Article

Educational Transitions in War and Refugee Contexts: Youth Biographies in Afghanistan and Austria

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Abstract
This article addresses educational transitions under conditions of multiple insecurities. By analyzing empirical data of two research projects with youths in Afghanistan and refugee students in Austria, we show how young people make sense of the social and educational inequalities they encounter on their educational pathways within different national, socio-political, and institutional contexts. We present in-depth analyses of two cases to elaborate how young people in different parts of the world conceive of their futures when basic security needs are not met, and how they make sense of the social and educational inequalities they face during their transition processes. After living through repeatedly fractured perspectives, young people have to make sense of their biographical experiences and continuously (re)design their plans while facing uncertain futures. In the Afghan Youth Project, we reconstructed a collective—and morally charged—biographical orientation of future plans. This orientation can also be understood as a critical response to persistent fragility and inequality and suggests an imagined generational hold and sense of belonging. In the Austrian project Translating Wor(l)ds, we reconstructed continuing experiences of educational exclusion, marginalization, and devaluation in different migration societies throughout refugee routes. Educational transitions, which can be challenging for all young people, take on special relevance under these conditions. Combining biographical and socio-psychological research perspectives allows us to reconstruct educational processes as cumulative, non-linear processes and to reveal the ambiguities, contradictions, and ruptures woven into them, as well as the subjects' constructions of sense and agency.

1. Introduction

As a decisive period in young people's lives, school-to-work transitions have received increasing scholarly attention both in the Global South and North in past decades (Bradley & Nguyen, 2004; Shehu & Nilsson, 2014; Unt et al., 2021). Among the main social inequalities described for transitions in the Global South are the lack of paid jobs, the concentration of skilled jobs in urban areas, ethnic and gender discrimination (Nilsson, 2019), as well as differences in private or public school attendance (Calvès et al., 2013). Educational processes in fragile states, such as Afghanistan, are steeped in general insecurity, violent attacks on schools, corruption, and weak governance, thereby including educational institutions in the surrounding political conflict (Pherali & Sahar, 2018). This makes educational pathways, and thus also transition processes, especially challenging for

girls in particular (Arooje & Burridge, 2020). However, educational systems in the Global North, where political and social circumstances are far more stable and secure, such as in Austria, are shaped by exclusion processes as well, albeit in a more subtle way (Husny & Fasching, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2021). This particularly applies to young refugees who are often confronted with uncertain residence status, discriminatory perceptions, and a lack of viable labor market perspectives (Bešić et al., 2020; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Therefore, in contrast to approaches that focus on "job-skill mismatches" (Bandara, 2019) and thus suggest a deficit-oriented individualistic perspective on the transition into the workforce, critical social science perspectives pay attention to political, societal, institutional, and structural levels, which (re)produce inequality (e.g., Dahmen, 2021; Waechter et al., 2009). Such perspectives are directed at various dimensions of inequality (e.g., gender, race, language, age, religion), which—alone and in their intersections—can lead to exclusions, especially in the face of transition.

While the sociopolitical frameworks and institutional structures that shape educational trajectories have been extensively researched, little is known about the experiences of youths themselves. Our article addresses this gap and explores young people's experiences with and views on educational and school-to-work transitions under conditions of insecurity. The research findings presented in this article emerge from a shared reflection based on two independent studies—one undertaken with youth in Afghanistan (Langer et al., 2019, 2021) and the second conducted in Austria with refugee students from Afghanistan and Syria (Alpagu et al., 2019a, 2019b; Dausien et al., 2020). While both projects had a wider focus on youth and education, in this article we concentrate on experienced and anticipated transition processes.

