



Article

Navigating the Maze - Reflexivity as a Critical Skill in Spatialised Youth Transitions

Jenni Tikkanen

University of Turku

Email: jenni.tikkanen@utu.fi

Liliana Zeferino

University of Lisbon

Email: lilianazeferino@edu.ulisboa.pt

Niklas Pernhaupt

University of Vienna

Email: niklas.lucca.pernhaupt@univie.ac.at

Ruggero Cefalo

University of Firenze

Email: ruggero.cefalo@unifi.it

Abstract

In contemporary debates on educational quality, learning outcomes are often framed in terms of measurable competences and performance indicators. However, this approach fails to identify reflexivity as a key learning outcome and a central transversal skill in today's fast-changing and increasingly uncertain societies. Reflexivity is required for identifying and mobilising the knowledge and competences needed to reach one's goals, and it necessitates understanding the surrounding opportunity structures. Further, we maintain that policy measures can impede or promote reflexivity, which is embedded in institutional arrangements and socio-spatial contexts.

We explored 1) how young people in vulnerable situations displayed reflexivity in educational and school-



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to-work transitions and disruptions in differing regions in Austria, Finland, and Portugal, and 2) how their reflexivity was supported, ignored, or hindered by their lived experiences of educational and labour market policies and practices. The comparative design enabled examining how distinct transition regimes and socio-spatial configurations shape the development and limits of reflexivity.

Our data consist of biographical narrative interviews with young people in vulnerable situations (N=67). From qualitative thematic analysis, three key themes emerged: 1) opportunities for reflexivity on educational pathways, 2) reflexivity on individual vulnerabilities, and 3) (lacking) institutional support for reflexivity.

The results highlight that reflexivity is shaped by interactions between individual characteristics, structural barriers, policy frameworks, and spatial inequalities. Institutional support is often uneven, fragmented, or misdirected across and within the countries – and often fails to reach those in most vulnerable situations. Thus, the low levels of youth reflexivity we observed were not individuals' shortcomings or lacking abilities but reflected structurally conditioned opportunities for reflexive engagement. This article contributes to comparative debates on educational quality by demonstrating how learning outcomes are socially constructed through the interaction of actors, policies, and spaces.

Keywords: reflexivity, vulnerability, life course, learning outcomes, spatiality

Introduction

Across Europe, a central policy goal is to increase educational equality and social inclusion of young people through an outcomes-focused approach to learning, for instance, by facilitating school-to-work transitions via clearly predefined, measurable, and assessable learning outcomes (e.g., CEDEFOP, 2024). However, the dominant understanding of learning outcomes as observable and quantifiable individual products fuels policy discussions that often overlook complex educational goals that are difficult to capture through standardised indicators (Tikkanen et al., 2026). This does not make these goals less relevant. Rather, it helps explain why many well-intentioned policy attempts to tackle educational inequality and social exclusion of young people fail, at large, to produce significant results (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2025). The hyperfocus on statistical indicators of comparable learning results (Mertala, 2024) fails to recognise learning outcomes as dynamic, relational, and contingent process shaped by multiple actors, institutional arrangements, and socio-spatial conditions (Tikkanen et al., 2026). Consequently, policies often lack context-sensitivity and fail to acknowledge young people's lived realities in increasingly uncertain and unequal societal contexts, thereby limiting their capacity to support successful educational and labour market transitions. However, at the same time – due to rapid changes in occupational profiles, career pathways, and work methods – the importance of arming young people with competences needed for lifetime employability and effective management of non-linear careers is emphasised in European policymaking (Barnes et al., 2020; Council of the European Union, 2018). These competences are referred to as career management skills, which are seen central for individuals to improve their employability,

develop career learning goals, and enhance occupational careers (Kettunen et al., 2020).

Indeed, today's young people face significant challenges in their transitions from youth to adulthood, especially in achieving self-actualisation in one's work career and a stable financial situation (Skirbekk et al., 2025). In addition to structural labour market changes and the disappearance of linear careers (Andreeva & Bemler, 2025), growing complexity of educational choices and their labour market consequences (Cuconato et al., 2016), inflation of educational credentials together with growing demand for high skills (Araki & Kariya, 2022), and widespread precarisation (Shin et al., 2023) all contribute to the challenging societal context within which young people strive to build their lives. Making and executing biographically meaningful and flexible educational and occupational plans that account for personal, structural, and spatial strengths and limitations, charting the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to reach one's goals, dealing with ruptured pathways, finding alternative routes, and adjusting aspirations when necessary are demanding tasks for all young people. However, those in vulnerable life situations are in a particularly challenging position as the vulnerabilities are connected to and impacted by their limited resources and opportunities.

