

“What’s my thing?” – Young people’s upper secondary level educational choices and gendered paths

Jenni Lahtinen, Tommi Hoikkala & Sinikka Aapola-Kari, Finnish Youth Research Society

Young people consider the push and pull factors of their educational choices in the contexts of their individual life situations.

Gender segregation in education and working life is exceptionally strong in Finland. Differentiation of girls and boys into separate fields already begins when they transition from comprehensive school to upper secondary level education. The Breaking down the barriers project (Purkutalkoot in Finnish) has studied young people’s educational choices related to this transition and the underlying factors. The goal of the project is to mitigate and dismantle gender segregation in education and working life by producing data on phenomena related to segregation, gendered attitudes to occupations, young people’s perceptions of equality and the process of making education choices. The researchers adopted a multimethodological approach to the topic, using qualitative and quantitative data and previous literature.

Project’s recommendations

Because a wide range of factors at the individual, social and organisation level influence educational and occupational ambitions, both political and practical measures in education, working life, youth work and leisure activities are needed to dismantle the segregation.

1. A nationally coordinated project should be established that links working life and businesses with education organisers into a regional strategic collaboration aiming at dismantling segregation.
2. An R&D project for counselling and training in counselling should be launched which will comprehensively develop counselling provided at all levels of education, employment offices, One-Stop Guidance Centers and other organisations offering guidance services.

3. Cooperation between educational institutions and guardians should be strengthened to diversify young people's choices.
4. Dismantling segregation, and equality and equal opportunities should be introduced as themes throughout the report on educational policy, the report on gender equality, the accessibility plan for higher education and the project to develop continuous learning.
5. Periods of work experience should be utilised more actively to dismantle gendered attitudes to occupations.
6. Varied leisure activities that are free of gender stereotypes should be supported for children and young people in basic education both through schools and outside of educational institutions.
7. The media and others involved in providing communications should be encouraged to include more varied professional role models in the content they produce.
8. A long-term media campaign should be created that dismantles stereotypes related to gender and other differences in a way that appeals to young people.
9. In order to dismantle segregation and increase gender equality and equal opportunities, more research is needed that is then incorporated into practical work and political decision-making.

Literature review

Several theories and approaches to explain segregation have emerged that differ from one another based on the premises of their philosophy of science and whether they attempt to explain segregation from the perspective of the individual, society or organisations. The approach selected has an impact on the way in which segregation is interpreted and the opinions on what, if at all anything, should or could be done about segregation.

Gendered education and labour markets and gender pay gaps have formed as a result of a long historical development process. Multifaceted power relations, political interests and symbolism are related to the differentiation, societal appreciation and salaries of men's and women's jobs and it is not possible to resolve these pay gaps or segregation without understanding the connections between these.

Perceptions of gender and gender-suitable occupations still follow traditional boundaries. Gender role assumptions related to childcare and more broadly to caring in particular still seem to exist and steer men and women into different fields. Regarding the formation of young people's perceptions of occupations, the literature highlights the significance of professional role models and the images related to them.

The methods of influencing segregation in the context of Finland and Europe comprise numerous education and labour policy measures, research and development projects and measures to promote equality implemented at schools and workplaces. Problems with these methods seem to be the distribution and introduction of good practices and, on the other hand, the implementation, follow-up and impact assessment of the measures suggested in the projects.

Factors associated with untypical choices

Young people make the most gender-typical choices when they transition from comprehensive school to vocational upper secondary education. Fields of vocational education are indeed very gendered and there are also gendered pockets within those fields that seem to have an equal gender distribution, which further emphasises the gender segregation in education. Untypical choices made by boys focus narrowly on the fields of healthcare and social services, where the paramedical competence area is one of these above-mentioned masculine pockets. However, untypical choices made by girls are spread out over several fields. Untypical choices are more common in older age groups for both men and women. Irrespective of gender, an immigrant background seems to increase the likelihood that a young person will choose the female-dominated care sector, which raises the question: are young people's individual capabilities taken into consideration sufficiently? In particular if a parent of the same gender makes an untypical educational choice, this is a strong predictor that the child will also make an untypical choice. Analysis also shows that young people's choices seem to depend on what is on offer in the regions' education and labour markets. Young people who engage in leisure activities that are considered untypical are more likely to make untypical educational choices.

Young people's perceptions of equality

Young people in Finland consider gender equality in society to be an important and positive matter, and this view is clearly supported by the vast majority. They would like to see the equality increase in the future. Young people consider the gender segregation in occupational fields to be a problem to some extent. Over one half of young women but only one third of young men support the mitigation of gender segregation. Though the vast majority of young people widely support gender equality, a significant share still think that childcare is primarily the responsibility of women. Some young people also believe that gender has relevance for the expertise in different fields. According to surveys, equality at educational institutions is relatively good, but gender-based harassment, bullying and discrimination, which diminish equality, still occur.

Young people's educational choices and gendered perceptions of occupations

Young people's educational choices are processes in which the following factors are significant: personal success at school and perception of own aptitudes; friends, family and the family's resources; hobbies; social and cultural phenomena, structures and practices existing locally and socially; and regional factors. These factors form the contexts of the young people's *socialisation landscapes*, which are present when they consider the *push and pull factors in upper secondary level fields of education*. One field may be attractive and pull the young person towards it, while another might push them away. Different factors in the young people's own social environments are emphasised in varying ways in their narratives.

The consideration of push and pull factors may be a conscious process or an unconscious process that is poorly verbalised, or something precisely undefined that falls somewhere in between. Though some young people make long-term decisions on their educational choices that aim towards a certain occupation, many decide on their next place of study based on rather rapid and superficial impressions. Gender is usually such a self-evident factor when young people make their educational choices that it is not even verbalised.

School guidance counselling is a significant part of the process of making an educational choice. Based on interviews with students it seems that counselling practices are based excessively on the future outlooks considered typical for genders. Good practices in counselling that recognises diversity that have been produced in various projects have not become rooted in the foundations of counselling. All too often use of these practices is currently dependent on whether individual teachers and guidance counsellors are interested in using them.

Familiarisation with occupational practices and work experience in occupational tasks are taken into account in the consideration of push and pull factors in occupational fields. Gender-based perceptions and operational practices are still widespread at workplaces and educational institutions and may impact young people's educational ambitions, employers' salary practices and the distribution of individual work tasks. The results of the project reveal that prejudices and gender-based harassment experienced by boys and men at school and the workplace should be identified better.

Further information:

Researcher Jenni Lahtinen, Finnish Youth Research Network
jenni.lahtinen@youthresearch.fi

Research Professor Tommi Hoikkala, Finnish Youth Research Network
tommi.hoikkala@youthresearch.fi

Research Director Sinikka Aapola-Kari, Finnish Youth Research Network
sinikka.aapola-kari@youthresearch.fi

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Chair of the steering group:

Opetusneuvos Sanna Hirsivaara
OKM, Korkeakoulu- ja tiedepolitiikan osasto
sanna.hirsivaara@minedu.fi

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