In the following sections, we elaborate on the theoretical and methodological framework, outline each project in its context, and analyze selected empirical data from both projects. A comparative discussion leads to the concluding section.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

We draw on a coalescence of biographical research (West et al., 2009) and critical social psychology (Keupp, 2016) for the analyses presented in this article. Both share the assumption that biographies do not have an ontological status but must be seen as social constructions (Fischer & Kohli, 1987) that allow us to analyze how political, social, and institutional processes are experienced by individuals, thereby focusing on the interconnection of social structures and the respective individual engagement with them (Kühn, 2014). Educational experiences are thus interpreted in their relation to the respective institutional and sociopolitical frameworks. Biographical theories are particularly well suited

to reconstruct educational trajectories as cumulative and non-linear processes (Dausien et al., 2016) that are shaped by ambiguities, contradictions, and ruptures, especially in transnational and migratory contexts (Siouti, 2017). Critical social psychology contributes a perspective to this regarding individuals' struggles with these ambiguities, contradictions, and ruptures (Keupp, 2016), and thereby highlights the significance of educational experiences for individual and group-related identity constructions, senses of coherence, and social belonging (Bainbridge, 2018; Wexler et al., 2005). Both unite again in the understanding of "biographization" as individual narrative processing and meaningful linking of events and experiences, as well as their implications for the construction of sense and agency. Agency, being a key concept in both approaches, is conceptualized here following Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963):

> [As a] temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its "iterational" or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a "projective" capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a "practical-evaluative" capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

Methodologically, the outlined theoretical framework allows us to understand the process of creation, reproduction, and transformation of educational transitions as decisive social phenomena, as well as the courses of action and the meanings actors assigned to their experiences at different times in their lives (Rosenthal, 2004). Since biographies consist of stratifications of experiences organized in sequential order, the narratives have to be examined in light of important transitions or turning points in one's life course, such as migration or traumatic events, educational transitions, or shifts in important relationships (Schütze, 1983). Narratives, however, are never developed free of context and thereby call for the integration of a positioning analysis as to how the characters are relationally positioned within reported events, how narrators position themselves towards an audience, for instance towards an interviewer, and how narrators position themselves vis-à-vis dominant social and political discourses into our methodological approach (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

For our analysis, we chose Afghanistan and Austria as contrasting, yet corresponding contexts. As a country where people have been facing manifold challenges due to decades-long and ongoing violent conflicts and wars involving devastating consequences for the social fabric, fragile political institutions, and a lack of social trust, sharp social (and not least gender) inequalities where educational and labor-market opportunities are severely limited, Afghanistan, on the one hand, is predestined for a study on educational transitions under conditions of multiple insecurities. While people in Austria,

on the other hand, have lived in peace since the end of World War II and can draw on a wide range of educational resources, the country also has one of the most restrictive asylum laws in Europe and various educational measures have been criticized as disadvantageous for refugee students. The insecurities we reconstruct regarding this case can contribute to a more nuanced picture of educational transitions in migration societies that are often accompanied by an uncertain residence status, socioeconomic marginalization, experiences of stigma, and structural (and sometimes even very concrete xenophobic) violence. In view of recent dynamics of forced migration to Europe, both contexts are nevertheless linked as young refugees from war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Syria represent important—and highly stigmatized—groups coming to Austria to seek protection and develop new prospects for the future. The Afghan "case" may provide insights into the difficult educational experiences that fuel these dynamics, while the Austrian one may help understand how young refugees cope with their educational expectations and adjust them to unfamiliar (and sometimes inhospitable) institutional environments.

3. The Research Projects

The two recently completed research projects we refer to in this article explore education-related experiences of youth in the context of sociopolitical insecurities. While the projects significantly differ in respect to their geopolitical context, they both rely on interpretative approaches to capture the complex subjective struggles with the manifold challenges of educational transitions.

3.1. The Afghan Youth Project

Building on a 2015 preliminary investigation, we designed a qualitative study, which aimed at understanding how young people deal with multiple insecurities while navigating their everyday lives and developing visions, plans, and skills for their future. Data collection took place in 2016 and 2017 in the northern provinces of Balkh and Kunduz. We decided on these two provinces based on their relative differences in terms of the prevalence of violence, socio-spatial structure (especially the distribution in urban and rural areas), and demographic composition, which, as contrasting cases, promised to deliver insightful results.

