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Conference Time: 10th Sept 2026, 02:42:28pm CEST

Conference Program

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Daily Overview

Session

H.03. Assembled Youths: Complex Biographies and Educational Trajectories For Uncertain Futures (1/2)

Time: **Wednesday, 02/Sept/2026: 3:00pm - 4:45pm**

Location: **Scienze Politiche (CU002): Aula XI Bis**

Convenor(s): Juan de Dios Oyarzún (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile); Aina Tarabini (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

Presentations

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Re-Framing ‘Successful’ Educational Trajectories And Subjectivities – The Role Of Structural, Discursive, And Contextual Factors In Shaping Educational Achievements

Jozef Zelinka¹, Sebastiano Benasso², Valeria Pandolfini²
1: University of Münster, Germany; 2: University of Genoa, Italy

In the paper, we analyse how subjective agency and various discursive, structural, and contextual factors intertwine in the production of inspirational or ‘success stories’ of learners. Currently, the dominant policy discourse frames education according to its quantifiable and measurable outcomes (Harris & Clayton, 2019; Ure, 2019). For learners, educational achievements have increasingly been recognised and valued based on their practical application on the labour market (e.g., as credentials, skills, competencies, qualifications etc.). This has valorised and proliferated ‘success stories’ that highlight trajectories of learners who, despite disadvantaged situations, reach notable educational achievements (Nyström et al., 2018; Bosch et al., 2021; Reynen-Woodward et al., 2025). We argue that the prevailing rhetoric of meritocracy undermines the role of discursive, structural, and contextual factors in shaping the educational trajectories of learners and foregrounds individual motivation and skills as the primary determinants of individual achievements. Against this background, the paper aims to yield new evidence on the interplay of subjective agency and various external factors in the production of ‘successful’ educational trajectories and subjectivities. The main research question reads as follows: *What factors are involved in the production of successful educational trajectories and how does subjective agency intertwine with dominant understandings of educational achievements?*

The paper is based on research findings of the EU-funded research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A multi-level analysis of (under)achievement in the life course* (CLEAR) (Agreement No. 101061155) and unfolds in three steps: *first*, we provide an overview of the conceptual underpinnings and current debates on educational quality and learning outcomes and conceptualise successful educational achievements; *second*, we analyse the role of discursive, contextual, and structural factors in shaping educational trajectories of young learners in multi-disadvantaged positions, comparing two cases of young learners from Germany and Italy; *third*, we juxtapose and contrast the findings to unveil how subjective agency and dominant framings of educational achievement collide in producing educational trajectories deemed as successful and desirable future models.

Our methodological design is informed by narrative biographical interviews with young people (18–29 years) from vulnerable positions (N=41) and by a quantitative analysis of educational, socio-economic, and employment indicators (N=51) of the countries and regions studied that provide a comprehensive account of the current developments, patterns, and sub-national trajectories. The qualitative data have been collected in the regions of Hamburg and Halle(Saale) for Germany, and Genova and Marche for Italy between the years 2024 and 2025. The quantitative data are based on Eurostat indicators from 2021.

Our findings suggest that subjective agency intertwines with various contextual factors and that successful educational trajectories cannot be decoupled from the experienced socio-economic, cultural, and discursive framings. Our findings also indicate that these factors often render educational systems complicit in reproducing initial social inequalities, hamper on the individual agency, and unequally distribute opportunities. Finally, our analyses advance the study of educational achievements and the concept of agency, which is often viewed as a monolithic subjective capacity rather than a dynamic and fluid exercise of power (Siles et al., 2024).

Making Futures in Industrial Territories: Youth Transitions between Opportunity and Social Reproduction

Juan de Dios Oyarzún
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile

This paper examines the early education-to-work transitions of young people living in highly industrialised urban and rururban territories in Chile, focusing on how institutional arrangements, territorial political economies, and socioeconomic precariousness shape the horizons through which future trajectories are imagined and enacted. In the territorial contexts studied characterised by deep levels of industrialisation (mining and forestry in the cases of this research) the relationship between schools and companies operates as a key structuring mechanism in the organisation and expectations of youth transitions. Rather than functioning as neutral pathways facilitating mobility, these institutional linkages are embedded within historically produced territorial inequalities and labour market configurations that structure the opportunities available to young people.

