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To cite this article: Sonja Kosunen, Anna-Maija Niemi & Linda Maria Laaksonen (2022): Class, migrant background and misrecognition of capital in the university admission, Ethnography and Education, DOI: [10.1080/17457823.2022.2089534](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2022.2089534)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2022.2089534>



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Published online: 23 Jun 2022.



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Class, migrant background and misrecognition of capital in the university admission

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss how class and migrant background intersect when students discuss their studies in general upper secondary education and their aspirations in university admission. We focus on the discussed social inequalities in student admission to one of the elite fields, medicine, in eight ethnographic interviews with students and fieldnotes concerning observations in two general upper secondary schools during an academic year. Admission to university-level medical education locally in Finland was constructed 'impossible for me' due to its high competitiveness. The symbolic violence in the self-perception and the misrecognition of capital in relation to interviewees' multilingual background did not function as mobilisable capital in the national admission process. Admission becomes a platform for misrecognition of cultural and economic capital and for educational exclusion of working-class young people from migrant backgrounds from the medical profession. This happens on the surface in public and private education and health care even in a tuition-fee-free education system.

KEYWORDS

Social class; migrant background; ethnography; admission; university

1. Introduction

In this article, we analyse the educational aspirations, experienced restrictions and embedded procedural inequalities of young people from working-class and migrant backgrounds aspiring for studies in medicine at a university. We combine conceptually the mobilisation, transformation and misrecognition of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 2004; Youdell 2006), and the hidden privatisation of public education (Ball and Youdell 2008; Beach 2010) in our analysis on the educational paths and aspirations of these eight young people.

Investigating who goes where and who does what are at the core of studying the inequalities embedded in different educational transitions (Reay, David, and Ball 2005). We analyse the emerging symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2018) through the concept of misrecognition of capital and its interpretation as non-valuable capital (Skeggs 2004). In addition, we analyse the social construction of impossible

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learners (Youdell 2006), and the role of hidden privatisation and the usage of private economic capital in the context of university admission in a tuition-fee-free higher education system in Finland. Educational inequalities do not operate only through the ‘structure of opportunities provided by the family’, but they are also reproduced in the interactions of many political, institutional and social factors (Tarabini and Ingram 2018, 3). Thereby, as the intersectional studies comprising the theme of privatisation of public education are still few (see Holloway and Kirby 2020; Ho, Park, and Kao 2019), we analyse the intersection of class and migrant background and the ways in which these students are describing their admission to national and international public and private higher education (HE) markets.

Generally, the intersections of class, race and gender are known to produce different social positions in educational transitions for young people from different backgrounds (e.g. Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Beach and Puaca 2014). The ways in which even the Nordic countries are able to produce egalitarian access to high-quality education irrespective of these differences has been questioned (Beach 2017). Processes of marketisation, privatisation and deregulation have been shown to be present even in the Nordic context (Dovemark et al. 2018; Kurki et al. 2018), all of which influence the ways in which young people manage to operate in the sphere of educational transition. This terminology used in the article, even it is originally developed in more stratified settings than the Nordic countries, seems to be analytically relevant now, as the processes of marketisation and privatisation are also hollowing the primarily public education systems, such as Finland (see Seppänen, Thrupp, and Lempinen 2020). Furthermore, the logic of action taken by the Finnish middle classes in educational choices seems to follow very much the distinctive lines of middle classes elsewhere (see, e.g. Tarabini and Ingram 2018; Van Zanten 2009). Thereby, given the notion that some of the educational inequalities are not as visible as in some other contexts, the exclusionary mechanisms in educational choice and selection need to be investigated.