The multi-method design included semi-structured interviews, projective essays, and drawings related to the subjects' biographies. We interviewed 52 children and adolescents between the ages of 11 and 21 (28 individual interviews, six group interviews, two focus-group discussions). Sampling took place in a contrastive manner to depict the diverse environments that, regarding education, ranged from young women who had never received any formal education to young boys carrying out demanding physical work since childhood (e.g., as

construction workers, wheelbarrow drivers), to youths who had already begun studying at university. The interviews were conducted by local peer researchers in Dari or Pashtu, who in most cases separated participants by gender. Some interviews were conducted by the German team members, either in English or with interpreters. In addition to the interviews, we asked the participants to make drawings before starting and between two thematic parts of the interview ("draw and tell" technique) as ice breakers in order to ease communication, serve as guidelines for subsequent questions, and, from a trauma-theory perspective, retrace experiences that could not be expressed verbally. We also collected 171 projective essays in the Balkh province by asking children and youths to write about their life expectations within the next 10 years (Gillespie & Allport, 1955; Langer et al., 2021). Drawings were included at the end of the writing process ("write and draw" technique). Data collection took place at different education-related facilities (public and private schools, orphanages), with the consent of the regional Ministry of Education. The participants were between the ages of 10 and 23. Considering where the data was collected, it may not come as a surprise that the stories and drawings have a particular emphasis on the (anticipated) transitional phase after school.

To identify key themes, their connections, and respective patterns on the material's manifest level, we carried out (MAXQDA-supported) thematic analyses of the interviews and essays (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on their English translations; a similar thematic coding was applied to the drawings. Key themes that emerged from the analyses and which are relevant for the present article include, e.g., "serving Afghanistan" and "education is key." To gain a deeper understanding of latent meanings inscribed in the material, we also interpreted selected interviews scenically in regular interpretation group sessions (Bereswill et al., 2010), from which we formed empirically condensed research vignettes of the cases (Langer, 2016); a free association technique used by in-depth interpretation groups was applied to the drawings only cautiously, however, to avoid over-interpretation, and was always linked to the complementary interpretation of the essays and interviews. Interim results were discussed with the local peer researchers during each subsequent visit for a transcultural communicative validation of our interpretations.

3.2. The Austrian Project Translating Wor(l)ds

The second project was conducted in Austria from 2017 to 2019. The ethnographic project aimed to explore the biographical experiences and competencies of refugee students, following their arrival in Austria and during the adjustment period in their new social and educational context (Dausien et al., 2020). We collaborated with a so-called "transition class"—more concretely with 16 students (four female, 12 male, aged 14 to 18 years) who were born in Syria or Afghanistan and had followed

different migration paths. The students came from different linguistic, cultural, and religious environments as well as from different social classes and family constellations. They brought with them different, individual life experiences and life plans as well. Throughout the project, which we designed with two school teachers, we viewed school as a space of belonging and education—one that can open up or close off possibilities of articulation. Students were addressed as competent subjects with multiple experiences translating between different languages and social worlds, which they explored together with researchers. The school was not always conducive to working with biographical methods because of its rigid framework; on the other hand, the school setting opened up opportunities for us to meet with students on a regular basis. During twelve workshops over one school year, we worked with various methods and media that were intended to enable, but not enforce, autobiographical narratives. We used approaches from adult education and pedagogical biography work (Behrens-Cobet, 1999) and adapted them to work with youths. At the beginning of the school year, we worked mainly with written texts because the students felt more confident writing than speaking in front of the group. At a later point, we worked with different kinds of moderated storytelling sessions, in which the students had the opportunity to tell stories about a specific topic in a small circle. Since the need to tell a consistent and "true" life story is inextricably linked to interviews in the context of asylum procedures and involves the risk of retraumatization (Thielen, 2009), we did not conduct biographical narrative interviews during the project. Instead, we worked with different formats of "small stories" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) that revolved around arriving in Austria, educational experiences, and future plans. In addition, we listened for spontaneous narratives beyond methodological guidance and gave them space. Only towards the end of the project, when we had established a mutual basis of trust, did we ask some students for a biographical interview.

