sees herself as someone who wants to 'work with people'. She wants to keep an open mind about possible future options in order not to miss any possibilities. In looking to the future, Mille focuses not on a specific job but rather on an undefined notion of 'what is right for her'.

Despite her desire to work with people, Mille inclines towards opting for upper secondary education, focusing on commercial subjects. This is in line with her

Table 1. Characteristics of the Different Reasoning Types

	(1) Unconcerned Choice	(2) Obvious Choice	(3) Keeping Choices Open	(4) Ambitious Choice	(5) Safe Choice	(6) Restricted Choice
Habitus	Not considered	Not considered	Distance	Distance	Closeness	Closeness
The function of education	Education not linked to future goals	Education intrinsically linked to personal competences	Education as a part of self (realisation) Value oriented	Education as a part of self (realisation) Value oriented	Education as means of securing a job Labour market oriented	Education as means of securing a job Labour market oriented
Reflexivity/ Form of biography	+/ Normal biography: Educational choice and identity strategies not linked directly. Might be a provisional type of reasoning, related to young age	+/ Normal biography: Correspondence between identity and future job, applies a practical consciousness	+/ Choice biography: Fear that wrong choice fail to serve as self-realisation. Self-realisation is important	+/ Choice biography: confidence in ability to choose and to achieve correspondence with identity. Focus on goal, but also the process	+/ Choice biography: Fear that wrong choices, will lead to unemployment, which in turn lead to unfulfilled hopes	+/ Choice biography: Managing limited opportunities Disconnect identity from education, deny the value of education
Reasoning	'I will go where my friends go.' No idea about future education, but no worries. Non-educational aspects determine choice	'Have always wanted to become...' Choice is natural and easy and motivated by personal experiences	'Want to find something that is really me.' Difficult to choose between all possible options. Choice linked to the process of finding out 'who am I'	'Want to use my talents and challenge myself.' Ambitions regard earning money as well as personal satisfaction	'It is good to have something to fall back on.' Focuses on a foreseeable future and breadwinning aspects	'Can't just choose anything, it is important to be realistic'. Choosing 'down' in order to escape the risk of being disappointed
Distribution of forms related to participant's school	3 in the low school, 1 in the middle school	1 in the low school, 6 in the middle school, 3 in the high school	1 in the low school, 2 in the middle school, 4 in the high school	1 in the low school, 1 in the high school	4 in the middle school, 3 in the high school	6 in the low school, 1 in the high school

family's orientation: her mother works in finance and her father owns a shop. She is afraid, however, that by choosing business-related subjects she may be ruling out other possibilities in the future.

It is possible for Mille to postpone her choice of youth education because she has chosen to attend a residential school⁸ for the following year, a school focusing on sports. Her elder sister also attended this school, and her whole family, except her mother, plays team handball. Mille comes from a social background that is relatively distanced from necessity in the sense that her family is economically well off: her mother and father hold stable, well-paid jobs. They are not, however, highly educated, and they want Mille to aspire higher in education than they have done themselves. When advising her about youth education and future jobs, her parents are concerned for her to find something that 'she is good at' and something that is in line with her personality. Her father has told her not to become a shop assistant because he thinks she can 'do better than that'. This places importance not only on Mille's ability to estimate her own academic ability but also on her feelings about a range of educational and working paths. But without a clear idea of what kind of employment she wants, it is difficult for her to negotiate the variety of educational choices. She says:

I will find something! But what if I am unable to find what I want? Well, it makes you worry, when you feel a little lost. There must be a lot of jobs that one simply doesn't know about.

Mille finds it difficult to navigate all the educational possibilities at this point, and she is worried about her ability to cope with a tight educational programme. She explains that she has had difficulties both in school and on the handball court over the past few years. She says:

I think it's the same when it comes to school. If I get upset and there is something I just can't get right, then I get completely... But at other times, I really fight for it. I won't give up.

She loves the highly competitive game of handball but would prefer 'an ordinary job' and 'an ordinary, quiet life', she says. She knows from handball that it takes a lot of effort to face her own shortcomings, and this makes her anxious that she could drop out (of an education) if things did not go well for her.