In this article, we explore the ways in which young people in vulnerable situations aim to construct their educational and occupational pathways – and how they are institutionally supported in these efforts – in differing transition regimes and regional contexts in Austria, Finland, and Portugal. To this end, we apply the theoretical concept of reflexivity (Farrugia, 2013; 2015). While akin to career management skills, in that it comprises abilities needed for recognising, mobilising, and consolidating productive educational and occupational choices, we find reflexivity a particularly relevant concept for analysing the prerequisites of life course construction of youth in vulnerable situations. This is because, instead of placing a pronounced emphasis on individual employability as is the case with the policy focus on career management skills, reflexivity highlights the socio-spatial embeddedness of the development of the competences needed in navigating uncertain and unequal societal surroundings. We seek to answer two questions:

- 1) How do young people in vulnerable life situations display reflexivity in educational and school-to-work transitions and disruptions?
- 2) How are young people's reflexive skills supported, ignored, or hindered by their lived experiences of educational and labour market policies and practices in differing spatial contexts?

Reflexivity in the Life Course

The concept of reflexivity is used in a multitude of ways across several disciplines. In youth studies, a key component of the different definitions of reflexivity is individuals' capacity to reflect on their own abilities, possibilities, and life courses (O'Connor, 2014). In broader sociological debates, a central issue is whether

reflexivity is understood to involve some degree of criticality concerning social structures (Kim, 2023). For example, Archer's (2007, p. 4) conceptualisation of reflexivity does not incorporate such criticality, and she defines reflexivity as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa”. Thus, according to her, reflexivity refers to conscious deliberations that take place through internal dialogue that people have with themselves. We, however, align with those scholarly works that see reflexivity to be inseparably embedded in social structures.

In Beck's (e.g., 1992) seminal work, the purpose of the concept of reflexivity is to capture features of structural complexity, and individual reflexivity emerges as a response to structural contradictions and insecurities – and it does not offer autonomy or freedom from institutional structures. Farrugia (2015) also criticises the assumption, often found in reflexive modernisation literature, that reflexivity is a form of sovereign agency, critical rationality, and cognitive deliberation leading to emancipation. Instead, he defines reflexivity as an embedded social practice which is oriented towards the realisation of meaningful biographical trajectories through unstable or contradictory structural environments. Thus, reflexivity cannot be reduced to a cognitive process or viewed as a pre-existing property of an individual.

In this study, we understand reflexivity as a socially and structurally shaped process through which individuals actively make sense of themselves and their biographies by reflecting on their circumstances and acting on those reflections (Farrugia, 2013; 2015). Furthermore, we argue that reflexivity constitutes a key learning outcome and a central transversal skill through which young people interpret, negotiate, and correspond with society's structural inequalities and uncertainties as they traverse their educational and occupational trajectories.

Spaces can offer or impede access to opportunities in education and the labour market (Benasso et al., 2022). In this regard, comparative analysis highlights how policy and structural configurations characterising national transition regimes contribute to shaping school-to-work transitions as well as cultural ideas and expectations on youth (Walther, 2022). At the same time, countries present significant territorial differences (Scandurra et al., 2021), and socio-spatial contexts affect youth experiences and perceptions. Educational and labour market policies may therefore hinder or promote young people's reflexivity by prioritising particular goals (e.g., labour market placement or individual exploration and development) and forms of support. Furthermore, the development of young people's reflexivity requires relational and institutional spaces that legitimise critical thinking, recognise the uniqueness of life trajectories, and offer consistent, dialogical support. In other words, reflexivity does not emerge spontaneously but depends on structured pedagogical and social conditions (Maclure, 2017).

Reflexive practices, with which individuals try to respond to the unstable and contradictory structural environments (Farrugia, 2015), are not – but can include or lead to – agency. Thus, reflexivity and agency are distinct: reflexivity may exist even when structural barriers prevent turning reflexivity into agentic action (Threadgold, 2011). For example, even though an individual might be reflexively aware of available opportunities, they can still find it difficult or impossible to access them due to a lack of relevant resources. Therefore, reflexivity does not necessarily bring choice but can lead to a “painful awareness of the lack of it” (Adams, 2006, p. 525). Whether or not it is possible to put one’s reflexive choices into practice can produce a range of emotions from confidence and satisfaction to frustration and alienation (Threadgold, 2011). As Maclure (2017) emphasises, when collective and mediated conditions for reflection are absent, reflexivity tends to become silent, internalised, and associated with personal guilt, rather than critical transformation.

In addition to the concept of reflexivity, we apply the theoretical perspective of life course (Elder et al., 2015), which builds on the premise that individuals’ life courses, which consist of interlocking trajectories marked by sequences of events and social transitions, are multi-dimensional and develop across various interrelated and interacting life domains. It draws attention to the embeddedness of individual lives in institutional and socio-historical frameworks as life courses are constructed through the interplay of political, social, economic, and spatial conditions, welfare state regulations and provisions, youth transition regimes, and biographical decisions and investments of individuals actively building their own trajectories within the surrounding structures of opportunities and constraints (Roberts, 2018). The life course perspective helps us capture the processual and context-bound nature of reflexivity. By highlighting the interplay between reflexivity, structural barriers, and policy frameworks, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how reflexivity shapes young people’s ability to navigate their life courses. It emphasises how young people’s critical reflections on their past and future life paths interact with the structural and policy contexts they face, helping us better understand their potential for decision-making and agency in complex and unequal spaces.