4. Struggling With School-To-Work Transition: Selected Case Studies From the Projects

Interpretive research has a particularly insightful strength of presenting its findings by means of in-depth interpretations of single cases (Abkhezr et al., 2018; Diefenbach, 2009; Lewis, 2011). We will therefore elaborate on the cases of Gul's and Sami's stories as selections from our two projects. Although the cases are not representative of the experiences of "the youth" we worked with, they paradigmatically demonstrate the complex reasoning surrounding education in the face of multiple insecurities, which is omnipresent in our empirical material.

4.1. Gul Afshan's Story (Afghan Youth Project)

At the time of the interview, in the summer of 2016, Gul Afshan was 19 years old. She lived in a household of nine with her parents, two sisters, and five brothers in a remote rural area in the Balkh province. In addition to the family's precarious financial situation with only one brother being able to provide a bit of food for the family, she stressed the fragile safety conditions in her district, especially for women:

> Not…only during [the] night but also during [the] day, [it] is not secure, our residence is quite far from the city…and it is an insecure area…[and] there are noticeboards on the road saying: The place for women is either [the] home or [the] grave.

When asked to tell something about herself, Gul seemed to hesitate:

> What could I say about my personal living….I mean, how could I tell, tell about [the] education that I did not have, only to some extent reading in literacy courses….By reading Qur'an I have learnt something and I am hopeful for the day when security prevail[s] and life gets better so then, like others, I am able to study and help people.

She obviously struggles with a lack of formal education and only had marginal access in religious contexts. As a precondition for learning, however, she calls upon peace. In addition, an aspect of solidarity emerges: When she is finally educated, Gul aims to help others.

Our peer researcher Naseera interviewed Gul at a Red Crescent hospital where she volunteered. The interview's location is significant considering that the school-to-work transition in Afghanistan is essentially gendered, even before the Taliban took over power again in summer 2021. Gul was urged to quit secondary school by her father a few months before the interview was conducted:

> When I was taken out from lessons, it was due to the fact that people would gossip about me, that the daughter of so and so studies, and this is very much painful and disturbs me a lot because a girl is also a living being and has the right to education; but our people may be backward in thinking because they think that girls should not [leave their] homes….That day when my father told [me] that, afterwards, you will not go out to learn because people talk to me about you, that day it is still a sour memory for me.

By inextricably linking her argument that a girl is "also a living being" to the right to education, she interprets education as a human right. The gendered dimension of educational transitions also becomes evident in the next section when Gul reports meetings she organized with other girls from the neighborhood to practice reading. After the neighborhood found out, their meetings were forbidden. One of her friends would not comply and was beaten by her father and forbidden to read. Gul describes this as a "type of heartbreaking-violence."

Gul links violence to the prohibition of going to school. She attributes the lack of respect for women in the public sphere to a general mindset in her community and criticizes men for not yet understanding that women are just as much a part of the nation. Through reference to Allah, Gul stresses that women are valuable on an existential level. She sees her volunteer work in public health awareness outreach as a key resource for self-education. It enables contact with other people outside the family, helps her feel meaningful in and for the community, and provides her a source of self-worth and self-efficacy. Education is central to Gul's narrative because it is a means of entering a society of people who treat her as an equal. She sees it as the pre-condition of being able to contribute something meaningful to society, through serving her community and nation as a valuable, honorable person. Gul has tried to access this world and fulfill this task in different ways, both through formal education and through her work for the Red Crescent as an attempt at informal education. Subsequently, Gul says that the priority of every Afghan is gaining security, which is linked to an in-school education. Many men are against the idea of women going to school, and even more to work, but Gul says that these men have a low level of education. Therefore, she sees nothing left but to pray to Allah that, at some point, the country's education level will be high enough that people will think openly (tolerantly) and that the distinction between genders in access to education and work will disappear. Gul says she has "a hope from Allah that a day comes that no one is left illiterate in our country because when everyone is literate then their thoughts are open."