Her own sense of opportunities and limitations is influenced not only by her grades, which are above average, but also by the doubts she has about her own abilities to follow certain educational paths. Her family's position—especially her parents' orientation towards business—influences her and makes it difficult for her to see her own way forward through education and towards a job. Pressure is on her to make something of her talents and to pursue what she really wants, so finding out what it is she actually wants is the most important thing for Mille. The possibility of postponing her choice is justified by a need to be clearer about what it

is she wants; the residential year, she believes, will clarify this and buy her time. Her reflexive understanding of her choice of education is expressed in her anxiety about making a wrong choice. Compared with the previous cases, Mille sees education as an opportunity for self-realization, and this is linked to her considerations about the future. Mille's uncertain but reflexive way of dealing with the forthcoming 'choice' is in contrast with the case of Lisa below.

Ambitious Choice: 'One should Always Do One's Best'

Lisa has always been stimulated to do her level best when there has been some kind of reward involved. She tells about a bicycle race in which she came in second, winning 1,000 Danish kroner (about €130) and how this motivated her to set her goals higher. About schoolwork, she says:

I think it is typical of me to aim high: sixth form, A-levels, the 'gymnasium', the toughest of them all. It is quite typical that I need to plan it in detail. I like to be able to see the final goal, something I can look forward to.

In line with her need to have things planned, Lisa has a clear plan for the foreseeable years of her education. She opts for the general gymnasium in the adjacent town, and after that she wants to train as an architect, preferably in the capital city. She has considered different gymnasiums but even though one of them seems better socially, she has chosen the other one because of its academic reputation and the subjects it offers.

Even though Lisa has planned her educational path quite clearly already, at times she has had a feeling of 'a mist before the eye'. At some point, she approached her parents because she did not know what to do. She describes this:

I came home and said, 'I have no idea...because it can involve risking my whole life, if it doesn't work out well.' And eventually, they said: 'You would probably make a good architect. That could be a possibility.' We began looking into it more, and then it just became that.

For Lisa, the motivating factor is what she will end up doing after education. It is imperative that it is something she finds interesting, that it is something that will earn her a good salary and that she is able to choose the 'right' school/academy. She expects herself to put a lot of energy into the choices that she makes and to get good results. And at the same time, she is focused on the outcome of her efforts: the job she can get and the size of the pay cheque. She puts it this way:

I guess you could say I think most about the final goal; the rest just follows along with it. When I consider the subjects I must choose, I don't think: 'Oh, chemistry, that's not a subject I appreciate, but that's what it takes to get this job so I'll probably have to choose it.' If it was all fun, then it probably wouldn't be challenging enough.

Even if Lisa is focused on the goal of her education, the important thing for her is not 'a job as such' but a job as a satisfying result of her own efforts, preferences and identity.

Summing up, the two forms of reasoning discussed above point to aesthetic forms of reasoning, where emphasis is put on how education is achieved, and its correspondence with identity. These types of reasoning illustrate how distance from necessity makes it possible to approach education as a way of constructing oneself. The 'keeping choice open' form of reasoning illustrates how ontological aspects are linked to choice of educational path and how young people, in the process of understanding themselves, have difficulties choosing just one option since the consequent narrowing down of possibilities narrows their understanding of themselves. The 'ambitious choice' form of reasoning, on the other hand, is more goal focused but at the same time the process of arriving at the goal is important because it says something about who you are.

Safe Choice: 'I Want to become a Police Officer'

In the following, the cases of Sebastian and Marianne will be presented. More than in the previous interviews focus is on education as a means to a job in the future. First we turn to Sebastian. He plans to become a police officer, but since he cannot apply to the police academy until he is 21, he is in doubt about what to do immediately after compulsory school. He says:

I have been in doubt as to whether I wanted a youth education at all. I would have taken 10th grade somewhere or other and then worked until I became 18, the time for my national military service.

However, his parents, his brother and the school career counsellor have urged him to continue with youth education, and he has come to realize that youth education will provide him with 'something to fall back on' if the police officer plan does not work out. He has therefore (almost) decided to attend a technical upper secondary school. He places importance on having a good job in the fairly near future but at the same time he has been convinced that education is the best way to secure a future in which he will have a 'fair income', a 'respectable house' and 'financial security'.

Sebastian's father works as an unskilled meat factory worker while his mother is a nursing assistant. A vital concern for Sebastian is his father's somewhat unstable position in the labour market. The father fears he will be unable to get a new job in the event of being sacked because he has no formal education. Sebastian seems therefore to be structuring his practice according to a notion of the value of education as something instrumental that will ensure a secure position in the labour market in the future. At the same time, though, he opts for a profession that is something of a 'boy's dream', expecting to have fun at work while he is there.

