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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schels, B., & Wöhrer, V. (2022). Challenges in School-To-Work Transition in Germany and Austria: Perspectives on Individual, Institutional, and Structural Inequalities. *Social Inclusion*, 10(2), 221-225. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i2.5770>

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Editorial

Challenges in School-To-Work Transition in Germany and Austria: Perspectives on Individual, Institutional, and Structural Inequalities

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Submitted: 9 May 2022 | Published: 9 June 2022

Abstract

Transitions between schools, vocational education and training (VET), and work pose important challenges for young people that influence their well-being and social positioning now and in the future. The young people themselves experience the transition phase as the formation stage of their aspirations and goals. In this process, young people are confronted with the expectations and assessments of relevant others—such as parents, teachers, employers, and career counsellors—and by the requirements that are defined in sociopolitical and institutional contexts. In these contexts, criteria of successful transitions and risky transitions worthy of special support are made relevant. German and Austrian employment-centred transition regimes are characterised by relatively high standardisation and segregation as well as a strong VET system linked to the labour market. This thematic issue brings together contributions that examine challenges in these transitions from different perspectives and related facets of social inequality. The articles address different transitions (mostly school-to-VET, but also school-to-school or unemployment to work) and their different phases: aspiration formation, changing aspirations, challenges in transitions, and concrete problems in transition processes like disconnectedness or unemployment. The articles on social inequalities are related to class, ethnicity, gender, and (dis)ability. We also place importance on balancing different methods to bring together findings from quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and participatory research.

Keywords

employment-centred transition regime; school-to-work transition; social inequality; vocational education and training; youth

Issue

This article is a part of the issue “Challenges in School-To-Work Transition: Perspectives on Individual, Institutional, and Structural Inequalities” edited by Brigitte Schels (Institute for Employment Research / University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) and Veronika Wöhrer (University of Vienna).

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1. Introduction

For decades, research on school-to-work transition (STWT) has demonstrated the formative power of this life stage in developing social inequalities over the life course (e.g., Heinz & Marshall, 2003; Johnson et al., 2011; Shanahan, 2000). The transitions between schools, vocational education and training (VET), and the labour market pose important challenges for young people

that influence their social positioning now and in the future. At the same time, these transitions have become increasingly uncertain and this is moderated, to different extents, by national institutions (e.g., Buchmann & Steinhoff, 2017; Mills & Blossfeld, 2005; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Shavit & Müller, 1998).

Given the existing broad research on STWT, this thematic issue unavoidably falls short of adequately outlining every important facet. Hence, its contribution

is made by examining how young people have met STWT challenges in the past decade, how they form their aspirations and goals, and how they are confronted with the expectations of relevant others, such as parents, teachers, career counsellors, and (potential) employers. To provide a thematic focus, the contributions all investigate STWT in Germany and Austria—two countries with a similar employment-centred transition regime where relevant institutions, in particular schools, VET, the labour market, and further support from the welfare state, primarily prepare youth for working life (Walther, 2006).

2. Institutional, Individual, and Structural Perspectives in the Context of Austria and Germany

Using the examples of Austria and Germany, we look at two countries where STWT is organised in selective and standardised tracks (Kleinert & Jacob, 2019). Key decisions are already made upon completing primary school at the age of about 10, with lasting consequences for further education and labour market positions (Bol et al., 2019). The different track types after primary school can be briefly sketched as an ideal-typical academic track and vocational tracks (Nikolai & Ebner, 2012): The academic track offers eight or nine years of upper secondary education leading to university studies; vocational tracks provide four to six years of compulsory secondary education, which is either followed by vocational education in vocational schools or by apprenticeships, both of which provide occupation-specific training. Apprenticeships combine workplace training with general education at vocational schools (the “dual system”) and lead to early labour market integration. They have been particularly well-recognised internationally for easing STWT and improving the match on the market (e.g., Kleinert & Jacob, 2019; Vogtenhuber, 2014). When comparing Austria and Germany, there are some clear differences: The German apprenticeship segment is quantitatively more important, while Austria’s school-based vocational track is more differentiated regarding occupational opportunities and attracts more young people than Germany’s. The Austrian school-based vocational system also provides direct paths to a university entrance diploma (Graf, 2016).

A smooth transition along the tracks from school to VET and employment is considered the ideal successful STWT, providing continuity through its chronological and social order (e.g., Heinz & Krüger, 2001; Walther, 2006). Such normative ideas about what the STWT should look like are powerful and formative for the sociopolitical perspective on young people. Deviations from the norm, such as unemployment or longer phases of occupational orientation, determine the sociopolitical criteria of “risky” transitions requiring special support, such as publicly funded support programs (Kohlrausch, 2012). Moreover, notions of ideal-typical tracks are also important for young people themselves. Their future orien-

tations are guided by the prevailing norms of what is expected from them and what they can expect to achieve (Walther, 2006).