This movement of thought is promising, but while education is a hopeful prerequisite for liberal and human attitudes, it in no way guarantees them—and recent developments have shown how fragile alleged educational achievements are. Gul sees the lack of opportunities for higher education as one main reason for young people to flee Afghanistan:

> But InshAllah one day they might think about that, [that] without their own country no other country can become their country, and so they will return and we will build our country and would have a stable living.

Here, strong ambivalences rooted in Gul's reality become clear. She invokes a possible future based on wishes and hopes—a future, however, that cannot be hers. And although leaving the country to access higher education in Europe might be an option, returning to Afghanistan educated and well-trained is only a temporary solution for its development.

The striking element in her account is the solidarity she hopes her generation will show for Afghanistan, which is rooted in collective, shared experiences of suffering. Towards the end of the interview, she elaborates on her dream to become a poet and give voice to people's pain, especially women's, and to inspire people:

> By Allah, probably one day I become something. When you ask anyone what [they] want to be, [they] say: I want to be a doctor, an engineer, and so on, but I want to become a poet, despite [how] much time is passed, in fact I am not hopeless. I want from Allah to become a poet so as to write down and express the pain of people and especially of women and by reciting them so the people are inspired and consider valuing each other.

Does she believe her dream will come true?

> Yeah, it is hard, if there was not any difficulty then I would have reached a position, but every person should have a kind of planning towards the[ir] wishes and I [will] try my level best though I am not literate, starting from the family.

4.2. Sami al-Masri's Story (Austrian Project Translating Wor(l)ds)

In this part, we will analyze excerpts from a biographical interview with Sami al-Masri. The interview was conducted after the school year during which we had succeeded in establishing a basis of trust with him. Sami was born in Syria in 2001. In 2014, he fled to Turkey together with his father, where they lived for one year before coming to Austria in 2015. There, Sami first enrolled in a "transition class" at a middle school and then in the transition class at a vocational school, which collaborated with us on the project. He is one of three students in the transition class to pass the entrance exam for the regular school. Sami started his biographical narration as follows:

> I was born in Syria in 2001 I lived in Syria until [I was] 20, so end of 2013, ah only since 2014 I had to leave Syria. I fled to Turkey; there I lived one year then I had to leave Turkey again. Then I came to Austria…at the end of 2015, I stayed in a refugee home for four or five months, then I had to leave the home.

At the beginning of Sami's story, no other characters appear. Although he had fled together with his father, this excerpt gives the impression of a "lone fighter." This could be related to the fact that Sami, like many of his peers, took on numerous administrative tasks for his family, more concretely caring for his seriously ill father, which must have made him feel alone with and which competed with his school duties. After starting his narration, Sami refers to the short duration of schooling in Syria and the insecurity caused by the war there. He characterizes himself as an excellent student back then and highlights his participation in a national mathematics competition. A break occurred in his education when he stopped attending school due to the deteriorating security situation. In Turkey, he could not attend school for financial reasons, because he had to work.

After arriving in Austria, the transition to his first school was challenging:

> At first, I was very happy to go back to school. Yes, but then it wasn't fun either, because…the teachers at that time just let us into the class, they give us games….So I didn't learn that much either…have no teaching material and so [on]. We just did Math, English, German. Yes. In Math we did things that you do in first elementary school, German kindergarten.

Sami criticizes that school was designed like occupational therapy. His description of subjects, content, and methods shows that he felt infantilized and not taken seriously in his educational aspirations. He continued with his transition in the next school year to a class that included "only refugees" and they had no contact with German-speaking students, making it difficult to learn German. He continues:

> Then I knew that I [had] to learn alone if I want[ed] to learn German. And then…I learned at home, yes. I was able to get information quickly. I…also made contact with people who speak good German. Then I finished the fourth grade….We didn't do fourth class material but a mixture of the second class, third class, and nothing at all of the fourth class actually. Only second and third grade.

