The Role of Learning Experiences for the School-to-Work Transitions of Young People in Vulnerable Situations in Bulgaria

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Ролята на учебния опит в прехода от училище към работа на младите хора в уязвимо положение в България

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The authors declare no known conflicts of interest.

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Авторите нямат конфликт на интереси. Кореспонденцията, свързана с тази статия, да бъде адресирана до Сийка Ковачева, катедра „Приложна и институционална социология", Пловдивски университет „Паисий Хилендарски", ул. „Цар Асен" 24, Пловдив 4002, E-mail: siyka@uni-plovdiv.bg

Postmodernism Problems / *Проблеми на постмодерността*
Vol.15 , No.2 , 2025, ISSN: 1314-3700, https://pmpjournal.org
https://doi.org/10.46324/PMP2502139

Abstract

The paper explores how, in the context of social, economic, and political crises and different vulnerable situations, young people in Bulgaria perceive and use their learning experiences in making the transition from education to employment. We focus on the life course perspective, examining the learning experiences as influenced by both the specific historical context and the local structure of opportunities and constraints. For the paper, we analyzed a total of 20 interviews with young people between the ages of 18 and 29, affected by diverse factors of vulnerability – ten from the socio-economically thriving Plovdiv district located in the South Central region and ten from the socio-economically declining Gabrovo district located in the North Central region. One of the important findings of our study refers to the beneficial link between formal education and non-formal education, which helps young people in vulnerable situations to make prompt, more conscious, and adequate choices for their future and career orientation. The analysis confirmed that the regional inequalities in terms of access to opportunities for quality education and satisfactory employment strongly shape young people's educational choices and academic achievements, but it also highlighted the importance of the subjective agency of young people. The young should have greater awareness and a higher willingness to take advantage of the diverse education and training opportunities.

Keywords: learning experiences, vulnerable youth, school-to-work transition, subjective agency, regional inequalities

Резюме

Статията изследва как, в контекста на социални, икономически и политически кризи и различни уязвими ситуации, младите хора в България възприемат и използват своя опит в обучението, за да осъществят прехода от образование към заетост. Фокусираме се върху перспективата за жизнения път, която разглежда учебния опит като повлиян както от специфичния исторически контекст, така и от местната структура на възможности и ограничения. За целите на статията анализирахме общо 20 интервюта с младежи на възраст между 18 и 29 години, засегнати от различни фактори на уязвимост – десет от социално-икономически развиващата се област Пловдив, разположена в Южен Централен район и десет от социално-икономически изоставащата област Габрово, разположена в Северен Централен район. Една от важните констатации на нашето изследване се отнася до полезната връзка между формалното и неформалното

образование, която помага на младите хора в уязвими ситуации да направят по-бързи, по-осъзнати и адекватни избори относно своето бъдеще и кариерна ориентация. Анализът потвърди, че регионалните неравенства по отношение на достъпа до качествено образование и удовлетворителна заетост силно оформят образователните избори и академичните постижения на младите хора, но също така подчерта значението на индивидуалната им активност. Младите трябва да бъдат по-информирани и да имат по-голяма готовност да се възползват от разнообразните възможности за образование и обучение.

Ключови думи: учебен опит, уязвими младежи, преход от училище към работа, индивидуална активност, регионални неравенства

ARTICLE INFO:
Original Article
Received: 20, 10.2024
Revised: 10, 01.2025
Accepted: 28, 05.2025

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Introduction

Over the last few years, Bulgaria has faced several crises that will continue to shape the country's social, economic, and political processes. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has undeniably transformed both the education system and labour relations, creating multiple challenges for young people, especially those in vulnerable situations. The 2022 military aggression of Russia into Ukraine, continuing for a third year, has led to an increase in the migrant flow of Ukrainian refugees to Bulgaria and has questioned the country's energy supplies, which has also increased widespread social insecurity. Parallel to these processes, Bulgaria is experiencing political and economic instability, manifested in frequent changes of the executive authority and a significant rise in inflation. The paper explores how, in this social context and vulnerable situations, young people in Bulgaria perceive and use their learning experiences in making the transition from education to employment. As a result of globalization processes, today there are changes in youth transitions (Du Bois Reymond, 1998; Tomanović, 2019). There has been a de-standardisation of youth transitions, mainly linked to extended periods of study, economic change, increasing labour market insecurity, and labour flexibilisation (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998). The period between completing secondary education and finding the desired job is now longer, and combining work with post-secondary education is perceived rather as an unstable period for young people, regardless of their social background (Corica and Otero, 2020). The increasing uncertainty in the youth stage forces young people to act more cautiously towards their future, preferring to set short-term life goals and take action according to their current life situation (Leccardi, 2012).