National and Regional Contexts of the Study

The three countries under examination represent different youth transition regimes, i.e., configurations of regulation of life course transitions (Walther, 2022). In each country, our study focused on two socio-demographically contrasting regions: Upper Austria and Vienna in Austria, Southwest Finland and Kainuu in Finland, and Amadora and Tâmega e Sousa in Portugal (detailed region descriptions in Kazepov et al., 2023).

Austria belongs to the employment-centred regime with selective and standardised educational and

training frameworks. Young people are expected to qualify for and be allocated to occupational careers and social positions in different segments, and labour markets are divided into a highly standardised and protected core and precarious peripheries. In Austria's stratified education system, based on their academic achievement, pupils are sorted into parallel channels at the age of 10. Upper secondary education consists of different vocational school types, apprenticeship, and academic upper secondary school. The vocational education and training (VET) system is constituted by work-based (dual apprenticeship) and school-based tracks. The strong vocational orientation of the education system is associated with comparatively fast transitions to employment. However, while youth with VET qualifications and tertiary education have good labour market prospects, groups in vulnerable situations face challenges accessing quality education and higher risks of unemployment (Kazepov et al., 2023). While multiple measures have been taken to reduce early school leaving and youth unemployment, insufficient guidance and counselling at school remains a significant issue. Upper Austria, with its more industry-oriented economy and conservative political tradition, and Vienna, capital city region with a social-democratic tradition and pronouncedly service-based labour market, differ in three key structural aspects regarding young people – educational attainment, employment, and migration status. Upper Austria has smaller shares of university graduates and people with a migration background, a higher share of VET graduates, and it offers markedly better employment opportunities compared to Vienna.

Finland represents the universalistic regime characterised by an extended welfare provision and an inclusive schooling system. Together with various forms of institutional support schemes, these express the recognition and securing of growing up as a process of personal development. Compulsory education applies to all 6–18-year-olds, and the first major transition is from comprehensive to upper secondary education, which has two tracks: general upper secondary education and VET, both giving eligibility to higher education. Schools provide special needs education, guidance and counselling, school psychologists, and social workers' services. There are also various other institutional actors providing support for youth in vulnerable situations. However, the availability of support is impacted by significantly decreasing financial resources. The Finnish labour market presents challenges for young people without at least a VET qualification. Economic prosperity and social well-being concentrate especially in metropolitan areas, while northern and eastern regions face lower living standards and increased risks of poverty and social exclusion. (Kazepov et al., 2023.) Southwest Finland, the second largest economic area in Finland, is an attractive region for youth due to its versatile educational and labour market opportunities with a diverse economic structure. Kainuu, population-wise a much smaller region, consists primarily of rural/remote areas, and many young people are forced to leave due to the rather scarce regional educational opportunities. Employment opportunities are mostly limited to a few key areas, population growth rate is negative, and youth unemployment rate and dependency ratio are higher than in Southwest Finland.

The familistic/sub-protective regime of **Portugal** is characterised by a relatively inclusive educational and broadly accessible system, which is, however, combined with under-resourced and often low-standard training schemes and highly challenging access to the labour market. Family plays a central role as a safety net, compensating for institutional shortcomings and absorbing much of the social risk associated with transitions, contributing to high levels of intergenerational dependency and reflecting an institutional “status vacuum” of youth. Compulsory education lasts 12 years. Upper secondary education includes an academic and a vocational path, the latter focusing on access to the labour market but still enabling higher education access. Portugal has reduced early school leaving and NEET¹ rates significantly (Kazepov et al., 2023); however, these advances coexist with persistent social and spatial inequalities. Rates of early school leaving, underachievement, and low qualification levels remain higher in peripheral and rural regions. Moreover, labour market integration for young people remains precarious and segmented. Disparities in regional development and the inability of compensatory education programmes to enhance the school performance of the most disadvantaged are among the key educational issues (Alves et al., 2018). Amadora, located in the Area Metropolitana de Lisboa, is a densely populated urban municipality characterised by high ethnic diversity, a significant migrant population, social housing neighbourhoods, and persistent socio-economic inequalities. In contrast, Tâmega e Sousa is predominantly rural and marked by lower educational attainment, a less diversified labour market, stronger traditions of emigration, and more limited local educational and occupational opportunities.

Data and Methods

Our data consist of biographical narrative interviews with 18–30-year-old² young people in vulnerable life situations (N=67) collected in 2024 within a European research project, *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A multi-level analysis of (under)achievement in the life course* (CLEAR), in the two socio-demographically contrasting regions per country. Informed by the characteristics of our research contexts and scholarship on social vulnerability (e.g., Cosner Berzin, 2010; Marta, 2025), we conceptualise vulnerabilities as experiences of disrupted educational pathways, unemployment, socioeconomic disadvantage, racial-ethnic minority status, migration background, mental and physical health issues, neuropsychiatric disorders, family instability, school bullying, and living in disadvantaged areas/neighbourhoods with limited access to opportunities.