Sami again constructs himself as a "lone fighter" who learned on his own because of the lack of school support. In addition to the educational segregation that prevents linguistic and social inclusion for refugee students, this passage reveals that Sami perceived the academic level of the "refugee class" to be below the norm. This holds true also for his next transition into the vocational school as well:

> We didn't do anything there either….I mean only I improved my German a little bit, but in other subjects [I didn't]. So I just wanted to go the year so that I can take the exam and go to first grade….I think there were about twenty of us in the class, three of them passed the exam.

The phenomenon of underachievement runs like a thread through Sami's educational history in Austria. He attended the last grade of school with the pragmatic goal of passing the exam for the regular school (*Regelschule*), but the fact that only three out of twenty students passed the exam points to severe institutional failures. Sami positions himself as the only one who was admitted to the next school level. While telling about a theater group which he had joined at school, Sami talks about his dream job as an actor and says:

> I have a friend who comes from Afghanistan….He is a very good actor. I think he's been here for four years.

And he was not allowed to stay here….I thought it was such a pity that someone like him has to go and those who are bad can stay. Yes. And I thought that I should write….I mean [about] how the refugees feel, [about] the pressure they have in their home country and when they come here, [about] the pressure they have because they can't speak German at the beginning. And they come to a different society and a different culture, they have to learn everything and it can also be that, in the end, when they do everything they are simply sent back to the home country, to the risk.

Here, Sami leaves the personal level and tells the story of a friend who was deported. This format, which he uses also in other parts of the interview, allows him to distance himself from his own situation and to criticize structural problems of the Austrian migration regime from a "distanced" and less vulnerable position. The account refers to his awareness that learning does not necessarily lead to success, but can also prove "useless" after deportation. When asked about his wishes and imaginations for his future, Sami says:

> When I was little, younger, I have always planned so ten years, fifteen, twenty years ahead. Like, I'll do this and that when I'm eighteen, twenty go to university, do this and that. Now in my current situation [clears throat] I cannot plan a month ahead. Because I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Maybe today I am here, tomorrow not here. It's not sure either.

Sami constructs the "narrated Self" as a forward-planning child who used to have a clear educational perspective for the future. Although this account can be read as a narrative intensification in contrast to his current situation, it reveals that the uncertainty related to "tomorrow" makes planning completely impossible. However, directly after this passage, he tells us that he would like to be a "lifelong learner." Besides this reference, his account reveals that learning is linked to the idea of a moratorium, which makes it possible to deal with the uncertainty of the future.

Sami's story shows that discontinuity in educational transitions does not only hinder the learning process but has also a more fundamental impact on young people's biographical perspectives and on their confidence in the ability to actively design and shape their own future. Like most of his classmates, Sami had to develop his aspirations under extremely precarious conditions both in his home country, during the routes forced upon refugees, often over years, and within the legal and institutional insecurities of the migration society. The fact that Sami and other students nevertheless develop plans and wishes can be read as a "survival strategy" (Dausien et al., 2020). In addition, the interview shows that Sami does not view the institutional obstacles that complicate

his transitions from the viewpoint of a victim, but from a strong, reflective, and analytical perspective.

5. Comprehensive Discussion

While there have been cases of successful school-to-work transition in the Afghan Youth Project, we purposefully selected Gul's story as an insightful example, in which one can see the intersection of socioeconomic precariousness, living in a marginalized rural and highly insecure area, and (currently accelerating) gender discrimination results in a failed transition with an ongoing struggle for social agency. Her empirically rich story paradigmatically exposes the paramount importance of education for biographical transition processes and the structural barriers young people face in Afghanistan. Sami's story was chosen because he is one of only a few students in the class who have managed to stay in the Austrian educational system and thread their way into the "institutionalized life course" (Kohli, 2007). Therefore, his story makes it possible both to reconstruct hurdles in educational transitions and to unfold a biographical sense construction to make this path his own story. What can we learn from these two stories that are so different, yet in some ways remarkably similar in the sense that both are young people navigating constantly changing conditions and multiple insecurities in the educational pathways they imagined for themselves?