The analysis conceptualises these dynamics through the notion of territorial assemblages (Tamboukou, 2008b; Youdell & Armstrong, 2011), understood as the contingent yet durable configurations of institutions, economic relations, spatial arrangements, and affective dynamics that organise everyday life in industrialised territories. These assemblages are thus simultaneously productive and restrictive: they generate aspirations, expectations, and narratives of opportunity, while also reproducing structural constraints that shape the limits of social mobility.

Empirically, the paper draws on a three-year longitudinal qualitative study that follows the subjectivities and early educational-labour trajectories of 30 young people enrolled in secondary education in two industrialised territories in the country: the Chilean north, the Antofagasta region, characterized by the desert and the historical and wide presence of the copper mining industry; and La Araucanía region in the green south, the territory with the largest Mapuche indigenous population in the country, and the forestry industry. The Chilean State, the Indigenous Peoples and the Forestry industry have held a deep conflict for the ownership of the land. The research traces their experiences from their final year of secondary school through the first two years following graduation, paying particular attention to how aspirations, expectations, and decisions regarding education and work evolve during this critical transitional period.

The findings suggest that young people's expectations for the future are deeply territorialised. Their aspirations and projected trajectories are shaped not only by individual preferences or educational performance but by the specific institutional and economic configurations that organise local opportunity structures. Industrialised territories often sustain powerful discourses of development, productivity, and employment that circulate through schools, families, and local institutions, producing expectations of stable employment and upward mobility. However, these narratives frequently coexist with persistent forms of labour precarity, limited educational mobility, and highly stratified access to post-secondary opportunities. As a result, the early transitions from school to work or further education are characterised by a complex interplay between aspiration and constraint.

The analysis therefore points to the importance of understanding youth transitions not simply as individualised processes of choice and decision-making, but as outcomes produced within territorially embedded institutional and economic arrangements. By foregrounding the territorial and political-economic dimensions of youth transitions, this research contributes to broader debates on education, labour, and social reproduction in industrialised regions.

School Withdrawal Trajectories: Experiences of Alienation and Resonance among Youth

Emma Laurin

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School absence is a growing concern in Europe and beyond (Kreitz-Sandberg & Fredriksson, 2023). Research points to significant and rising levels of absenteeism and its serious consequences for young people's academic, social and mental health outcomes (Heyne et al., 2020) with the risk of absence being especially pronounced among children who lack family support and those with neuropsychiatric and other disabilities (Connolly et al., 2023; SOU 2016:94). School absence research has predominantly been conducted in psychiatry and psychology, often conceptualising school absence in terms of individual factors (Kreitz-Sandberg & Fredriksson, 2023) such as anxiety and neuropsychiatric disability. Few studies examine how broader social forces influence school absence (Kearney, Childs & Burke, 2023) or young people's own experience of school withdrawal (Forsell, 2020).

Drawing on Hartmut Rosas sociological theory on our relationship to the world this study explores resonance and alienation in educational and school withdrawal trajectories among young people. While alienation refers to a relation in which subject and the world meet each other with indifference or even hostility, resonance is a responsive, affective and bodily relation in which the subject feels affected by the world. These modes of relating to the world are, according to Rosa, influenced by the social acceleration of modern life that many times undermines resonant relationships (Rosa, 2019).

The study builds on interviews with eight young people in Sweden with experience of long-term school withdrawal. Five of the interviews were digital and three were conducted on site. They were carried out in two research projects on long-term school absence, one conducted 2021-2022. The other project started 2024 and will end 2028. Both research projects were approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

In the study school withdrawal is conceptualised as a phased process including pre-withdrawal, withdrawal, continued withdrawal and, for some young people, return to school. The findings highlight a complex interplay between forms of alienation and resonance across these phases, including attempts to foster resonance, experiences of muteness and of resonant relations within school. The results also indicate shifts from one type of resonance to another as well as from resonance in school to resonance in other social contexts such as digital environments. From a resonance perspective, school withdrawal may be interpreted as an attempt to regain control and transition towards contexts where resonance is possible, in an institutional school context experienced as alienating. While such strategies may restore a sense of control and agency, and include elements of resonance, they also risk deepening alienation and reduce exposure to potentially resonant encounters.