Unequal transition opportunities depend on several determinants and conditions (e.g., Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Market conditions are important because the number of young people facing problems in the transition increase when the markets are tight, either at the regional level or in times of economic crises (e.g., Hillmert et al., 2017), such as the Great Recession (e.g., Schoon & Bynner, 2019) or the Covid-19 crisis (e.g., Bacher & Tamesberger, 2021). Moreover, selection procedures are important, as access to the academic or vocational tracks depends on the achieved school qualification, either because the requirements are formally regulated or as gatekeepers use qualifications as signals in selection processes (e.g., Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2019). In addition, opportunities in the STWT depend on the strength of familial resources and motives that vary across social class as well as by migration background and barriers, such as those related to health and disability, and gender differences (e.g., Achatz et al., 2022; Allait, 2019; Cousins, 1998).

Questions of success, failure, and their causes are often discussed at the policy level in simpler terms of market disadvantages versus social disadvantages than how they may appear and be subjectively experienced by youth (e.g., Allait, 2019; Walther, 2005, 2015). Political definitions may not match the young people’s definition of their situation (e.g., Escott, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2018). Thus, further research is needed to expand questions about the persistence of known inequalities.

3. The Research Perspectives of the Thematic Issue

The articles in this thematic issue assemble different research perspectives about transitions in young people’s educational and vocational paths. The contributions each address some of the multiple issues and factors that make up the STWT from the perspectives of young people. They enrich the topic by providing more depth through different perspectives according to an article’s discipline, methods, and groups of young people in focus. Therefore, we aim to sketch a picture of this life stage through the interplay of the thematic issue’s contributions.

The articles address different transitions and phases in the STWT: The transitions between school, VET, and the labour market define critical points of decision making or social positioning. Therefore, some contributions examine the situation of young people at specific transition points. For example, Pessl and Steiner (2022) examine the situation of young people with disabilities (YPWD) two years after leaving secondary education, while Patzina et al. (2022) investigate first employment. Furthermore, several contributions reflect upon the formation of aspirations and competencies before the transition to upper secondary education, as seen in Wicht

and Siembab (2022), Eberhard et al. (2022), and Klein et al. (2022). The study by Yildiz and Ohnmacht (2022) adds that formative experiences, such as discrimination, occur early in the educational career.

Moreover, the life course perspective emphasises the need for using longitudinal analyses to examine transitions as processes. Therefore, several contributions either deal with facets of stability or change in the transition, such as Mühlböck et al.'s (2022) work on occupational aspirations, Fischer-Browne's (2022) article on the compromise formation between occupational aspirations and training occupation, or Valls et al.'s (2022) research on the alignment of occupational and educational aspirations. Furthermore, some articles investigate individual developmental processes in the transition, such as Gellermann and Fuchs' (2022) work on autonomy, Fasching and Felbermayr's (2022) research on cooperation, Wintersteller et al.'s (2022) study on young people's demands, or insecurity by Thoma and Langer (2022). These studies primarily focus on agency and strategies that are developed by young people experiencing transitions.

The articles furthermore focus on different social categories: They investigate class, ethnicity, gender, and (dis)ability to emphasise social structures. By doing so, the studies enrich the literature on the lasting influence of familial background. The studies by Wicht and Siembab, Thoma and Langer, and Yildiz and Ohnmacht look at the aspirations and experiences of young people with "migration backgrounds," while Fischer-Browne shows how parental aspirations can hold children back in the transition to VET. Additional studies highlight currently under-researched social categories, like Klein and colleagues, who focus on incomplete families. Likewise, YPWD or health problems are important groups who have received attention in political discussion, but where evidence remains limited. Fasching and Felbermayr, as well as Pessl and Steiner, focus on YPWD, while the multifaceted consequences of health and sociocognitive well-being are broadly addressed by Patzina and colleagues. The "disconnected youth" is another important group that Gellermann and Fuchs examine; by definition, this group exists outside of institutional settings and is thus also hard to reach. Other contributions that look at young people who deviate from the standard transition include the study by Mühlböck and colleagues on the young unemployed and research by Wintersteller and colleagues on participants in publicly funded support measures for early school leavers. In contrast to these perspectives on disadvantaged youth, Eberhard and colleagues show that deviations from the norm may also mean that youth with higher social backgrounds aspire for relatively low-status occupations.

The thematic issue pays attention to balancing different methods, bringing together findings from quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, ethnography, and participatory research. The contrasting research perspectives can be used to critically reflect on norms

and expectations in the STWT. While it is important to uncover whether social categories translate into different probabilities of success, it is also necessary to understand underlying subjective experiences when ascribing categorisations of "risk groups" to young people or expectations of their success. While, for example, the quantitative study by Wicht and Siembab identifies that having a migration background makes a difference in gender(atypical) occupation choice, qualitative studies by Yildiz and Ohnmacht reflect the construction of migration background in the school context and Thoma and Langer carve out the contextual variations of immigrant insecurity. A further complementary approach can be seen in Pessl and Steiner, whose quantitative analysis demonstrates career disadvantage factors amongst YPWD, whereas the participatory study by Fasching and Felbermayr shows how this group of young people become active agents of transitions. While Gellermann and Fuchs conducted narrative interviews and analyse what factors contribute to the disconnectedness of youth from educational and training institutions, Wintersteller and colleagues involve young early school leavers in the research and describe their demands for educational and training contexts to be more inclusive of diverse life courses and needs.

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