The data analysis in the paper draws on a life course perspective towards the educational paths of young people in vulnerable situations. In addition to being set in a specific historical context, the learning experiences of the interviewees are examined as influenced by the local structure of opportunities and constraints. Education-to-work transitions of young people are strongly influenced by the degree of urbanisation, the level of economic growth and labour market development in the regions. The dynamic of rising regional inequalities is gaining speed in the past ten years influenced by the economic policies in Bulgaria, including the ways of distribution of European funds among regions and the regional fiscal policies (Nenov, 2023). We first chose two economically contrasting districts in the country and then in each of them

we interviewed about ten young people who were in diverse vulnerable situations. We explore the educational choices of the youth and the level of support from family and institutions, and then we systematize the main barriers they face in the transition from education to employment. Their work experiences and future career prospects are analysed, again taking into account the learning experiences and the importance of the support received at the family and institutional level. Special attention is paid to the subjective agency of young people in this process. We acknowledge that exploring young people's ability to formulate and realise their life projects is essential for a better understanding of the vulnerable situation they find themselves in, and will help to formulate more adequate policies to support the transition to work of young people in the most disadvantaged positions.

Theoretical framework

According to the life course perspective (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003), the individual life course is laid in a certain historical time and social place, which affects its specific construction. The individual actively constructs his/her life course through the choices made and actions, taking into account the opportunities and limitations of the given social environment. The same life transitions and life events may affect an individual's life course differently, depending on the life stage in which they occur. The life courses of individuals are strongly intertwined, and the occurrence of certain events in the life of a relative can affect our life development. Human development is a continuous process, and it is necessary to examine human life in its entirety and not take into account only one specific stage of it. The life course develops in different life domains, which are interconnected and influence each other (Mayer, 2004), which in turn correspond to the differentiated spheres of present-day societies (Heinz, 2010). The life course is the set of trajectories that the individual follows in his/her life development in the field of education, labor, family, and residence, as individual behavior is limited by the historical context and the available social institutions (Elder, 1998).

Within the life course theory, the analysis works with the concept of life trajectory, which is a set of social roles occupied and played by the individual in different social spheres of life (education, employment, personal life) in a certain social context, determined by the current social structures and institutions. As a result of individual life choices and life chances provided by existing structures, the individual takes a certain line of life development, with which he constructs his own life trajectory (Elder, 1998). Life trajectories often include multiple life transitions (from school to work, from parental home to own home and family, transition

to parenthood, etc.) (George, 1993). The individual has a global life trajectory within which several other trajectories (marriage, professional, residential) can be distinguished. The youth stage is a dynamic period of life, during which various transitions take place (from school to work, from a lonely life to marriage and parenthood). Nowadays, we can talk about linear and non-linear or de-standardised transitions. Such a distinction is possible because of the strong influence of cultural, economic, and social changes, which lead to the 'weakening' of the influence of tradition and, at the same time, 'increase' the importance of individualisation processes. Giddens (1991) talks about 'choice biography', in which the personal choice of the individual becomes increasingly important in the course of constructing his/her life course (see also du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003).

In times of intensification of the economy and rapid expansion of the private sector, education and its role, both in the private lives of individuals and in social development in general, are changing. One of the main problems that is becoming more and more relevant today is the extent to which the education provided meets the needs of the market and whether the education system is sufficiently effective. The term 'learning outcomes' is increasingly used in European education and training policies (Prøitz, 2014). The 2017 EQF recommendation defines learning outcomes as '…statements of what an individual should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy'. They are a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and understanding that an individual will achieve as a result of his/her successful engagement in the learning phase (Adam, 2006). At the threshold of the 21st century, Bulgarian youth tend to increase educational aspirations and strive to achieve higher educational achievements (Boyadjieva et al, 2001). The new challenges, as a result of dynamic living conditions and universal social insecurity for individuals and societies, create the conditions for rethinking the essence of education and, in particular, lifelong learning. Studies (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2022) have found the positive impact of lifelong learning on the ability of individuals to cope with life's difficulties and challenges, which helps not only their own well-being but also that of their surroundings.

