

The Role of Contexts in Educational and Employment Transitions and Pathways of Young People

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Abstract

Young people’s educational and employment pathways are shaped by the social contexts in which they are embedded. While past research has often emphasized individual characteristics, this thematic issue highlights the decisive role of contextual factors—including regional disparities, institutional arrangements, and socio-economic structures—in influencing opportunities and transitions. Drawing on national and comparative perspectives, the contributions examine how educational systems, labour markets, and regional and local environments affect schooling outcomes, vocational training access, aspirations, and early career trajectories. Special attention is given to vulnerable groups such as refugee students, young women, and persons with disabilities, showing how contexts structure (dis)advantages and cumulative inequalities. Together, these studies offer valuable insights for research and policymaking. The findings stress the importance of targeted policy interventions addressing contextual disparities, curriculum reforms, and inclusive measures for disadvantaged groups.

Keywords

career entry; contexts; education system; labor market; pathways; transitions; youth

1. Introduction

Social contexts highly structure individual chances for favourable outcomes in education and employment. For young people, spatial, institutional, and socio-economic contexts can either facilitate or complicate their educational pathways and achievements, transitions from school to work, or early career outcomes. Because early (dis)continuities can yield cumulative (dis)advantages for employment trajectories, they are pertinent for individual social positioning across the life course and thus contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities.

While research has often emphasized personal characteristics, skills, and agency, this thematic issue highlights the decisive role of contexts. The articles presented here explore how various contextual characteristics influence young people's educational and employment transitions and pathways. Drawing on national and comparative perspectives, they address key dimensions such as regional disparities, institutional arrangements and policies in educational systems, labour market structures, and social inequalities, offering valuable insights to better understand and thus improve educational and employment outcomes.

2. Conceptualizing Social Contexts and Their Impact

Throughout sociology's history, contexts have been integral in analysing how individuals are embedded within collectives, environments, or social settings. Social contexts provide opportunities and constraints, shaping actions, choices, and outcomes (Coleman, 1990; Merton, 1995). They are defined in terms of space and time as temporally organized physical environments that surround or frame interactions. This means that actions and interactions occur in places (e.g., schools, companies, etc.) and, depending on the place and historical time, conditions for actions vary considerably (Giddens, 1984). A special case of such places is a territory with institutions that guarantee certain rights and restrict agency within a delimited space based on authority and objectified legal orders.

A key analytical tool here is the idea of contextual properties, which describe how aggregate-level characteristics (e.g., city-wide economic prosperity) affect individual outcomes independently of individual attributes (Lazarsfeld & Menzel, 1961; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Social contexts can also catalyse the impact of individual resources and promote a cumulation of (dis)advantages, which may, therefore, unfold distinct mechanisms and effects on individuals' educational and career chances. They can be of particular importance for youngsters who often have fewer resources given their age and usually depend on their family's resources, which makes it potentially more difficult for them to change from a less to a more favourable social context. Especially in the case of education, young people (and their families) are often exposed to institutionalised contexts and policies that may restrict agency under threat of legal sanctions (Kohli, 1985).

School contexts have been widely shown to impact the educational achievements of students (Dreeben & Barr, 1988; Harker & Tymms, 2004). Regarding access to vocational education and training (VET) and employment, companies, markets, and national economies (and their regulations) serve as essential contexts affecting social closure and access to (aspired) training opportunities and occupations. For young people, school-to-work transitions and transitions into stable employment are particularly influenced by contextual properties such as insider-outsider market structures or the type of market economies (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Brzinsky-Fay, 2007).

3. Overview of Contributions

3.1. *Schooling and Educational Pathways*

The foundations for successful placement in the labour market are laid during school years. School-leaving qualifications, shaped not only by personal or familial factors but also by contextual conditions, decisively influence access to the training market, as the contributions by Cantalini et al. (2025) and Will and Becker (2025) to this thematic issue show.

Cantalini et al. (2025) examine regional disparities, geographical marginality, and educational pathways in Italy, focusing on variations between central and marginal areas in high school enrolment, dropout rates, and academic track placement. Their findings challenge the assumption that geographical marginality always leads to adverse outcomes. In marginal areas of the North, non-enrolment in five-year secondary programs is often offset by a higher prevalence of enrolment in three-year vocational schools. In the South of Italy, though, geographical marginality appears to have a protective effect as students have lower dropout rates and higher chances of enrolling in the academic track than their peers in central areas. The authors' nuanced analysis underscores the complexity of regional influences on educational choices.

Will and Becker (2025) analyse municipal factors and the schooling of refugee students in Germany, focusing on a specific group of students. Their study shows that while the municipality's resources and experience with immigration influence school placement, the overall impact of local factors is relatively small. This finding raises important questions about how local contexts and municipal autonomy shape educational opportunities for newly arrived (young) refugees.

3.2. *Educational and Occupational Aspirations*

Understanding how young people develop aspirations is crucial for ensuring equitable school-to-work transitions, as the contributions of Sendzik et al. (2025) and Böhle et al. (2025) show.