The interconnections of hidden privatisation and commercialisation of public education and public health care are crucial questions in (re-)producing inequalities in education and society at large. Ball and Youdell (2008) describe the ways in which private educational providers enter the field (exogenous privatisation) and the ways in which consumerist discourses are adopted from the private sector to public education (endogenous privatisation). As it comes to these two types of hidden privatisation (Ball and Youdell 2008), they both have an impact on the fundamental values underpinning public education and health care, such as curriculum and treatment decisions and education delivery (Beach 2010). Dennis Beach points out how the

‘bottom line’ is the key question as to whether education and health care should be about providing people with opportunities to develop their fullest potentials as members of society or whether they are simply services to be sold to the same people as client-consumers who have merely become targets for marketing. (2010, 559)

There is a general trend of responsabilisation of the educational consumers, i.e. changing the citizens into active consumers of educational services, when the responsibility over their (or their children’s) success (or failure) in the system remains with them, as consumers. Using public services therefore turns into a private choice. (Beach 2010; Beach and Puaca 2014; Erixon Arreman and Holm 2011; Kosunen et al. 2022).

Our analysis focuses on ethnographic interviews with eight young people who wish to pursue acceptance in a medical programme at a university in Finland or abroad. The data comprise these interviews and field-notes from two upper secondary schools over a period of 6–9 months each in Helsinki-metropolitan area, Finland. In two parallel ethnographic research projects on general upper secondary education, we noticed a similarity in the analysis, which was a group of students from migrant and working-class backgrounds aspiring for studies in medicine. We analyse the socially and relationally constructed ways by which these young people describe their aspirations to study medicine from their current social setting (see Tarabini and Ingram 2018), and the mechanisms through which educational inclusion and exclusion seem to operate with these students (see Youdell 2006; Beach and Dovemark 2019). We aim to clarify the ways in which different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1984), and their transformations and misrecognition operate in the intersection of class and migrant background in the educational paths of these young people. The Finnish education system does not officially include educational dead-ends; however, it seems that having and mobilising the relevant forms of capital in university admission also includes financial aspects, which in the tuition-fee-free system are considered somewhat irrelevant in public discussion. In this article, we explore the ways in which money is used in the surfaces between public and private education in university admission and how economic inequalities are embedded in the interview talk of these eight young people. The analysis brings new insights to the academic literature on the relation between privatisation of public education and health care (see Beach 2010) in the Finnish context, where both of them are reputedly mainstream (see Kallio 2008). Simultaneously they seem to be hollowed from the inside by the processes of privatisation and economic inequalities in complex ways. More needs to be known about the mechanisms excluding some of the prospective medical doctors out of public education and eventually any medical education.

2. Conceptual framework: misrecognition of capital and impossible learners

Our theoretical standpoint adheres to forms of capital and their transformations (Bourdieu 1984) in the field of education. We analyse, how the mobilisation and the lack of capital influence the positions of the actors in the field, in this case, the field of university admission. In the analysis, we focus on the interview narration of future aspirations in the field of education (see Reay 2018), particularly within the admission process to higher education in medical faculties. Pierre Bourdieu and Louis Wacquant (1992) widely discuss the power of the dominant classes through the concept of misrecognition of capital, in which the possession of different forms of cultural, social and economic capital is treated as an individual's personal psychologised characteristics such as motivation and talent. Apart from this, we wish to add to their notion the expansion of the concept by Beverley Skeggs (2004), who has stated that the actions and assets of the dominant classes are not only hidden *per se*, but also that the socially disadvantaged groups are perceived as holders of the non-valuable forms of capital and their embodiments in the field. When describing this pattern of symbolic violence (see Bourdieu 1977) that is experienced by the working-classes in the education system, Diane Reay (2018) describes how a sense of hopelessness and fatalism are central ways in which

the symbolic violence operates. Attached to this is Deborah Youdell's (2006) notion on so-called impossible learners, i.e. who the student can be or become, and it is closely scrutinised with the dimensions (self-conceptions as well as seen by the school's staff members) good or bad, ideal or impossible learners. These dimensions include some of the students in the educational practices of schools and exclude others also in the Finnish context (see also Niemi and Kurki 2014).

Social inequalities emerge in educational transitions and educational practices (Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Youdell (2006, 15) points out how school ethnographies have shown social class to be a key component in investigating inequalities in daily processes and practices (see also, e.g. Hjelmér and Rosvall 2017; From 2020; Huilla, Peltola, and Kosunen 2021). We analyse this notion in this study by focusing on the intersection of class and migrant background. Furthermore, Reay, David, and Ball (2005) have shown how usually the geography of HE becomes a determining factor as it comes to HE choices made by persons from working-class backgrounds. The local universities are the main option for them, as their other life conditions, such as family situations and life in the workforce require so, and that the transition to HE was considered risky (Reay, David, and Ball 2005, 86). In middle-class families, the internationally oriented careers of young people are often navigated in ways that are assuring and transmitting advantage (Maxwell and Yemini 2019).