Globalisation creates both the conditions for the development of new innovations and leads to an increase in economic and social changes, and creates a sense of instability. The increase in overall insecurity is directly replicated on the most vulnerable social groups through locally established employment systems, education, social regimes and family models (Mills

and Blossfeld, 2003). On the basis of existing forms of employment, educational opportunities, social policies and cohabitation models, young people in the transition stage to adulthood make conscious choices and take specific decisions relating to their employment, family and reproductive careers. Vulnerable groups are those who, under the influence of physical, emotional, material or social factors, have a propensity to risk and danger of worsening living conditions. Some of the factors that can predispose or enhance vulnerability are: physical or mental disabilities, difficult family constellations, low social support and resilience, critical life events (illness or sudden death of relatives, substance addiction), lack of skills and internal motivations, ethnic or sexual orientation discrimination, etc. (Bendit and Stokes, 2003). The youth period, as a key transition stage in the life course when young people make their first conscious choices, is perceived as one of the periods with high levels of vulnerability risk (UNDP, 2014). In Bulgaria, young people who are in the most vulnerable situation and most in need of employment support often remain the most excluded from support programmes (Krasteva, 2019). Research in this field also focuses on the attitudes of young people about the work of official institutions in the country. The results indicate high levels of mistrust on the part of young people (Lavrich et al., 2019; Mitev et al., 2019; Krasteva, 2019). Qualitative research confirms, on the one hand, the inadequacy of the institutions and the measures and services implemented by them, aimed at supporting young people in vulnerable situations at the stage of transition from education to employment, and, on the other hand, highlights the need to apply an individual approach when working with different groups of young people experiencing difficulties on the labour market (Kovacheva and Hristozova, 2022).

Data and Methods

The empirical data used are part of an ongoing international project, CLEAR[1], in which Bulgaria is participating together with 7 other European countries. It aims to understand the factors that influence the quality of learning outcomes in Europe in order to realize the potential of young people, especially those in vulnerable and disadvantaged situations, by fostering their

[1] The research project Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of Under-Achievement in the Life Course (CLEAR) is exploring the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across European regions. It is designed as a multi-level, mixed-method study with transversal participatory elements. Conducted over three years (2022-2025) in eight EU countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain –, the project intends to spark innovative policy solutions and enhance social upward mobility of young people. For more information, please visit our website: https://clear-horizon.eu/. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme under Grant Agreement No. 101061155.

ability to achieve meaningful goals in life. Both cases of young people who are currently experiencing significant difficulties in training and finding employment, and those who have already come out of the difficult period are presented in this paper. We do this in order to understand how young people are coping in the course of the transition to employment, but also to understand how they are reassessing the educational and employment choices they have already made. The main research tasks were to examine: the family as a source of help, advice and values for young people or on the contrary, the lack of support for learning and emotional neglect; institutions as a source of help; the learning experiences in school and the experience of non-formal learning; the learning outcomes (achieved skills or the lack of them); the subjective agency of young people in the process of their education and school-to-work transition.

Youth transitions are embedded in particular social contexts, and it is important to capture the impact not only of the national but also the local context. Following Soja (2009), who draws our attention to the concept of space which both influences and is influenced by social agents, we first selected two regions in Bulgaria at the NUTS 2 level with contrasting scores on the main indicators related to education, economy, and demography as measured by Eurostat. Then we chose two sites at the NUTS 3 level in each of the regions: the Plovdiv administrative district in the South Central region as a socio-demographically thriving and the Gabrovo administrative district in the North Central region as a socio-demographically declining.

A total of 20 in-depth interviews with young adults are used for the paper – 10 in the Gabrovo district and 10 in the Plovdiv district. The young people interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 29 and were affected by diverse factors of vulnerability, such as an underprivileged ethnic minority background, lack of parental care, experiences of domestic violence, and spells of long-term unemployment. A balance has been achieved both in terms of their vulnerability status (currently or previously) and in terms of whether or not they belong to an ethnic minority. All young adults interviewed were born and raised in Bulgaria, except for a woman, a Ukrainian refugee. We gained greater access to young people living in the two regional cities (Plovdiv and Gabrovo), where most youth centers, social and employment institutions providing support were concentrated. As a result, young people from smaller settlements (municipal towns and villages) are underrepresented.

The fieldwork was conducted from January to February 2024. The main channels for recruiting young people for the interviews were: experts who participated in the expert focus groups conducted previously in both regional cities; employees in local and regional non-profit organisations actively working on a variety of initiatives targeting youth in vulnerable situations; heads of state social institutions and street-level professionals that worked with young people from poor families or without parents; employees of local employment offices and educational mediators supporting ethnic minority youth. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed via approved transcription software. The main themes emerging from the interviews are presented and discussed using pseudonyms[2] of the interviewees and quotations in young people's own voices.

The next paragraph presents the results of the research, which are presented separately for the two regions – first the Plovdiv interviews are commented on, and then those in the Gabrovo district. We begin with a brief description of the regional characteristics and attitudes of the interviewed youth towards the opportunities and constraints available in the specific social environment of residence. Then we focus on their educational experience and the impact it has on their learning outcomes and career experiences, and prospects, emphasizing the support at the family and institutional levels and the degree of subjective agency in making the school-to-work transition. In the end, some more general conclusions are drawn based on the thematic analysis of the interviews in the two regions.