We selected the participants through purposive sampling, and recruitment was carried out with support of local experts from various institutions working with young people in vulnerable situations, such as second

¹ NEET Not in Education, Employment, or Training

² As in the CLEAR project, the age range follows the general logic of many European-wide youth policies (see Lavchyan & Williamson, 2019) with a focus on youth of legal age.

chance programmes, rehabilitative workshops, outreach youth work, and training centres (in Vienna, six interviewees were recruited via snowballing/through a researcher). The interviews focused on educational experiences and pathways, current situation and future plans, and regional/local conditions and opportunities. The biographical narrative approach allowed the interviewees to focus on the events, processes, emotions, and opportunities for reflexivity that were most relevant to their personal transitions and policy experiences. We did not prioritise chronology, recognising that young people's most notable life events and reflections might fall outside the critical transition points and chronological narratives (Aaltonen, 2013). The sample's key features are presented in Table 1 (detailed description of sampling, recruitment, and ethical considerations, see Järvinen et al., 2024a).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Country	Region	N	Gender			Mean age	Migrant background
			Male	Female	Unknown		
Austria (AT)	Upper Austria (U)	12	7	3	2	19.4	5
	Vienna (V)	13	7	4	2	23.3	8
Finland (FI)	Southwest Finland (S)	11	6	5	–	21.2	2
	Kainuu (K)	11	6	5	–	24.1	–
Portugal (PT)	Tâmega e Sousa (T)	10	4	6	–	23.7	–
	Amadora (A)	10	5	5	–	25.9	6
Total		67	35	28	4	22.8	21

At the lower end of the “vulnerability spectrum” of our sample, were those young people with only one main vulnerability factor (e.g., migration background) affecting their situation. However, for the vast majority of our interviewees, the vulnerabilities were multiple and intersecting. The larger the number and the higher the degree of severity of accumulating vulnerability factors, the higher we interpreted the degree of vulnerability of the life situation to be.

We conducted qualitative content analysis and started the analysis process by constructing a tentative analysis grid by drawing on our insights from preliminary descriptive analyses of the data carried out in the CLEAR project (Järvinen et al., 2024a; 2024b). The interview transcripts were treated in the original language by a native speaker. The grid was filled in based on several rounds of thorough reading of the transcripts with a focus on displayed reflexivity in the life course narratives and future plans, interplay of reflexivity with family background and individual vulnerabilities, and institutional factors and local/regional

conditions promoting or hindering the development of reflexivity. The authors convened regularly to discuss the analysis. This iterative approach based on “close teamwork” between co-researchers supported inter-subjective validity (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2014) and allowed to leverage both insider and outsider positionalities (Chavez, 2008). Three key themes emerged from the data: 1) opportunities for reflexivity on educational pathways including school-to-work transitions, 2) reflexivity on individual vulnerabilities, and 3) (lacking) institutional support for reflexivity.

Results

Opportunities for Reflexivity on Educational Pathways

We set out to examine how young people in vulnerable situations display reflexivity on their educational pathways and how their reflexive skills are supported, ignored, or hindered in differing spatial contexts. The interviewees displayed varying opportunities for and, thus, varying degrees of reflexivity in their narratives of educational transitions reflecting structurally conditioned opportunities, not individual capacity, and revealing how opportunities for reflexivity were unevenly distributed across institutional and socio-spatial contexts.

It was rare that the (initial) choice of upper secondary track and/or vocational field of study was based on a highly reflexive consideration of personal interests, structural constraints, and long-term labour market positioning, and that it led to a linear, uninterrupted educational path. Only few interviewees, who were facing only “simple”, non-intersecting vulnerabilities and were, therefore, in a relatively good position, displayed this kind of high reflexivity in their narratives. One of these was an 18-year-old young man, Elias³ (FI_S_3):

[The reason for choosing the VET field] the certainty of getting a job, employability. As long as there is electricity, electricians will be needed. [---] I love cars. I could spend every day with them, customising them and driving around. But I wasn't interested in being a mechanic for the rest of my life, I'd rather be an electrician or like. [---] [Electric cars] is one of the things that I plan to study too. That would be like a pretty good business plan, studying electric cars.

More commonly, the degree of reflexivity displayed by the interviewees was much lower and associated with disruptions on their educational trajectories. The vulnerabilities faced by the young people had often drained their mental and material resources and played a significant part affecting the degree of reflexivity and constraining possibilities of translating it into strategic choice, for example, due to problems with mental or physical health limiting the scope of opportunities – as was the case for 18-year-old Paul (AT_U_3):

³ All names are pseudonyms.

[T]he end of lower secondary school, [had mobility-limiting health issues] and that made it very difficult for me to find an apprenticeship and then [COVID-19] came along, so I didn't really get to try out much and then I just took the next-best apprenticeship as long as I had something and that was at a large supermarket.

Upper secondary choices were often based on limited knowledge of the chosen field and its employment opportunities or even made without clear personal reasoning: *"I don't even know [why chose the VET field]. [...] The substitute counsellor mentioned something about [the field] and somehow it stuck to my head. So, I applied there pretty much just on a whim."* (Kerttu, 23-years-old; FI_S_7). A Portuguese interviewee explained: *"I went with my father to enrol, and they told us there were no places left. So, I just took what was available. I didn't choose it."* (Thabisa, 26-years-old; PT_A_14). Several other Portuguese participants also described making decisions based on availability rather than genuine interest or informed judgement. Particularly in vulnerable contexts, young people tended to choose vocational tracks with minimal information or based on what was locally available or suggested by others, illustrating how limited institutional mediation narrowed the horizon of imaginable futures.