Trying to illuminate working-class migrant students' experiences in society and the educational system is difficult, as the neo-liberal discourse of individualisation and different expressions of 'fulfilling one's potential' have become so dominant. Focusing the analytical lens on the descriptions of their aspirations and experiences of the students becomes a matter of overcoming the responsibility that has been put on the individual and their own success in the system (see Reay 2018, 25). The young people's aspirations of becoming medical doctors touch upon the fields of education and health care. It generally relates to the hidden privatisation (Ball and Youdell 2008) of public services, such as education and health care, and the commercialisation of public education (Beach 2017). Burchardt and Propper (1999) have developed the concept of private welfare class, by which they mean a group of population using private welfare services, such as education, health and social services. They state that in the context of the UK the members of this group usually come from highly educated, high-income and politically conservative backgrounds, and emphasise personal responsibility over collective responsibility. Such a group is small even in the UK, as many use public and private services in parallel. In the Finnish context, as can be expected, not all Finns have the possibility of choosing between public and private health services either, and this is strongly related to their economic resources (Kallio 2008). The use of private supplementary educational services is also socio-economically biased (Kosunen et al. 2021). Thereby we see economic differences influencing the stance towards privatisation of public education and health care, which are both embedded in the aspiration of becoming a med-student and having a career as a medical doctor.

Previous studies examining particularly access to medical studies have focused mainly on widening-participation policies (e.g. Griffin and Hu 2015) (which as such are non-existent in Finnish universities) and pointed out how applicants from lower socio-economic status backgrounds were under-represented among the admitted students, even more so, if they were women. After the admission, the ones admitted did not perform

any worse than other students did. (Griffin and Hu 2015). Thereby a large scientific interest should be put in the admission process. Additionally, intersectional studies on the usage of private tutoring on the side in the admission process are scarce, but there are some discussing the intersection of social class and ethnicity (see Ho, Park, and Kao 2019; Holloway and Kirby 2020). Holloway and Kirby (2020) present how the social gradient of buying private tutoring only cements social inequalities, even if in low-income families it could also enhance social mobility. Alongside private tutoring, particular language education programmes have been introduced in the Nordic contexts. Beach and Dovemark (2019; see also Fejes and Dahlstedt 2020) describe how in their study in Sweden many of the newly arrived migrants had aspirations of attending education programmes in health care and medicine, but even if being strategic in their planning, e.g. discussing different longer paths through vocational programmes first, only a few of them were able to achieve these goals (see also Laaksonen, Niemi, and Jahnukainen 2021 for Finland).

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Context

Upper secondary education in Finland is divided into two distinctive school types, general and vocational. The field of general upper secondary education in the capital area of Helsinki is stratified according to attainment, for which there are annual public rankings in the press. The schools in which this study has been conducted were in the lowest ranking quartile of those rankings. The general upper secondary school culminates with the final nationwide standardised test called the Matriculation Examination, which is currently applied as the main criterium in the selection for university admission. In Finland, young people with migrant backgrounds typically take longer to complete their general upper secondary studies than their counterparts with over-generational roots in Finland (FNAE 2017). The divide into academic and vocational secondary education has been considered as an instrument somewhat excluding working-classes from higher education (Jauhiainen 2011; Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Jauhiainen 2022). Earlier research has shown that students with migrant backgrounds in Finland end up in general upper secondary school less frequently in comparison to other segments of the Finnish population (see Jahnukainen, Kalalahti, and Kivirauma 2019), and there is an underestimation of their study skills. The students, who had aspired to a career as a medical doctor, have been guided towards vocational studies instead of general upper secondary studies (see, e.g. Kurki 2019; Laaksonen, Niemi, and Jahnukainen 2021), which has been named a goal dissonance (Beach and Dovemark 2019).