Findings

Results from the Plovdiv region

Among the interviewees, we outlined four main life course patterns focusing on their educational achievements: early school leavers, young people in their last years of high school, university students, and young people experiencing difficulties in the transition to work. Considering the other major life transitions, there was a woman who had a child and a woman who was engaged. The housing arrangements were very diverse – from still living in the parental home (alone or with the parents) or a state social home to renting a flat individually or shared with relatives. There was also a woman who had been living with her partner in an independently purchased apartment.

[2] The pseudonyms are chosen by the interviewees themselves or by the interviewers.

The Plovdiv district is economically thriving. It has a population of 662,907 people and a territory of 5,973 square km. The centre of the district is the city of Plovdiv, which hosts 8 universities that attract young people from all over the district and the Southern part of the country. In their regional profiles, IME gives the district the best score in population development, best in infrastructural development and ecological protection, an average economic growth, economic activity and education (IME, 2022). The district's economy is dominated by the services.

Although the region is rich in educational institutions with access to a wide variety of specialties, there are often not enough vacancies in the local businesses, and young people are forced to move to the capital to have an opportunity to find a job in their specialty. However, educational opportunities are mostly identified as sufficient by young people living in smaller towns near Plovdiv because this allows them to combine education with employment without having to leave their home towns. The lack of convenient logistical organization between large cities and more remote areas significantly reduces the opportunities for training and work, as well as for combining the two activities, especially for lower-skilled young people. Silvia, a 29-year-old woman with a university diploma, who for a long time experienced difficulties in finding permanent employment, summarizes that:

> I do not consider it a good outcome and development for this city, as it is super over-built, and at the same time, there is no public transport, there are not many interesting things to do here, although the city is growing. The second-largest city in Bulgaria does not offer a particularly wide variety of jobs and good pay.

The interviewees in the Plovdiv district shared both some positive and some negative experiences at school, which have influenced not only their school results but also their personal development and self-esteem. Neli, a 21-year-old woman who grew up in a small town near Plovdiv, shared the attitude of her primary education teachers, who have purposefully limited her opportunities for personal development, and this has subsequently affected her self-confidence and attitude to education:

> In elementary school, I was undervalued. I think that some of the teachers even saw in me some kind of a threat or competition, and therefore did not choose me for certain projects, positions, when there were extracurricular activities, recitals, or something like that. And I was often on the sidelines, on the periphery, for those very reasons, I felt very depressed.

Two other interviewees reported experiencing physical and mental bullying at school by their classmates. In his primary education, Marin, a 22-year-old Roma man, was often bullied because of his being overweight and this harmed his behavior. He has repeatedly sought support from his class teacher, principal and psychologists, as it has come to a point where he 'avoided going to school', which negatively affected his school performance.

Regarding the positive learning experience, it can be considered in two directions – in formal education and in various non-formal trainings and initiatives in which some of the interviewees have taken or continue to take part. Vera, a 23-year-old Roma woman, values very highly the life lessons she has received from her teachers because they have developed her as a person and help her cope with the challenges she faces: "I really did not like this subject [mathematics]. But it taught me a lot of deep thinking. It taught me that thinking about a problem is very important. And it helped me a lot – to think ahead". For Chris, a 27-year-old Jew with experience of studying abroad and largely led by his parents in his educational choices, the clash with fiercer competition at the secondary education has proved to be a motivating factor for his professional development, something that has helped him in the future, developing the necessary 'social skills to be a mediator in a more competitive environment'.

Volunteering and participation in informal training are particularly vividly represented in the life courses of Neli and Marin, who said that this experience has helped them develop many important personal qualities. For Neli, who at the age of 14 remained a semi-orphan and grew up in financial difficulties, this helped her overcome the difficulties in her formal education and changed her philosophy of life and dealing with life's problems in general: "I understood then that the balance between the two is the way to cope in our school, student duties, even in life". Active volunteering helps Marin to *'be more communicative'* and gain more self-esteem and confidence in his abilities. Thanks to this experience, the young Roma man had the opportunity to gain many contacts with people from different fields who saw potential in him. All this stimulated him to develop constantly and categorically alienated him from community traditions, which are limiting him to the creation of a family and children, and finding employment that brings financial security, but not satisfaction. For 18-year-old Reni, whose parents have died and who has been placed in a social institution for two years, participating in the Erasmus+ program has enabled her to 'get to know more new people, new perspectives' and to think a little more about her future and different strategies for coping with the difficulties ahead:

> There were all sorts of crazy people... one of the Pakistanis invited me out. And all evening we talked about the future, what we can do, what we want to do, and how we are going to do it, whether we have any plan in place, etc.