It was something the teachers suggested. The course – I think it was the only one available at the school. I actually wanted the sports one, but it was already full. So, I went for another one, which I didn't mind, but it wasn't really what I wanted. (Eno, 23-years-old; PT_A_18)

Particularly in Finland, many youths struggled with making decisions on the field of study expressing that there were too many options (and too little relevant information about them) or that they were not able to figure out what they would like to do, which intensified their plight further: *"I feel really anxious and uncomfortable. Because I have no idea of what I'd like to do. Where to apply to study or anything. Like what job I will have. The feeling of not knowing anything causes anxiety."* (Venla, 26-years-old; FI_S_10). Some of the Austrian and Finnish interviewees reflected on the capabilities of 15-year-olds and expressed that they had been too young to be forced to make these decisions with long-lasting effects on their lives.

Families influenced young people's degree of reflexivity in a myriad of ways – in addition to a disadvantaged family background being a key vulnerability factor in the sample. For some, the vocational field of a family member was virtually the only field that was at least somewhat familiar to them, thus, strongly guiding their educational choices: *"I learned metal technology, partly because I couldn't think of anything else. My father did that and my brother did it for a year."* (Toni, 22-years-old; AT_V_11). For many others, family provided encouragement to a certain direction or even clear pressure to choose "the family trade" despite a lack of own interest in the field.

Making educational choices with limited opportunities for reflexivity was often followed by dropping out of education, indicating a cyclical pattern in which constrained choices reproduced further instability. For many, this cycle was repeated more than once. However, for some, dropping out had been a choice that gave space to (re)gain resources for reflexivity, as was the case for 18-year-old Luca (AT_U_12) who had

dropped out from school due to mental strain caused by a rising internalised pressure to perform at school. This had allowed time to reflect and recover from the mental health issues, thus, improving his wellbeing. However, this kind of reflexivity was not always institutionally supported:

I talked with a guidance counsellor that I would've wanted to take a gap year [after basic education]. They said to me that they don't really condone applicants' gap years in VET. So, I didn't take a gap year, because I thought it wouldn't be worth it. Now I feel that it would've helped me a lot to cope and recover. (Veikko, 20-years-old; FI_S_9)

For some of the Austrian and Portuguese interviewees, early school leaving was not a result of low levels of reflexivity or a freely made choice, but a need or wish to achieve economic autonomy. Joana, a 27-year-old woman (PT_A_1), explained: *"I have two children. I couldn't manage everything. Work became the priority."* These narratives described transitions shaped by overlapping material responsibilities and the absence of institutional support, where reflection on the future was constantly subordinated to the urgency of the present. In Austria, early school leaving emerged as a result of general dislike for schooling among youths in VET: *"I'm not the kind of person who likes education, I'm more of a working person, I like to work more and that's why I didn't go to secondary school."* (Mika, 20-years-old; AT_U_7).

Early school leaving did not typically appear as a sudden rupture but as the culmination of a process of systemic disconnection and lack of differentiated support, especially during critical moments such as the transition from lower to upper secondary education. 29-year-old Mariana (PT_T_7) illustrated this experience: *"I knew that course wasn't for me, but no one gave me another option."* Ilona, 23-years-old (FI_S_5), would have been very motivated to study, but a lack of timely support led to dropping out:

Because I wasn't diagnosed with [a neuropsychiatric disorder] as a child, I hadn't learned how to balance life and studies. [...] [Studying] didn't work out, my already unstable mental health took more hits, because I couldn't cope with stress.

Thus, low levels of reflexivity displayed in the narratives of educational transitions were not due to young people's lacking abilities but reflected structurally mediated limits on reflexive development. In the following sections, we further highlight this by discussing young people's reflexivity on their own vulnerabilities and the degree and quality of available institutional support for developing reflexivity and turning it to transformative agency.

Reflexivity on Individual Vulnerabilities

Many interviewees displayed reflexivity on the vulnerabilities of their own situations and awareness of the consequent life course effects. Their narratives illustrated how vulnerability was not merely the context in which they lived, but an active structuring condition shaping both the need for and the limits of reflexive engagement. Several interviews highlighted how reflexivity in life course transitions was in itself a highly

demanding task for young people struggling with intersecting vulnerabilities, but also that the vulnerabilities created further layers of need for reflexivity in making educational and occupational plans.

Reflecting on one's own fragility, exclusion, or stigma demanded emotional strength, particularly when the surrounding institutions had failed to acknowledge the suffering endured or to offer legitimate spaces for its articulation. For some, emotional vulnerability was a barrier to reflexivity, and emotional silence was not the absence of thought, but a deliberate survival strategy, as was the case for Mariana: *"There was too much in my head. Thinking only made it worse. So, I pushed everything down."* For 18-year-old Johanna (FI_K_11), it had been easier to think about passing away at a young age than about future pathways: *"Like, in a way, there never was a future for me. [...] Yeah, I don't really know, I probably thought that I wouldn't be here anymore."*

Many young Finns were reflexive about how vulnerabilities affected their functional and coping abilities and limited the feasibility of different vocational options. For instance, Kerttu illustrated this: *"I've been thinking a lot about what job would have as few taxing features as possible. [...] That I could feel like I could cope with it well. So that it would give more than it takes."* However, this reflexivity had typically not led to agentic transformation of one's situation due to the surrounding opportunity structures lacking suitable employment opportunities that would have provided sufficient support and part-time or otherwise "lightened" work opportunities, which highlighted the gap between awareness and actionable opportunity.