Finnish HE is described as a mass HE system with comparatively low levels of differentiation within the social-democratic welfare regime (Iannelli and Smyth 2008). There are far more applicants than study-places available in HE, and the competition to the most competitive disciplines such as medicine and law is harsh. Generally, 51% of the students' admission is based on their matriculation examination results, and for the other 49%, admission is based on the entrance examinations (Studyinfo 2020), even if there is annual variation in this. There is evidence of general over-representation of

young people from highly educated urban families in Finnish public¹ universities (Nori 2011), and underrepresentation of young people from working-class (Heiskala, Erola, and Kilpi-Jakonen 2021) and migrant backgrounds (FINEEC 2019) even with high prior school attainment. The proportion of people with migrant backgrounds in higher education is equal in comparison to the rest of the population, but the proportion is as high due to all international students studying in Finland and statistically belonging to the category (Larja, Sutela, and Wittig 2015). Despite the relatively low level of socio-economic differentiation in attainment in Finnish HE in international comparisons, earlier research has shown that the higher social classes choose the more prestigious fields in HE (Iannelli and Smyth 2008).

Generally, the most elitist and thereby distinct disciplines in Finnish universities based on the educational background of students' parents are medicine, law, economics, technical sciences and natural sciences (Kosunen et al. 2021). In order to be accepted in the most elitist one, medicine, an applicant needs to either succeed in the entrance exam or have achieved excellent grades in the matriculation examination. The particularly interesting part is that in Finland admission to medical studies does not include interviews. Nor is there a possibility of attending a private track in a private university, as there are none in medicine in Finland (Kosunen 2018). At Finnish universities, 875 students nationally were admitted to study medicine in 2019 (Vipunen 2020), which adds up to about 7000 medical students overall when counting all undergraduate and graduate students. In the year 2019, only 4.2% of all applicants for medicine were admitted. Institutional differences exist between the five universities providing medical studies, where the University of Tampere, with the most competitive admission in 2019, admitted only 3.2% of all candidates. (Vipunen 2020). In 2020 the universities decided that in the admission process the admitted students would need the fourth highest (scale 1–7) from Finnish as a second language, and the ones having Finnish as a first language could pass the university admission with the lowest acceptable grade (Ennsner-Kananen et al. [forthcoming](#)). This change was later cancelled.

Meanwhile, in 2019, 1120 students studying medicine abroad were receiving Finnish study support, having increased from 357 students in 2013 (KELA 2013, 2019). This represents an increase of 214% in six years. The most popular countries to study medicine in were Sweden (306 students), Latvia (231), Romania (154) and Estonia (104) (KELA 2019). Approximately 14% of all medical students either with a connection to Finnish universities or the Finnish study support system were undertaking their studies abroad. We interpret this as a symptom of high competitiveness in admission within the public sector.

Money plays a role in admission, despite Finland's absence of tuition fees for most students. Due to the uncertainty of admission, there is an expanding market for private tutoring for matriculation examinations and HE entrance examinations (Kosunen et al. 2022). To attend such courses, applicants need to invest money and time, which in most cases puts the applicants in economically unequal positions (Kosunen et al. 2021). It is mainly the offspring of the highly educated, who use and also profit from private tutoring in Finland as a part of the preparation for admission to the university in the medical faculty. Many of the admitted students come from affluent backgrounds and have used private tutoring. (Kosunen et al. 2021). In the Finnish context, there is a social class bias in attending private tutoring (preparatory courses) prior to successful

admission to university disciplines such as medicine and law; affluent applicants use these services more than others (for the UK see Reay, David, and Ball 2005). In medicine, more than 70% of the admitted students had participated in private tutoring (see Kosunen et al. 2021).