Among the interviewed young people prevail those who have always tried to have high results in their education, both to meet the expectations of their parents and to have a chance for better educational and career opportunities in the future. In his interview, an 18-year-old Stefan, who expects to inherit the family business, said that:

> Success is important for me as well as for the family, because they are very fond of my grades (...) if I manage to pass my exams, I will try to enroll in university so that I can reach their level.

Some of the interviewees were guided by the opinion of their parents and largely formed their educational achievements under their influence. Silvia decided to study the Spanish language in high school because her mother convinced her that she would face less competition on the labour market. After all, "it is something different and there will not be that many people in Bulgaria who know this language or who have studied it". Chris received a university degree at a Western university thanks to the intensive studying of the German language during his secondary education, which had been 'required of him by his parents'. Rosi, who is from a Roma family, shared about her parents: "They expected to get at least a basic education, because without education it is already very complicated".

Two Roma youths managed to enroll in tertiary education, despite resistance from their families. They link this achievement not only to greater opportunities to access more satisfactory employment, but also to the opportunity to achieve greater autonomy in their life. For Marin, who in the middle of his secondary education rediscovered his interest in acting, studying at the university helped him to develop his common culture and to make many informal contacts that showed him how many different perspectives he has. As Vera, who from a teenage age lives outside the parental family and follows her dream to study and engage professionally in the music and dance arts, shared:

> The biggest obstacle is my family, because many people in the big family disagreed with me studying (...) This was the hardest thing for me – to fight my family... to become independent, to change something in our family.

Despite the difficulties that the interviewed young people have encountered in their life courses, the majority of them have already undertaken or intend to undertake specific strategies

to counteract their limiting circumstances. The group of young people with experience of vocational training in their secondary education stood out. They have undertaken this form of training as an alternative they would follow in their future careers, or as an opportunity to gain initial work experience to provide them with temporary security and prepare them mentally for the challenges of career development. For example, 21-year-old Boris, living alone in a small town near Plovdiv, took this approach to his education already at the stage of choosing secondary education, repeating this model also at the stage of choosing tertiary education, because he believes that 'if you do not help yourself, there is no one':

R: Who made you choose the professional high school?

Int: I was looking for education and a career. I said to myself: "Someday it will be like a key to me."

R: In the beginning you told me that in addition to working, you have chosen to study the Bulgarian language with history at the university. How did you come to this decision?

Int: Again practical (...) It is as if the best possible choice is to pick up a few more keys for future variants.

Reni, who is willing to pursue music professionally in the future, does not regret that she will receive a high school diploma in the field of hospitality, because, in addition to accepting this as an alternative for initial employment, she believes that this experience would allow her to develop other valuable skills: "I very much want to work as a hotelier or as a waitress in the beginning... This job can allow me to communicate with foreigners and this is a plus, as I can practice my English language". Ani, an 18-year-old refugee, who will receive a diploma in the field of beauty industry, independently decided to take advantage of her free time during online training and has started working in her specialty: "I came to Bulgaria and started working. From a hobby, it has become my job". For her, this is an opportunity not only to gain work experience, but also to support the financial situation of her family, who have settled in Plovdiv together with her.

Two other interviewees decided to take a risk by reorienting themselves professionally. Vera did it surprisingly at the end of her secondary education because she felt she had the potential to develop in a different field and the new career in dancing art would bring her more satisfaction: "I decided that I should not do this thing if I do not do it from my heart". Chris did not have the confidence to work on the completed specialty and took the opportunity to try to

create an academic career by enrolling in a doctorate in a field that has always been of interest to him because “the things I am interested in are slowly starting to merge into the scientific and professional spheres”.

Results from the Gabrovo region

Among the interviewees in Gabrovo, we outlined four main life course patterns focusing on their educational achievements: early school leavers; young people in their last year of high school; university students; and young people who have made the transition to work. Considering the other major life transitions, there were two women and one man who had become parents while the housing arrangements in the interviewees were very diverse – from still living in the parental home or a state social home to renting a flat individually or sharing one with friends.

The Gabrovo district may be defined as an economically declining district with one major foreign employer and a high exodus of young people. It has a population of 103,404 people and a territory of 2,023 square km. Its economy has a high share of industry. Gabrovo is one of the first districts in population aging and has the second highest average age of the population (NSI, 2024). It has a low economic growth, a low rate of youth employment and a high out-migration rate. The centre of the district is the city of Gabrovo, which has been a leader in the creation of the country’s industry with its machine-building factories by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, but is now moving to much lower ranks.