Whereas young Finns were reflexive about their vulnerabilities mainly in relation to educational and occupational pathways, for the Portuguese youth – often facing more intense structural inequalities – vulnerability-related reflexivity was more "holistic", highlighting aspects of disengagement processes. Several young people described feelings of institutional invisibility experienced as symbolic exclusion. Joana stated: *"I felt like no one cared about me. Even when I went to class, it didn't seem to matter whether I was there or not."* In some cases, young people articulated the intersecting layers of their social condition. 28-year-old Ellen (PT_A_3) identified the convergence of gender, class, and racialisation as a cumulative burden: *"I feel like I must prove myself twice as much. For being a woman, for being black, for coming from here. I don't even try some things anymore, because I know it's not worth it."* Some were able to identify more subtle dynamics of discrimination, such as racialisation within their own communities. For example, Thabisa, an African immigrant, recounted: *"They were African, but born here. They spoke better. And they laughed in my face. [...] Many dropped out."* These narratives reflected a critical awareness of language, belonging, and positionality, demonstrating how reflexivity could take the form of socio-structural diagnosis even in the absence of institutional support. However, there were also Portuguese interviewees in whose narratives vulnerability became a driver of resistance and identity reinvention. Rui (29-years-old; PT_A_11), after a long process of mental health medicalisation, had reoriented his path through critical reflection: *"I*

was on medication for ten years. But I realised I needed another way of taking care of myself. I started reading, talking to other people. I changed my focus." Reflexivity, in such cases, emerged as an act of epistemic autonomy, a refusal to accept external definitions of oneself, and a deliberate effort to rebuild meaning from within one's own vulnerability.

Particularly in Austria and Portugal, a recurring element in the narratives was a retrospective awareness of the negative consequences of certain decisions, such as early school leaving. However, this rarely led to a critical analysis of the underlying structural causes. Instead, the strength of internalised and naturalised meritocratic narratives was evident, for example, in the account of Mariana from Portugal: *"If I could go back, I wouldn't have messed up so much. I would have made the most of it."* In these cases, school "failure" was appropriated in an individualised manner, without considering institutional constraints or the effects of accumulated vulnerabilities. In Austria, many youths expressed regret over laziness: *"In my current situation, if I'd gotten better grades back then, I might still be in school now, so if I'd gotten used to sitting down and learning, then I'd be able to do that."* (Zach, 18-years-old; AT_U_1). The Finnish interviewees did not display much awareness of the structural factors contributing to their vulnerabilities either, but they typically recognised – at least in retrospect after receiving institutional support – the impact of mental health problems, neuropsychiatric disorders, and/or learning difficulties on their learning outcomes and educational choices, including dropping out. While their awareness remained partial and often retrospective rather than transformative, they did not display as much "meritocratic self-blame". Still for some, like 24-year-old Pekka (FI_S_6), these feelings of being a failure were strong: *"When I dropped out and applied to a new place, immediately I had this fear of like I don't think I'm going to be able to finish this... I was afraid that I'd fail, disappoint my parents and myself too."*

In many Austrian interviews, meritocratic thinking intertwined with the lived reality of the available opportunities, reflecting a lacking number of available apprenticeship positions. Thus, many of the young people were part of an alternative supra-company apprenticeship programme where they were being trained through courses and many short internships across multiple companies. Some reflected on supra-company apprenticeships being a more precarious form of apprenticeship – especially monetarily. Revealing how meritocratic logics were reproduced even within structurally constrained pathways, many of them had internalised a sense of deservingness to justify earning less money in supra-company apprenticeships vis-à-vis regular ones, like Karim (18-years-old; AT_V_6): *"I think that's fair, because the people who are working outside now don't sit here like we do and so on. Of course, they get more than we do."*

(Lacking) Institutional Support for Reflexivity

In Austria, insufficient guidance and counselling at school had left many young people like 19-year-old Max (AT_U_11) to navigate their educational paths on their own devices: *“Um, I just studied, I just looked around to see if there was anything that interested me, I just did a bit of research.”* One salient pattern was that the young Austrians who had attended special needs and performance-based programmes reflected on the ambivalence and impact of these supposedly integrative measures, illustrating how they created stigma and hampered turning reflexivity into agency by limiting opportunities in the labour market.