3.2. The material

The data analysed in this article comprise ethnographic interviews of eight students and field-notes of participant observations from two ethnographic studies in two general upper secondary schools in the Helsinki metropolitan area in two different field-work periods during 2017–2020.² Some of their students were travelling long school journeys in order to attend them, as they could not have gotten admitted to schools close to their homes with higher enrolment thresholds. In these schools, relatively many of the students came from working-class and/or migrant backgrounds, which we know from the student interviews in the larger project frame, and thereby the students in this article do not stand out from the general crowd in these schools. The only feature distinguishing them from the other students and the reason of choosing them for this study is their explicit aspiration to study medicine. We describe our approach as multi-sited (see Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009; Lahelma et al. 2014) and contextualised in current education policy (Troman, Jeffrey, and Beach 2006). For us, it means that we have jointly analysed the data from two separate fieldwork periods, in two separate research projects and two field schools. We consider the ethnographic field of this particular research topic as being composed of our fieldwork in these two schools as such but also by contextualising the research and analysis in a wider societal frame (see Marcus 1995). In other words, both the fieldwork and the analysis stretch out from particular institutions towards wider policy discourses, such as discourse on the privatisation of education and health care (see Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020; Troman, Jeffrey, and Beach 2006; Beach 2010). We studied the schools by participating in the lessons, breaks and various meetings, and by writing fieldnotes of the things we saw, heard and felt. The overall data comprise the field notes on the schools' different practices and how those appeared to us, as well as transcribed interviews (individual and group) with the students and the staff members.

Our eight students are aged between 16 and 20 and they studied either first, second or third year at a Finnish-speaking general upper secondary school at the time of the interview: most of them were in their final year. Some of them had attended language introductory programmes (for a Swedish counterpart see Beach and Dovemark 2019; Fejes and Dahlstedt 2020) before attending the general upper secondary school, and some of them had relatively large challenges with mastering academic Finnish. To contextualise the interviews, we reflected on them with selected fieldnotes from 50 school days. The interviews with five young men (Amir, Mehdi, Abdi, Ramin and Jasir³) and three young women (Sumaya, Khadija and Sofia) dealt with their current life situation, ongoing studying, and educational history and future aspirations. Most of them had average grades below eight in the scale 4–10. Jasir and Sumaya aspired for medical school in Finland (alone); Amir, Mehdi, Abdi, Khadija and Sofia for medical school first in Finland and if not there, then abroad; Ramin aspired to get into a medical school abroad (alone). All of them are racialised as non-white persons and had a

home language other than Finnish. They all participated in Finnish as second-language teaching. Some of them were born in Finland (Abdi, Khadija, Sofia and Jasir), and some of them were fairly recently arrived asylum seekers. Their backgrounds varied also in terms of social class when evaluating their class positions in their country of origin prior to migration. If parental occupation and income related to it were to be evaluated, their current family background would have been described as working-class. When asked in the interviews, the students told that currently, all their parents were either working in working-class jobs, were unemployed, or in one case had retired. Amir came from a former upper-middle class background, but after migration even his family members were currently working in working-class occupations. None of the parents of these young people had studied in the Finnish education system nor did they have any first-hand experience in it.

3.3. Analytical strategy

Our analysis was thematic and theory-driven, based on ethnographic and discursive reading of the data. First, this means that the approach to data reading was comprehensive, in a way that the analysis was influenced both by the fieldwork and by the theoretical literature we made use of (see, e.g. Lahelma et al. 2014). By discursive we mean that the focus of our interest was on the knowledge and meaning-making that our research participants produced within these educational practices which, in turn, are limited and enabled by certain policy discourses (see Tamboukou 2008; Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020). An example of this would be the Finnish as a second language (F2) classes, which were held in a separate classroom from those studying Finnish as a first language. The criteria for attending F2 were quite unclear. The grades in these two subjects suddenly had a different value in the higher education admission policies and practices in 2020 (Ennsner-Kananen et al. [forthcoming](#)), which lead to debates about changing classes among some of the students, which then the teachers either stopped or promoted as the ‘gate-keepers’ or enablers (Beach and Dovemark 2019). The policy-frame of reforming the admission to higher education is present in this analysis. After several reading rounds of the data, the analysis was conducted by categorising all the material related to the transition process to HE in the interviews as well as in our field-notes. After this, the material was thematised in line with the research questions and in relation to the theoretical frame of cultural, social and economic capital and their transformations.