Sebastian's choice for his future is rationalized with reference to a generalized understanding of education as 'important'. His family's experience of vulnerability

in the labour market has an impact on his understanding of education as a safety measure, and the arguments of his family and school seem relevant and justified to him. He has therefore reflexively considered his options and made choices aimed at avoiding a negative future scenario. It seems Sebastian's boredom with school and desire to do something different are not socially accepted as a legitimate basis to build choice on and are therefore omitted from his 'choice'. He therefore ends up endorsing a discursive understanding but he does so in a way that reflects his own preferences and understandings of an acceptable way of managing his opportunities.

Restricted Choice: 'I am not Clever Enough'

The restricted choice form of reasoning will be exemplified in Marianne's case which illustrates the management of very limited opportunities within the educational system. Marianne focuses her future plans on the practical options she sees for herself and on jobs she knows she can take on, even without education. She says:

I have considered many different things I would like to become. But then I think, 'No, that doesn't really interest me' and, 'That takes too long'. I don't want to spend enormous amounts of time on an education, becoming a doctor, for example. I can't be bothered with spending my time on that. I'm not clever enough, either.

She accounts for her lack of interest in 'long education' with an explanation of how she wants to prioritize her time. She has a feeling there are lots of interesting jobs out there but when she finds out what it takes to get this or that education, she loses interest. Besides, she is dyslexic, which she translates as 'not being clever enough'. This characterization of herself is structuring her reasoning, in the sense that she does not want to take a 'long education'. Her great passion is her pony. In the past, she says, she could not even be bothered to do her homework but this has changed during the past year because of her success with her pony. According to Marianne, her teachers also support her horse riding because:

[My] teachers have said all along that if I didn't have the horse riding, then things wouldn't go so well either...so now I've started to study a bit and so on. It starts improving just as soon as things get going at the riding school.

Marianne is the child of a mixed marriage: her mother is Danish, her father is from Turkey. Over the years, they have had disagreements about Marianne's horse riding. Her mother supports her hobby both financially and personally whereas her father is of the opinion that Marianne should invest more time in schoolwork. Her parents are both unskilled workers, her father now retired, and Marianne says of them:

I would prefer to have an education, to not be like my parents, who have no education... My big sisters have [education]: nurse and nursing assistant. So there is quite a bit of pressure.

Marianne's sense of opportunities and limitations is shaped by her family's closeness to necessity in the sense that the concrete and known possibilities are favoured and pictured as realistic in contrast to, say, becoming a doctor. Even though Marianne is aware of the advantages of having a formal education, this awareness is difficult to put into practice because of her school experience. So in practice, horse riding has proved to be her personal turning point in the sense that it offers her a notion of opportunities outside education. The most obvious opportunity is to take advantage of her success with her pony which she can ride until she turns 16. She says:

Now I have just this year left, and I'd like to make the most of it. And I would like to go as far as I can with this horse. So I'm not indifferent about school, but this is what I want right now, because I only have it for one more year. Otherwise, I can't do it.

Marianne's reasoning unfolds between a situation close to necessity and the unpredictability of her opportunities. She chooses to focus on the known, namely her pony, since it has proved to be her most reliable option, an option that also involves a future perspective. She rationalizes her priorities with reference to the positive impact her horse riding has on her schoolwork as well as to actual job possibilities. She is aware of the objective advantages of education, and she consciously postpones her engagement in formal youth education with reference to the present possibilities she has with her horse. She argues within the educational discourse even though at the moment she has difficulties seeing her own active role in it.

The cases above have demonstrated how reaching a choice that seems 'right' develops through a process of argument in which dominant views about education are adopted but also recreated and altered (see Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Jöhncke et al., 2004) and where realistic expectations for the future are engendered by present realities (Jenkins, 1992: 28). We have also seen that educational choices are influenced by understandings of structural as well as personal constraints and capacities (Andres et al., 2007: 136), as in the case with Mille who tried to assess her possibilities in education in light of her experiences in team handball. In the following, some of the questions posed in the article will be discussed.

The Right Choice, Revisited

What characterizes an educational choice? It has been argued that reasoning is a vital part of making a choice and that choice of education is socially situated and embedded in biography construction. Choosing is thus not just the act of entering one or another educational programme but rather is a reflexive process of reasoning. The cases have illustrated how young people display resourceful agency in that respect, regardless of form of reasoning. Habitual understandings of opportunities and limitations, future orientation and biographic identity processes are negotiated. As ideal types, the forms of 'unconcerned choice' and 'ambitious choice' are examples of different ways of engaging in this choice: David disconnects the question of future plans from

educational choice at this point whereas Lisa actively exhausts the possibilities in the educational system in the process of making sense of individual aspirations.