[L]et's say, the problem nowadays with apprenticeships is that if you look at the school report card now, not all companies of course, but some, if you look at the report card, for example, in a certain subject like math [special needs status], it's not so good. (Lena, 18-years-old; AT_V_9)

The Austrian narratives illustrated how educational and labour market conditions limited the space for some young people's reflexivity, particularly by prioritising placement over meaningful guidance. For instance, as there were more young people looking for apprenticeship positions in Vienna than there were available ones, putting reflexivity into practise was hindered: *“I wanted to be a car mechanic, but in the end, I became a tiler, it's something else.”* (Joker, 25-years-old; AT_V_1). Regarding school-to-work transitions, Austria's labour market integration scheme is primarily based on placement. For many youths in the unemployment system this meant facing the heteronomy of being placed in sectors of need and, therefore, a lack of choice.

You sit down there [public employment service], tell them you're interested in an office job and they put you in a youth workshop where you do bricklaying, and then you're desperate again and don't know what to do with yourself and you stand there again and think you have to combine one with the other and it's always this cycle that leads nowhere. (Sarah, 19-years-old; AT_V_7)

In Finland, many of the interviewees who had dropped out of education had (eventually) sought for or been guided to support measures aimed at youth in vulnerable situations, indicating a comparatively more structured yet uneven support architecture. Some had been able to strengthen their reflexivity by gaining more critical insights on the available opportunities, alternative educational routes, and their own strengths with the provided support. They had been able to come up with more suitable and personally meaningful educational and occupational plans and start to pursue their goals: *“I attended preparatory training for VET [---] and [a coaching programme]. Then I thought what to do after, and my coach and I started to think about that. [---] [W]e visited vocational institutions. And I chose this one.”* (Eino, 21-years-old; FI_S_1). However, despite the relatively wide range of different support forms with potential to contribute positively to young people's reflexivity, many Finnish interviewees had not received sufficient support for the vulnerabilities they were facing, which impacted their reflexive abilities negatively. Regarding mental health problems, learning difficulties, and neuropsychiatric disorders, which were very dominant in the sample, it was typically a question of not getting a timely diagnosis and the consequent lack of

individualised support, having to queue long times to gain access to services, or the complexity and fragmentation of the service network – the latter of which was an issue especially in Southwest Finland. In Kainuu, the much smaller population and limited resources have forced the different actors of the service network to a close collaboration benefitting those seeking support. Regarding guidance at school, while many Finnish interviewees discussed how it had benefitted them at least to a degree, there were also those who had received insufficient or even counterproductive guidance rejecting their own reflexivity and leading to disruptions on educational pathways. For example, 22-year-old Niina (FI_K_3) had received questionable advice from a guidance counsellor impacting her reflexivity and educational pathway negatively.

I was thinking about studying animal care in VET. And then I thought about studying to become a restaurant cook. But at that point our guidance counsellor was like your grades aren't good enough. That there's no point in even trying to apply. That it's much easier just to apply to our local general upper secondary school, because the required grades are so low there. [...] So, then I was like help! Like is there any place that I can apply to. It was really close that I didn't apply anywhere.

In Portugal, the narratives pointed to a largely unresponsive school system – where institutional rigidity and territorial inequalities intersected – characterised by normative pedagogical practices, a lack of meaningful listening, and technical support disconnected from the lived realities of students, thus, weakening their reflexive development. In the young people's narratives, schools had failed to create hybrid spaces of listening, mediation, and recognition, which are fundamental conditions for reflexivity on life course pathways. This institutional failure cut across both urban and rural settings. In Amadora, territorial fragmentation and the stigmatisation of certain neighbourhoods hindered integrated responses. In Tâmega e Sousa, the scarcity of resources and pedagogical rigidity obstructed inclusion. Despite their differences, both regions reproduced inequality through schools that rarely listened, offered poor guidance, and failed to challenge young people to think critically about themselves and the surrounding societal structures. In this relational void, one of the key institutional mechanisms for fostering reflexivity was lost: educational guidance. Thabisa highlighted the clear absence of support beyond the classroom: *"If I'd had support outside classes... it might have worked. I think I could have even started to enjoy it"*, showing that the availability of educational support was neither guaranteed nor sustained, and that the absence of stable, mediating pedagogical relationships weakened students' engagement with learning and self-reflection. 23-year-old Amahale (PT_A_13) recounted the humiliation she had experienced at the hands of a teacher: *"She basically meant I wasn't going to learn, that I wasn't worth the effort"*, exemplifying systemic forms of epistemic violence (Dotson, 2011), outright dismissing young people's cognitive potential and denying them the possibility of being recognised as legitimate thinking subjects.

Discussion

Drawing on life course research (Elder et al., 2015) with a focus on spatiality, this study examined how Austrian, Finnish, and Portuguese young people in vulnerable situations displayed reflexivity in educational transitions and disruptions, and how their reflexivity was supported, ignored, or hindered by their lived experiences of educational and labour market policies and practices in the different socio-spatial contexts.