Sendzik et al. (2025) explore the influence of educational policy on major choice in higher education through differences between school curricula across German federal states. Their findings suggest that increasing compulsory instruction in civic education and economics has a modest but positive effect on related major choices regarding the further educational path, specifically university majors. However, for computer science, the results are inconclusive, showing the need for further research on how policy interventions shape long-term educational trajectories.

Böhle et al. (2025), in contrast, focus on family, peers, and role model interventions. Their contribution examines how vocational role model effects unfold in different social contexts students are embedded in, potentially enabling or constraining intervention effects. According to their results, firstly, a unique encounter with vocational role models in class is, on average, related to increased occupational aspirations for the presented VET occupation, also against the backdrop of the long-term influence of peer and parental contexts. Secondly, vocational role model intervention also has an effect against the backdrop of the long-term influence of peer and parental contexts, even in contexts that convey strong parental and peer norms.

3.3. Accessing Training Opportunities

Once young people have finished school (successfully or unsuccessfully) and decided on their further educational moves, the next step is to secure a position in higher education or VET.

If the decision to aim, for example, for an apprenticeship has been made, the question is how personal preferences and given possibilities interact. Hoffmann's (2025) study on adaptations in VET seekers' mobility willingness shows how regional opportunity structures affect young people's willingness to relocate to find a company willing to award a VET training place. Using longitudinal data, the study finds that high-status aspirations for VET consistently drive greater mobility willingness, mostly independent of search duration or the regional availability of occupations aligned with their aspirations. In contrast, VET seekers with lower status aspirations are less willing to relocate, but adjust their mobility willingness, particularly with decreasing availability of matching occupations or increasing search duration.

Meyer (2025) explores whether young refugee women decide to enter vocational training. Her study on refugee women's transition to VET in Germany examines how gender norms and human capital endowments affect refugees' chances of entering vocational education. Surprisingly, the study finds that neither prior education nor gender role attitudes nor having children significantly predict participation in VET, while having a partner is associated with substantially lower chances. This suggests that broader social and structural factors, rather than individual characteristics, are key to understanding refugee women's educational transitions.

3.4. School-to-Work Transitions in a Comparative Perspective

Comparisons between countries offer valuable insights into the effects of the cultural, political, societal, and legal amalgam that countries or nations represent. Two contributions to this thematic issue addressing school-to-work transitions present cross-national comparisons.

Tomaszewski et al. (2025) provide a cross-national comparison of socio-economic and gender differences in post-secondary pathways in the UK, Germany, and Australia. Their analysis reveals that parental education significantly shapes post-secondary transitions, while the gender impact differs across countries. These findings underscore the need for targeted policies to support low-SES youth and promote gender equity in education and employment.

Blanck et al. (2025) investigate labor market entry trajectories of persons with disabilities in Europe, offering a comparative perspective on school-to-work transitions. According to their findings, young people with disabilities do not necessarily transition more slowly into employment, but they face higher instability and exclusion. Institutional support structures facilitate more inclusive transitions, emphasizing the importance of policy interventions to enhance sustainable labour market integration.

3.5. Unemployment Scarring and Early Career Outcomes

Rocky school-to-work transition processes, characterized by unemployment and education–job mismatch spells, can have long-lasting scarring effects on young people. However, the mechanisms that either foster

or prevent unemployment scarring are underinvestigated. Hänni and Kriesi (2025) examine unemployment scarring in early careers to fill this gap, focusing on the interplay between individual skills and labour demand on post-unemployment outcomes. Their study finds that general skills and strong, status-adequate labour demand reduce the risk of downward mobility. In contrast, occupation-specific skills help individuals exit unemployment quickly but increase the risk of status loss. These findings underline the long-term implications of skill specialization and job market structures.

4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Collectively, these studies highlight the key role of social contexts in shaping young people's educational and employment transitions. They provide a multifaceted perspective of young people's challenges, spanning regional disparities, municipal policies, educational system structures, labor market conditions, and persistent social inequalities. By examining diverse populations, including young women, refugee students, and persons with disabilities, the contributions illuminate key mechanisms such as vocational role model interventions, mobility for training opportunities, and long-term consequences of unemployment scarring.

Several key implications emerge from this research. First, addressing regional context disparities requires targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to education and sustainable employment opportunities for young people and to promote their achievement and completion of targeted educational pathways. Second, curriculum reforms should be carefully designed and embedded to align with long-term educational objectives and outcomes. Third, policies aimed at supporting disadvantaged groups, such as refugee women and individuals with disabilities, should especially account for both structural barriers and individual agency.

Future research should continue to decode further the mechanisms and the complex interactions between individual aspirations and agency, institutional settings, and broader socio-economic contexts. By adopting a contextualized perspective, scholars and policymakers can develop more effective strategies to support young people's transitions and promote social inclusion in education and employment.

This thematic issue is valuable to the ongoing discourse on educational and employment pathways. It emphasizes the role of contexts in shaping young people's trajectories. We hope thus to inspire further research and informed policymaking in this critical area.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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