Despite strong incitements from the social and educational system to educate and thereby find education or 'activation' for everyone, some forms of reasoning answer the questions this system asks better than others. This has been illustrated in the case of Marianne who feels the educational system has little to offer in her search for answers to the question of what it is she wants to do. However, in her reasoning, horse riding is turned into an agent for her improved results in school. In the 'keeping choice open' and 'ambitious choice' forms of reasoning, focus is on how the choice is made 'in the right way' in order to reach goals in the correct manner. In the case of Sebastian, on the other hand, we have seen how personal motivation works to change choices and preferences: he reconsiders his choice in the light of other people's attitudes towards it and ends up endorsing systemic notions of a right choice. Bourdieu points to the fact that limited life choices often become naturalized, becoming part of the individual's sense of reality (Bourdieu, 1977: 164; Gillies, 2005). This is true, but the present analysis has also shown that that 'sense of reality' is acted upon in a pragmatically rational way. Sometimes, the outcome of such a process results in the endorsement of dominant views and sometimes not.

We have seen that educational choice not only concerns the rational assessment of possibilities and limitations but is also, for some, a way to manage the need for a predictable and planned future. For these individuals, therefore, choosing 'something' is the best option. This was the case for David who planned to start at vocational school even though he lacked a defined plan. Sebastian similarly chooses to 'choose something' in order to leave all doors open. Mille, on the other hand, actively postpones her choice because she cannot accept just choosing 'anything' as this would conflict with her habitual understanding of her own opportunities and ways of dealing with them.

Conclusion

Exploring how young people engage in the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education, this article contributes to an understanding of the uneven distribution of possibilities for young people to participate in the educational system in the 'right' way. It has pointed out a variety of aspects that contribute to young people's management of choice of education at this critical juncture, and the cases have illustrated differences in individuals' capacity for engagement in the educational system, based on forms of reasoning about choice. Defining 'the margins' of the educational system may prove less than fruitful in understanding differences but we have nonetheless seen that some forms of reasoning fit more neatly than others within the discourse of the educational system. Some young people, therefore, have to bend over backwards in order to benefit from the educational system. On the basis of this analysis, we can conclude that marginalization is not necessarily a simple question of whether one is or is not marginalized: rather, marginalization should be understood as a process with social inequality reflecting complex, masked webs of

feelings, practical considerations and notions of self, all of which determine one's engagement with the educational system at any given point. The inquiries into the forms of reasoning about educational choice thus show how differences in managing the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education are structured and how the 'right choice' is negotiated.

Notes

1. This project is part of a larger project, VestLiv, funded jointly by Aarhus University, Ringkjøbing Amts Sundhedsvidenskabelige Forskningsfond, Egmont Fonden, Augustinus Fonden and Helsefonden. I am thankful for discussions and inputs on earlier drafts of this article from colleagues in the VestLiv project as well as from the reviewers.
2. The VestLiv study investigates pathways to social inequality in health, focusing mainly on psychosocial determinants related to health outcomes. The cohort consists of about 3,500 respondents living in the county of Ringkjøbing, Denmark, in May 2004.
3. Henceforth referred to as 'low', 'middle' and 'high' social status.
4. In the whole VestLiv cohort 73.8 per cent reported attending eighth grade in a public school and 8.2 per cent attended eighth grade in a private compulsory schools.
5. An indication of this is that very few of those interviewed ruled out continuing their education. In contrast, others have found that among eighth grade students, 23 per cent of the boys and 14 per cent of the girls want to find a job or take a break from school after they finish ninth grade (Pless and Katznelson, 2005: 23).
6. In this article, compulsory education refers to primary- and lower-secondary education which in Denmark is compulsory for 7- to 16-year-olds. Post-compulsory youth education refers to upper-secondary education: in Danish, 'youth education'. When leaving lower-secondary education at 15 or 16 years of age, higher education lies a minimum of three years ahead; higher education is not explicitly debated in this article. Consult <http://eng.uvm.dk/> for further information about the educational system.
7. To secure anonymity, all names of interviewees used in this article have been changed.
8. This is an independent residential school at lower-secondary level for students between the ages of 14 and 18. There are about 250 of these schools in Denmark.