In their narratives, the young people navigating their lives in the three differing transition regimes and six contrasting regional contexts displayed varying opportunities for and, therefore, varying degrees of reflexivity (Farrugia, 2013; Kim, 2023) and possibilities to turn reflexive awareness into agency (Farrugia, 2015). These variations, which were typically associated with the complexity and severity of their vulnerabilities, reflected opportunities for reflexive engagement that were strongly shaped by their socio-material conditions in each of the three countries. Thus, reflexivity should not be seen as a “fixed” inherent trait of individuals. Instead, it is constructed through a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process shaped by a variety of actors and factors (Tikkanen et al., 2026), including policy orientations, institutional cultures, and spatial disparities. In other words, our findings demonstrated that reflexivity is not an individual psychological attribute but a socially and institutionally mediated learning outcome. Intersecting vulnerabilities, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, migration background, racial-ethnic minority status, and mental health issues, typically constrained young people’s reflexivity – not because they did not have sufficient critical thinking abilities, but because they were overwhelmed by structural pressures and their circumstances. Vulnerabilities also created additional needs for individual reflexivity, which is a demanding skill for any young people to develop even with ample resources.

Although support structures exist in all three countries, they vary widely in accessibility, quality, and responsiveness at national and regional levels (Benasso et al., 2022), reflecting different transition regimes and governance logics. In some contexts, reflexivity is more systematically scaffolded through coordinated guidance and structured services, whereas in others it remains fragmented, reactive, or narrowly oriented towards rapid labour market placement. This relates to factors ranging from the organisation of and collaboration between institutional sources of support, to the professionalism and institutional attitudes (Heflinger & Hinshaw, 2010) of the experts working with young people, i.e., the habitual ways institutions and their professionals perceive, relate to, and prioritise the needs of young people. As illustrated time and time again through young people’s lived experiences of policies and practices, all too often institutions failed to provide young people in vulnerable situations with individualised, context-sensitive, and timely support for navigating their pathways in biographically meaningful ways. Due to the lack of spaces where reflexivity could have been developed dialogically and supported both in life course transition points and over time, instead of well-informed and strategically reflexive decisions, educational and occupational

choices often appeared accidental or externally imposed. The choices were also often shaped by socio-economic pressures, gendered (family) expectations, and urgency to secure income, illustrating how multiple actors and structural forces intersect in the construction of both learning outcomes and educational pathways. For example, dropping out of education, which typically followed circumstantial educational decisions made with limited opportunities for reflexivity, emerged as a result of a process of systemic disconnection and inadequacy of differentiated support (Dupéré et al., 2015; Hilal et al., 2024), not as an absence of individual aspirations and motivation to engage in education. In this sense, early school leaving appeared as a cumulative outcome of misaligned institutional responses and constrained opportunity structures. Nevertheless, internalised meritocracy beliefs (Ho, 2024), which were evident in many young people's narratives, led to feelings of guilt and self-blame, which affected their self-images negatively and added to the burden of the vulnerabilities of their situations.

In Austria's employment-centred regime, the emphasis on standardised placement often constrains reflexivity to labour market needs, whereas Finland's universalistic model encourages exploratory reflection but risks choice-anxiety within a complex "maze" of options, and the complexity of service networks decreases the accessibility of support especially for those in most vulnerable situations (V Järvinen et al., 2024a). Conversely, the institutional "status vacuum" in Portugal's sub-protective regime often subordinates reflexivity to the urgency of immediate survival or familial reliance. These national trajectories are further stratified by spatial injustices, where limited regional opportunity structures can turn reflexive awareness into a painful awareness of the lack of biographically meaningful options (Adams, 2006). Our cases all demonstrate this, although with specific declinations. In Finland, while metropolitan areas concentrate economic prosperity, the northern and eastern regions, such as Kainuu, face significantly lower living standards and increased risks of poverty and social exclusion. In Vienna, spatial inequality manifests as a supply-demand gap; there are more youth seeking apprenticeships than available positions, forcing young people into non-preferred working paths. In Portugal, peripheral and rural regions, like Tâmega e Sousa, suffer from higher rates of early school leaving and underachievement due to resource scarcity and a relational void in schools that fail to provide relevant guidance. We observed that spatial inequalities often compound existing social inequalities (see Skattebol & Redmond, 2019) through specific territorial mechanisms. In more deprived contexts, the fragmentation and stigmatisation of neighbourhoods can create barriers to integrated policy responses that can lead to institutional invisibility. Institutions may even exercise "epistemic violence" where a student's cognitive potential is dismissed outright based on their background or location.

Spatial injustice also shapes access to education, training, and employment opportunities (Cefalo et al., 2026; Petrescu et al., 2021). As shown by our results, even when young people in vulnerable situations had opportunities to develop reflexive awareness of their positions, spatial constraints and institutional

shortcomings often prevented them from acting on it. In this regard, the relevance of our contribution stems from highlighting that educational quality cannot be reduced to measurable performance indicators but must also encompass the institutional and spatial conditions that enable young people to develop and exercise reflexivity in meaningful ways. This stresses the need for context-sensitive, relational approaches to guidance and other forms of support for youth that account for both material conditions and subjective needs and aspirations. Supporting reflexivity as a transversal learning outcome is, therefore, not merely an individual-level intervention, but a structural and relational responsibility of educational and labour market institutions. For youth-targeted educational and labour market policies to achieve their goals, such as building their career management skills (e.g., Barnes et al., 2020), institutions cannot overlook the importance of enabling and supporting the development of reflexivity as a transversal skill and, thus, a key learning outcome for young people, when educational quality is understood beyond measurable performance and the aim is to move towards enabling equitable life course navigation for all young people.

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