In many ways, the narrative logic Gul unfolds in her story is representative of the younger generation in Afghanistan, at least until the summer of 2021. A collective narrative runs through all the data we collected, telling a story of a mission to serve Afghanistan and its people by being an honorable person and by reaching societally valuable and productive occupations. Education is key in every respect: Only well-educated people can meaningfully contribute to society. "I want to reach a position in the next ten years that I could serve my country that has suffered a lot from fights," writes Anees (17 years old) in his essay; and Mawluda (17 years old): "I want to serve for my painful country after graduation." The transition process from school to the workforce is significantly over-determined. More than images of individual free decisions, the plans outlined for the future are strongly rooted in a collective mission and are legitimized by the youth's contributions to the future of the nation. Seeing oneself as part of a generational mission for unity and peace serves different functions: Psychologically, self-esteem and agency are strengthened when one adopts a powerful social identity; sociologically, the collective narrative of being "future-makers" contains implicitly sharp criticism of the older generation that can hardly be addressed openly; politically, however, it reflects an ambivalent effect of Western nation-building efforts through education (Ahmad, 2021).

That girls and women can use this narrative to position themselves as significant actors in social discourse, thereby raising a claim to be heard is an exciting provoca-

tion. It is a highly fragile logic, however, when the school-to-work transition fails (due to a broken education system and a weak labor market) and young people find themselves not only socioeconomically marginalized but deprived of the mission of serving the country as well. In this regard, we should recognize Gul's innovative struggle to cope with her situation and try new paths to still feel like a worthy part of the collective endeavor: volunteer work and an idealistic message, but still holding on to solidarity and hope.

We think of the younger generation in terms of an entrapment (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Langer et al., 2021): Youths seem(ed) to be caught between normatively grounded notions of hope on the one hand and far-reaching everyday experiences of suffering on the other. This tension frames an anticipated transition not only to work but also into adulthood and permanently (re-)produces and undermines their sense of social agency that includes the promise of being part of a collective mission to lead Afghanistan into a bright future. But what if the idea does not hold anymore? While Gul's story seems to suggest that the failure to transition from graduation to societally useful professions can be dealt with creatively, one controversial solution discussed in the interviews and essays is migration to India, Turkey, or Europe to receive a good education, which is only legitimate if someone aims to return to Afghanistan for important jobs and to serve the country. Migration seems to be a highly ambivalent way out, as Sami's story tells. His could also be the story of many male youths in the Afghan Project and resonates well with first tentative observations from an ongoing follow-up project with young Afghan refugees in Germany.

Sami's story is representative of young refugee students coming to Austria in the sense that they encounter several obstacles and insecurities related to school enrollment, and that segregation into "refugee classes" complicates both social and linguistic integration, leading to "excluding inclusion" (Alpagu et al., 2019b) and a special risk of exclusion regarding later transitions. For refugee students, participation in the education system structurally means "precarious" (Mecheril, 2003), and thus temporal, belonging. In addition, Sami's story, like those of other students in our projects, shows that transitions are not just results of "decisions" based on rational choices (e.g., Dausien, 2014). Instead, they are ongoing and multi-layered confrontations with and examinations of spaces of possibility, which also appear at the level of interaction in the interviews. While this is certainly true for all young people, there are some distinctive features that concern refugees: First, structural barriers in the educational institutions of migration societies hamper transitions. Second, even if transitions are formally enabled, educational processes and social inclusion are hindered through segregation (Alpagu et al., 2019b). Third, transitions concern legal questions, e.g., related to asylum. The stories and texts written and told by Sami and his classmates show that the transition to

the Austrian education system and its possibilities is a disadvantaging and partly inscrutable experience. In addition, the texts are critical of student segregation, which makes both social participation and planning further educational and professional perspectives more difficult.

However, Sami's narrative is also a story of success: He survived life-threatening circumstances during his school years in Syria and had to interrupt his institutional education for economic reasons in Turkey. In addition, Sami shows that despite several economic, legal, health-related, familial, and educational insecurities during his escape route, and after he arrives in Austria, he has "made it." His self-construction as a "lone fighter" is not only one of powerlessness: On the one hand, it enables him to present himself as an educationally successful and independent youth. On the other hand, it makes it possible to point out the gaps and shortcomings of the Austrian education system whose rules he has understood and whose weak points he scandalizes. The fact that Sami is one of only three young people in the entire class who succeeded in finding a way into regular school after the "refugee class" is certainly related to his family background and associated privileges. A comparison with other stories of refugee students could show in more detail how connectivity and social resonance can be established in a new national, institutional, and educational context and which role social-cultural background structures can play for processes of biographization.