Although the region provides some employment opportunities that allow a ‘normal’ life, it is much more difficult to find a satisfactory job with good career prospects. The region is not attractive to young people, for whom it is important to have access to more entertainment, social and health services, and a variety of formal and non-formal training. Along with the limited prospects for personal development, the interviewees also spoke about the unequal educational opportunities – insufficient vocational high schools and a lack of diversity in terms of university education. Many young people feel forced to leave the region to continue their education in the desired specialty and achieve career development. For Alexander, a 19-year-old man, who failed to complete secondary education: “Young people leave [the town] to study in bigger towns, because here you can’t choose what you want to learn”. Isabela, a 27-year-old woman with a university diploma in finance, considered that:

> There are schools here that... years ago were at a fairly high level, but not any longer, and at the moment very few students graduate from them and just drop out... perhaps

the problem is that even if they acquire some competences, there are already fewer places to apply them…

Our interviewees freely commented on their experiences while at school, clearly delineating what caused them disappointment and trouble and what brought them enjoyment and helped achieve better results. A most significant drawback turned out to be the covert and often overt discrimination that was faced by young people in basic school. About of third of the interviewees spoke about suffering from such unfair treatment by teachers and other classmates. Prejudices were commonly based on ethnic minority background. For example, Alexander spoke about the unfair treatment of children in the elementary school in a small town in the Gabrovo region by their teacher:

R: Because we're from a Turkish family and the missus, maybe she didn't like Turkish and Roma families a little and separated us.

Int: What do you mean?

R: She paid more attention to the other children, because they were rich, some were from good families – the chief of police, a family of lawyers... And that's why we were farther away from training, let's say.

This treatment resulted in his 'feeling horrible most of the time from the first to the fourth grade' as well as that he did not learn the basics of mathematics and the Bulgarian language, and Alexander entered the next grade with a new teacher completely unprepared. Isabela, who was with a Bulgarian majority background, pointed at poverty and parental status as the main grounds for discrimination by their teacher, who: "treated the children differently and separated us … divided the class into 'clever kids' that were tolerated and the rest of us".

More common was the experience of bullying in primary and secondary school which was commented upon by almost half of our interviewees. Some mentioned informing the teachers and the principal about the bullying episodes, but did not find they cared much. In one case, a parent interfered, again without much effect. For many, bullying caused psychological trauma that affected both their learning scores and personal self-esteem. In the words of Alexander:

The kids made fun of me because I couldn't do anything, and I wouldn't succeed in anything. The teachers didn't pay that much attention... And after that, I didn't even want to go to school. I didn't even want to set foot in the diner, so that the kids wouldn't see me.

Young people interviewed in the Gabrovo region had many positive experiences of learning as well. These were related to understanding the world around them, developing new skills, forming friendships, and developing a love for learning. As Nikol, a 27-year-old Roma woman, explained:

> I loved going to school. Most importantly, I loved studying… We went to school every day. The teachers were very good. The students were also well behaved... One day, there was a lot of snow, maybe literally up to here [raises her hand]. And I was crying to go to school… I remember the first day of school when I got my books. Such a joy.

The analysis of the interviews uncovered encouraging experiences of learning in after-school centres teaching music and drawing, as well as informal learning in daily communication with mentors, neighbours or in doing part-time jobs.

When telling the stories of their lives, the young spoke about their attitude to the school grades and wider life achievements. Many considered having high grades important for prestige among classmates, as well as for personal enjoyment and self-esteem. It was so for Anita, the 26-year-old single mother:

> I've always tried to be an excellent student. I studied hard not only for my grades, but for my own sake, in order to learn more and because at some point, this will benefit me, so to say… I say again, I've done it for my satisfaction, not just to be told 'good, you've succeeded, you have the max on the exam' and so on. I am pleased to see the results of, for example, hours of learning...

Some focused on pragmatic effects, such as better prospects to continue their education to the next stage or to get a university grant. Rada, an 18-year-old woman, placed in an institution, explained why she is studying hard to take the matriculation exams:

> Int: Is success important to you?
>
> R: A lot, yes. A lot. This is, perhaps, one of the most important things, because, if I take the exams, I will be able to go to Plovdiv – possibly – to continue with "food Industry". This is one of my biggest dreams. Maybe, although engineering and technology aren't easy at all.

Several interviewees defined attaining autonomy as their greatest achievement. Kristian, a 22-year-old man who is studying and working in parallel abroad, for example, said:

> I do not depend on anyone and have not depended on anyone since I set foot here… And I dare say from my current position that a young man must have that courage to go

> through the difficulties, knowing that he has the potential to develop himself and achieve what is worth it for him.