References

- Andres, Lesley, Adamuti-Trache, Maria, Yoon, Ee-Seul, Pidgeon, Michelle and Thomsen, Jens Peter (2007) 'Educational Expectations, Parental Social Class, Gender and Post-Secondary Attainment. A 10-Year Perspective', *Youth and Society* 39(2): 135–63.
- Archer, Louise and Leathwood, Carole (2003) 'Identities, Inequalities and Higher Education', in Louise Archer, Merryn Hutchings and Alistar Ross (eds). *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*, pp. 175–91. London and NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Ball, Stephen J., Davies, Jackie, David, Miriam and Reay, Diane (2002) "'Classification" and "Judgement": Social Class and the "Cognitive Structures" of Choice of Higher Education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23(1): 51–72.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Du Bois-Reymond, Manuela (1998) "'I Don't Want to Commit Myself Yet': Young People's Life Concepts', *Journal of Youth Studies* 1(1): 63–79.
- Giddens, Anthony (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkeley and LA: University of California Press.

- Gillies, Val (2005) 'Raising the "Meritocracy": Parenting and the Individualization of Social Class', *Sociology* 39(5): 835–53.
- Harrits, Gitte Sommer (2005) Hvad betyder klasse? En rekonstruktion af klassebegrebet med henblik på en analyse af sammenhængen mellem klasser og politisk deltagelse i Danmark. (What Does Class Mean? A Reconstruction of the Concept of Class). PhD thesis. Vol no 1 and 2. Dept. of Political Science, Aarhus University, Denmark. Politica.
- Heinz, Walther R. (2009) 'Structure and Agency in Transition Research', *Journal of Education and Work* 22(5): 391–404.
- Hodkinson, Phil, Sparkes Andrew C. and Hodkinson, Heather (1996) *Career Decision Making and Culture in the Transition from School to Work*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Hodkinson, Phil and Sparkes Andrew C. (1997) "'Classification" and "Judgement": Social Class and the "Cognitive" Structures of Choice of Higher Education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23(1): 51–72.
- Hutters, Camilla (2004) Mellem lyst og nødvendighed: en analyse af unges valg af videregående uddannelse. (Between Desire and Necessity: An Analysis of Young Peoples' Choice of Higher Education). PhD thesis. Forskerskolen i livslang læring, Roskilde Universitetscenter.
- Jenkins, Richard (1992) *Pierre Bourdieu*. London and NY: Routledge.
- Jöhncke Steffen, Svendsen, Mette Nordahl and Whyte, Susan Reynolds (2004) 'Løsningsmodeller. Sociale teknologier som antropologisk arbejdsfelt' (Models of Solutions. Social Technologies as an Anthropological Field of Work), in Kirsten Hastrup (ed.) *Viden om verden. En grundbog i antropologisk analyse*, pp. 385–407. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Lehmann, Wolfgang (2005) 'Choosing to Labour: Structure and Agency in School-Work Transitions', *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 30(3): 325–50.
- Payne, Joan (2003) *Choice at the End of Compulsory Schooling: A Research Review*. Research Report no 414, Department for Education and Skills. DfES Publications.
- Pless, Mette and Katznelson, Naomi (2007) *Unges veje mod ungdomsuddannelse*. Slutrapport, Center for Ungdomsforskning. (English: Young Peoples' Way Towards Youth Education. Final report, The Danish Centre for Youth Research, The Danish University of Education, Denmark).
- Pless, Mette and Katznelson, Naomi (2005). Niende Klasse og hvad så?: En midtvejsrapport om unges uddannelsesvalg og overgang fra grundskole til ungdomsuddannelse og arbejde, Center for Ungdomsforskning, DPU. (English: '9th grade and then what?: Halfway-report on young peoples choice of education and transition from compulsory education to youth education and work', The Danish Centre for Youth Research, The Danish University of Education.
- Rabo, Annika (1997) 'Free to Make the Right Choice?', in Cris Shore and Susan Wright (eds) *Anthropology of Policy*, pp. 83–103. London: Routledge .
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler (2002) 'Analysis of Personal Narratives', in Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research*, pp. 695–710. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Taylor, Anthea (2005) 'It's for the Rest of Your Life: The Pragmatics of Youth Career Decision Making', *Youth & Society* 39(4): 471–503.
- Walther, Andreas and Plug, Wim (2006) 'Transition from School to Work in Europe: Destandardization and Policy Trends', *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 113(Fall): 77–90.

Walther, Andreas (2007) 'Regimes of Youth Transitions', *Young* 14(2): 119–39.

Weber, Max (1949) *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

Regine Grytnes (MA anthropology) is a PhD student jointly at the Department of Occupational Health, Herning Regional Hospital, and Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research projects and publications have covered issues related to young peoples' educational choices, safety culture among young construction trainees, drug policing in open space and the workings of social policies for drug users. [email: regine.grytnes@vest.rm.dk]