Incomplete Puzzles And Shallow Pedagogies: Youth Transitions In Peru's Informal Urban Settlements

Maria Balarin

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The figure of the incomplete puzzle was used by a secondary school student in the context of a recent study on educational justice (Milligan, L., Balarin, M., et al., 2025). It was the most concrete expression of a feeling of disconcertedness and disorientation, of not knowing how to articulate and understand different ideas, that has consistently appeared in my work with young people living in the vast informal settlements that surround Peru's urban spaces (Alcázar et al., 2020; Balarin, 2011; Balarin et al., 2017). Whether in relation to social, environmental, citizenship or history issues, these incomplete puzzles emerge in the context of what I have characterised as the shallow pedagogies that predominate in many Peruvian schools, especially those catering to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Balarin & Rodriguez, 2024).

Shallow pedagogies have become widespread over the past three decades, during which Peru has implemented outcomes-based curricula and active teaching methods. This has led towards a marked displacement of knowledge and educational purpose in classrooms (Biesta, 2015). Similar problems have emerged in other countries in the Global South implementing these kinds of curricular and pedagogical reforms (Allais, 2014; Hoadley, 2017; Schweisfurth, 2011).

A key characteristic of these shallow pedagogies is the profound disconnection and frequent contradiction between young people's everyday experiences, marked by precarity and injustice, and the normative ideas that they are presented with in school around citizenship, social inclusion or the role of personal effort in attaining wellbeing. Additionally, schools present young people with mostly surface, scattered and closed knowledge, without inviting them to explore, deepen or make meaningful connections (Balarin & Rodriguez, 2024; González et al., 2017). This not only limits young people's capacity for critical thinking but also their possibility of understanding complex phenomena and making sense of the world.

The presentation will explore the encounter between young people's experiences of growing up in precarious contexts and school experiences marked by shallow pedagogies. It will discuss how these experiences influence their transitions into adulthood, their understandings of citizenship, their aspirations and capacity to navigate life. The discussion will be based on findings from the JustEd Study (Milligan, L., Balarin, M., et al., 2025), which used qualitative participatory methods to explore secondary school students' learning and experiences of intercultural, transitional, gender and environmental justice and how these shape their attitudes and dispositions towards sustainable futures. It will also draw on findings from two earlier studies on marginalised citizenship (Balarin, 2011) and precarious youth transitions (Balarin et al., 2017) that provide additional support for the arguments.

Shallow pedagogies limit young people's possibilities for engaging in and generating knowledge, thereby constituting a major form of epistemic injustice at the heart of education (Fricker, 2007, 2015). The presentation will include a discussion of what it might take to establish more epistemically just pedagogies that can provide young people with the resources needed to make sense of their worlds and help them navigate their way towards complex and uncertain futures.

Unequal Trajectories, Unequal Futures: Youth Aspirations and Upper Secondary Transitions in Rural Catalonia

Mariona Farré

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

This paper aims to explore the role of space and social inequalities in shaping youth aspirations in rural Catalonia (Spain) and its consequences for their upper secondary VET choices.

Transitions to upper secondary education occur against a political backdrop that emphasises the raising, management and regulation of students' aspirations to ensure realistic choices (Hart, 2012), obscuring the highly conditioned character – by social background and educational context – of such processes (Ball et al, 2000). As Appadurai (2004) points out, the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed across different social groups. Research highlights that aspirations are mediated by students' habitus, shaping how they perceive opportunities, as well as by dominant conceptions of valued educational pathways within the system (Hart, 2012; Gale & Parker, 2018). Moreover, imagining and pursuing particular futures requires capacities conditioned by students positions and capitals.

At the same time, research has emphasized the spatial embeddedness of social and educational inequalities and the importance of place in shaping young people's biographies and identities (Farrugia, 2014). Therefore, making decisions about academic and professional futures often involves choices about (im)mobility (Finn, 2017). In this sense, mobility goes beyond the physical act of moving (Urry, 2008) and relates to individuals' imagined spatial futures (Rönnlund, 2020), which are constructed based on their sense of place belonging and their horizons for action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). This process is particularly relevant in the Catalan context where VET provision is unequally distributed and centralized, and vocational education is often devalued, considered a 'second-best' option suitable for more vulnerable students. The way in which students imagine their futures and make decisions is therefore strongly influenced by their capacity to exercise spatial reflexivity (Cairns, 2014), in a context where mobility becomes almost mandatory for successful transitions.