The young people we interviewed in our study have all met various difficulties in their life courses. External constraints have limited their range of options for learning, working, and forming relationships. This was particularly palpable in the story of the 27-year-old Roma woman, Nikol. She was stopped from going to school by her step-parents to marry into a family she did not know. When the interviewer asked her how she chose to stay at home rather than go to work, she said: 'No, no, I didn't have that choice. To this day, there is not much choice. Or as Alexander put it: 'No matter how much you plan, something else happens…'. Some demonstrated a waiting approach to life. They had some better visions for their futures, but did not feel able to pursue their life dreams in the current situation leaving them for an indefinite future.

Agency was highly esteemed by some of the interviewees who felt the need and ability to fight the challenges they met. In his long interview, the 19-year-old Hristo, who grew up in a social institution after his mother developed a drug addiction, kept saying: 'Everything's up to me…If you persist, you will achieve everything'. Atanas, another 19-year-old Roma man, placed in an institution, shared that: 'I always think about how I can manage on my own, without any support'. Anita, the single mother, put it in more words:

> I don't know if I could rely on a certain person. It's more like... to myself. It's all up to me… Sometimes life is complicated and a person feels he is in a tunnel in which he wanders, in a labyrinth, in a circle, but there is always a light, and he can come out if he wants to. And not only as long as he wants to, but if he makes an attempt, tries hard, because if a person just waits....., he does not get anywhere.

Discussion

All interviewed young people in both regions have experienced multiple difficulties in their life transitions. The early school leavers, who often work without a formal contract in temporary/seasonal jobs, find it difficult to ensure financial stability for themselves and their families. The young people with a minority background who have left school early and started a family often do not have the freedom to make their own decisions about their future and follow the patriarchal values and traditional life paths of their parents. Some young people whose school behaviour and educational achievement have been strongly limited by the violence and/or the extreme poverty in the family can form active strategies for their future

thanks to the social institutions in which they are accommodated and the emotional support of their mentors. Young people who have grown up in a problematic family environment with frequent conflicts between parents often rely solely on themselves in terms of educational and career choices. There are also young people who have already formed families but later have become victims of domestic violence, and are trying to achieve a balance between further training, current employment and childcare responsibilities. For the refugee in our sample, who is still studying and in parallel working to provide for herself, the lack of financial security creates significant difficulties in formulating clear and long-term future life strategies. Those who have already graduated from high school or university, often meet serious difficulties in finding a job in their acquired specialty and a major problem in their life transitions is the experience of frequent periods of unemployment and the inadequate social support provided by the state.

Most of the interviewees associate the learning outcomes with an opportunity to understand the surrounding world more easily, to acquire new skills and to have a greater chance of satisfactory employment in the future. Young people, in particular those who grew up in a family environment with constant conflicts, as well as those who grew up in social institutions, find in the school the necessary motivation to develop in the future and achieve success in training and work. For many, non-formal training has proved to be of most importance for their earlier career orientation. Some raised the issue of more individualised school guidance as a way to open more opportunities for the young.

The analysis highlighted the expectation common to findings of previous studies that linking formal education with non-formal education is the necessary change that would help young people in vulnerable situations to make prompt, more conscious, and adequate choices for their future and career orientation. Here we should also underline the role of family-type social institutions as a source of emotional support, but also as institutions providing their users with easy access to many informal trainings and programs. Many of our interviewees blamed themselves for their educational failures, but also highlighted many negative aspects of the educational institution: neglect and underestimation by teachers, bullying by classmates, lack of motivation by teachers in their work. These experiences have a serious impact on young people’s self-esteem, but also stimulate some of them to become more independent and ambitious in terms of training and formulation of educational and work strategies. For some of

the interviewees, university education has played a major role in their intellectual and personal development, which has opened up many new life opportunities for them.

The analysis revealed significant differences in the educational experiences and reflections on their life paths among the young people in the two regions. In Gabrovo, several interviewees told stories about discrimination on ethnic and poverty grounds in primary school, while there was no mention of this in Plovdiv. In the latter city, the young talked about competition among classmates for better grades – another emerging theme that was absent in Gabrovo. In addition, in the Gabrovo district there is a clear tendency that those who want to get VET have to leave their home town or village and move to the district centre Gabrovo. Many spoke about the low quality of educational opportunities in Gabrovo in comparison with those in the capital Sofia and abroad. Those who wished to get higher education mostly planned go to other regional centres or Sofia or abroad (if their parents can support them or if they could rely on support from associations targeting young people without parental care). In Plovdiv the young can choose from a wide range of VET and universities and few go to study in universities in Sofia or abroad. The satisfaction with vocational training opportunities in Plovdiv is not very high and most strive to achieve higher education. Studying at a vocational high school was chosen by some as a safety (Plan-B) strategy before applying to a university in case of failure at exams or in view of future labor market challenges.