The cases we selected for this article refer to different sociopolitical and institutional frameworks of multiple overlapping insecurities; however, the experiences we reconstructed seem to be quite similar. They both reveal an ongoing battle with societal and institutional barriers, a permanent struggle with educational setbacks, a feeling of being deprived of anticipated pathways to higher education and professional work, and innovative attempts to develop new opportunities into the open future. The concept of school education provides a promise of hope for transitioning into a world of (unknown) stability and reliability within a (too familiar) world of instability and betrayal. While in Afghanistan (and Syria and beyond) this transition is linked to collectively shared endeavors that provide social containments in cases of failure, in the diaspora, the sense of being part of a collective mission (that might psychologically serve as a coping mechanism for overcoming experiences of marginalization) seems to dissolve. One loses the ability to stabilize an identity and is only left with the "lone fighter" position.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we focused on educational transitions under conditions of multiple insecurities. By analyzing the empirical data of two research projects in Afghanistan and Austria we have shown how young people make sense of the social and educational inequalities they encounter on their educational pathways within different national, socio-political, and institutional contexts. While youths in Afghanistan are mainly affected by the uncertainties linked to a (post)war state, its fragile institutions, and its lack of reliable future perspectives, refugee students in Austria have to deal with other uncertainties, e.g., regarding both their asylum status and educational pathways linked to a future in Europe and insecurities linked to a racialized labor and housing market there.

Our analysis has shown that transition processes in the context of uncertainty are linked to specific frameworks on national, societal, and institutional levels. After living through repeatedly fractured perspectives, young people must make sense of their biographical experiences and continuously (re)design their plans while facing uncertain futures. In the Afghan Youth Project, we reconstructed a collective—and morally charged—biographical orientation of future plans. This orientation can also be understood as a critical response to persistent fragility and inequality and suggests an imagined generational hold and sense of belonging. In the Austrian project Translating Wor(l)ds, we reconstructed continuing experiences of educational exclusion, marginalization, and devaluation in different migration societies throughout refugee routes. For refugee students, transition is a permanent incomplete state. In addition, being torn out of familiar environments and routines and confronted by a generational reversal of familial tasks can precipitate processes of disillusionment and self-constructions of being a "lone fighter." Educational transitions, which can be challenging for all young people, take on special relevance under these conditions. Personal histories are constructed in an unspecific reference to time in which past, present, and future are closely intertwined. Research has revealed that biographical agency emerges when past experiences can be meaningfully linked with an anticipated future. Under conditions of insecurity, this connection is often interrupted: When the past appears "cut off" or "lost" and the present is extremely uncertain, designing the future becomes severely difficult (Dausien et al., 2020). However, as overwhelming as the experiences of uncertainty undoubtedly have been for our research partners, it is remarkable how unrelenting their belief in the power of education was.

Qualitative research provides an insightful framework for analyzing the sociopolitical and institutional conditions that frame school-to-work transitions from the perspective of young people and for understanding their challenging educational struggles. Our article, therefore, is aimed at contributing to the growing body of qualitative research on social inequalities in educational contexts (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020; Legewie, 2021). The interpretative approach outlined here is accompanied by certain implications, of which we highlight two: First, while biographical case studies allowed for a detailed, contextualized reconstruction of complicated educational paths, systematically integrating these findings into the wider empirical material of the projects could reveal more general patterns of educational

struggles and barriers in school-to-work transitions. Second, while we focused on the importance of anticipating the school-to-work transition for guiding our process, it would be compelling to follow our research partners into their future work environments to understand how their acquired senses of agency might equip them for responding to the institutional barriers to come.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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