This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the intertwining of social and spatial inequalities in shaping educational transitions and, specifically, young people's aspirations. A single case study based on a mixed-methods design with embedded units of analysis was conducted in a rural area of Catalonia, which portrays a particular upper secondary circuit of schooling composed of different types of high schools – in terms of ownership, social composition, supply and location – and student mobility flows. A questionnaire was distributed (N=632) and 45 in-depth interviews with students in the final year of compulsory education were conducted. The analysis explores how students from different social backgrounds, gender and migrant origin construct and navigate their spatial horizons regarding education, work and place to live. First, we identify unequal patterns of upper secondary choice – between tracks and programmes within tracks – in relation to structural variables, students' place of residence and their attachment to it. Second, we analyse students' imagined futures in terms of the highest level of education they aspire to achieve, the occupations they envision and the characteristics of the place where they would like to live. Overall, this paper sheds light on how social and spatial inequalities structure youth educational trajectories.

Transnational Assembled Youths: Complex Biographies and Educational Trajectories between China and Italy

Fabiana Marchioro, Chiara Bove

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This contribution presents the first results from the analysis of data collected within an ongoing ethnographic and biographical study on the school experiences of young adults of Chinese origin who experienced a transnational childhood (Baldassar et al., 2007; Bohr & Tse, 2009; Fresnoza-Flot & Nagasaka, 2015) between China (Gao & Sacchetto, 2024; Lamas-Abraira, 2019, 2023; Liu et al., 2017) and Italy (Ardizzoni & Omodeo, 2022; Costantini, 2023; Paciocco & Baldassar, 2017). The research is situated within educational studies and engages with debates on complex biographies (Ball et al., 2013), mobile childhoods (Fresnoza-Flot & Nagasaka, 2015), the school experiences of Chinese students with migrant backgrounds (Costantini, 2023; Scolaro, 2025; Paciocco, 2018), and youth agency in contexts shaped by transnational mobility (Baldassar et al., 2014; Dreby, 2007; White et al., 2011).

The study focuses on the stories of so-called left-behind children, satellite babies (Wang, 2018), and sent-back children (Bohr & Tse, 2009), young adults who spent part of their childhood in China with grandparents or extended family members before reuniting with their parents in Italy. Its aim is to examine how their educational trajectories intertwine with their experiences within the Italian school system.

Through semi-structured biographical interviews (Bertaux, 2003; Bichi, 2022; Merrill & West, 2009) with young adults aged 18–31, the study explores how linguistic transitions, school integration processes, peer relationships, and family expectations are experienced and narrated. Particular attention is devoted to identity negotiation processes, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and the redefinition of aspirations over time – yesterday, today, and tomorrow – across transnational spaces.

Methodologically, the study adopts a student voice perspective that recognises youth agency and their active role in knowledge production (Lundy, 2007). This approach is strengthened through participant-generated visual methods, such as the Self-Portrait (Bagnoli, 2009) and the Language Portrait (Busch, 2018).

Interview analysis combines a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a biographical reading inspired by Bertaux (2003) and an analysis of identity dynamics within narratives following Demazière and Dubar (2000). Preliminary findings are interpreted through the concept of assemblage (Youdell & Armstrong, 2011), in dialogue with the ecological perspective on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and the life-course approach (Elder, 1977). From this perspective, educational trajectories are not understood as the linear outcome of structural determinants nor as the simple result of individual choices. Rather, they can be interpreted as ecological assemblages in which family dimensions (linked lives), temporal dimensions (the timing of migration), local contexts (schools, peer groups, relationships with teachers), national frameworks (educational policies), and transnational connections (family, friendship and media networks) coexist and co-constitute one another (Ball et al., 2013; Elder, 1977; Fresnoza-Flot & Nagasaka, 2015).

Preliminary findings suggest that agency, identity, and aspirations cannot be treated as decontextualised categories detached from the transnational experiences of “here” and “there”. These ecological assemblages acquire educational value when they become explicit and open to dialogue within a pedagogical perspective. The situated complexity of these life stories calls for further reflection on transnational care and education as a key issue in addressing educational inequalities.

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