The interviewed young people in the Plovdiv region associated their home towns with better employment opportunities. As a 21-year-old young man studying in Plovdiv explained: ‘We have a secure working environment in the industrial zone, we have many significant entrepreneurs... here the economy moves, funds circulate, and people explore them’. In Gabrovo, many interviewees focused on the lack of good jobs, so you have to take any available opportunity. Further differences that came up from the qualitative analysis are that many young people in Gabrovo pointed at the city's poor infrastructure, lack of good public transport both in the towns and between them, low-quality health services, and a deficiency of entertainment opportunities for the young. While in Plovdiv, the evaluation of such services was more balanced. While some complained of poor city transport, high population density, and over-construction of blocks of flats, others appreciated the lower prices of flats and abundant opportunities for youth leisure.

Conclusion

The life course is the set of trajectories that individuals follow in their life development in the fields of education, labor, family, and residence, and the individual behavior is impacted by the historical context and the available social institutions (Elder, 1998). We found the basic principles of the life course theory (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003). The principle of life span development is associated with the need to study human life in a longer perspective, because people's life courses are influenced by changes in their circumstances throughout life. Although our focus was on the educational trajectories of the young adults, we also looked into their experiences in the early years of family and projected their development into the expectations for the future. This allowed us to see that vulnerability is not a personal quality or a permanent status of particular groups or individuals, but a stage in the configurations of constraints and opportunities one passes through. Some of our interviewees have had a life start with severe limitations in terms of the economic and cultural capital of their parental families, others have faced critical life events such as losing a parent or becoming a victim of violence later in the life course. Many of the young participants in the study have passed through various crises and have found a way out of vulnerability, while for others the initial 'mild' drawbacks have accumulated along their life paths into a set of serious disadvantages limiting future prospects. As the principle of timing suggests it is also important to take into account when, at what life stage the individual experiences a critical event. As a whole reconstructing the biographical paths from the stories our interviewees we confirmed other researchers' observations about the uniqueness of the various life journeys from education to employment (Heinz & Krüger, 2001; Kovacheva et al., 2020; Benasso et al., 2022).

The principle of agency in the life course perspective posits that the individual actively constructs the life course through the choices and actions taken, taking into account the possibilities and limitations of the given social environment. The choices made at a certain stage of one's life have an impact on one's future development, as individual actions can both increase and limit future life chances. The ability to subjectively navigate one's educational and other life transitions is always dependent on the structure of opportunities (Roberts, 2018) in which the individual life is embedded but its role is crucial for the achievement of personal goals, which in turn reflect past experiences and create new visions (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The case of Atanas, the Roma young man, who was left by his parents to state care and did poorly at elementary school but later found his gift for music and ambition for university studies is an example of the effect of personal agency which was however inspired by the music teacher in

the out-of-school centre and the social workers in the children's home. Here it is important to see the link with another of Elder's principles – the principle of linked lives – an individual life is tied to the lives of others. Family members, neighbours, teachers, and friends may broaden the opportunities for exercising one's agency, but they may also be factors for undermining its very basis and severely limit one's coping strategy.

Cities are the result of social relations that create abstract spaces, where inequality often occurs not only in terms of income but also in the quality of the environment, public facilities, access to transportation, and the distribution of public services (Setianto and Gamal, 2021). In our study, Gabrovo emerged as a territorially stigmatised area (Beach et al., 2018) or, as a recent study put it, 'a demographic desert' (Lashkova, 2024). On its part, neither was Plovdiv the 'economic tiger' of the country, as a 2017 study of the Institute for Market Economy predicted (Sokolova, 2017). Both cities and the districts around them faced numerous grave socio-economic and educational problems. Yet, both in terms of distribution of resources and opportunities to use them, the latter region is somewhat privileged compared to the first one. The young people were aware of the role spaces played in their life courses and school-to-work transition. They often compared cities, regions and countries in their narratives. The life stories of the interviewees confirmed that regional inequalities in terms of access to education and the opportunity for gainful employment in the acquired specialty strongly shape young people's educational choices and academic achievements. In line with the greater diversity of educational institutions and easy access to employment, the experience of young people from Plovdiv district testified that they were more likely to act proactively, looking for new prospects for themselves. The analysis also highlighted the perception that creating diverse education and training opportunities for young people is not the final objective, but it should be matched with policy actions enabling young people with the knowledge and willingness to take advantage of them.

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