Our research task is to explore, how the intersection of class and migrant background emerges in the social construction of the aspirations of the young adults pursuing medical studies in public and private universities either in Finland or abroad. We analysed, how the different forms of capital were to be mobilised and, arguably, misrecognised in these processes. This means analysing all material related to studying and courses in general upper secondary education, subjects to choose in matriculation examinations, the ways of attending courses and preparing for the examinations, the aspirations of one’s friends and family, one’s own aspirations and future plans, leisure activities, university admission plans, teacher-student relationships, strengths and difficulties in learning, money spent on studying in secondary education, money prepared to be spent in the future studies, and experienced inequalities in the life-course and the education system.

More conceptually, in the material we examined, the transformations of cultural capital from one form to the next: from embodied to institutionalised cultural capital. This was analysed as the discourse on the skills and knowledge perceived to be required in certain disciplines, such as mathematics and chemistry, relevant to the field of medicine and tested in the entrance examination. Second, we analysed the value of mastering Finnish, which is the language of instruction and studying at both upper secondary school and university. This was analysed as another form of embodied cultural capital, which could be recognised and be mobilisable in the field, and actually dominating the field. Then, we analysed the role of economic capital in gaining access to mobilise embodied cultural capital: this was in many cases discussed as a matter of buying extra-curricular private tutoring in the university admission, as their school attainment was relatively weak. Finally, we examined the talk on how the institutionalised cultural capital (medical degree) could subsequently be transformed into economic capital in the medical profession (for economic necessities and working-classes see Freie 2010). A significant factor in the analysis was the hidden role of economic capital enabling, or preventing, the admission to public and private HE. Our analysis considers the forms of capital these young people perceive they have or lack (i.e. are misrecognised in the field).

4. Results

4.1. Non-valuable cultural capital and the restricted local admission to medical studies

Our analysis of the ethnographic interviews and observation field notes highlighted the success in upper secondary education and the role of Finnish language proficiency as a mediator of HE choice. Nearly all interviewed young people from migrant backgrounds struggled with mastering Finnish, even if they were fluent in several others. Abdi, Jasir, Amir, Sumaya and Sofia described the different elements related to language proficiency, school success and obstacles in the admission process to tuition-fee-free public university education in Finland. In the fields-notes the staff of the schools often mentioned that the two occupations that are usually discussed with the students from migrant backgrounds are those of a medical doctor and a lawyer. The staff acknowledged the pressure these young people possibly get from their homes when aspiring for these well-recognised and appreciated study paths (see also Taylor and Krahn 2013). Generally, the reasonings of the students aspiring for programmes in medicine included elements of international mobility, occupational stability and a desire to help others:

... somewhere you can like study, be that profession in a certain country, but with a medical doctor certificate you can be wherever. Abdi

Jasir: I don't have any hobbies at the moment, because there's no time for that.
 Interviewer: No time for that.
 Jasir: Yeah. Because you spend pretty much time studying here at the upper secondary school. And then a dream job is a surgeon.
 Interviewer: Okay. Where did that come from?
 Jasir: I don't know. I've just got the feeling that I want to help people, so it started from that.

The interest in becoming a medical doctor goes hand in hand with Jasir's interest in studying in general. Jasir narrates his educational path as a storyline of growth and maturation. He mentions how he did not concentrate on studying during comprehensive school and only messed about, whereas during the 10th grade (additional year after comprehensive school) he managed to improve his grades and after that year, got into general upper secondary school. He seemed to be well aware that to get into studying medicine in a public university in Finland, you have to have good grades, especially in mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. He explains, however, that he had struggled with verbal exercises in mathematics all through school and participated in special needs education in mathematics, and he still gladly makes use of any additional teaching and support offered. In his interview narration, access to faculties of medicine in Finnish universities is described as being very demanding. Amir also considered admission to Finnish HE to be almost impossible, and that is why he had an alternative strategy:

Well in Finland it is really difficult, they take about 3.6% [into med school] of all [applicants], there are about 4500 applicants, and they take about 100–200, it is almost impossible in comparison to the grades [I] get, and then abroad you need a lot of money. So I don't know. Amir

Sumaya discussed the same themes Amir brought up. She said that she was struggling with the Finnish language and she made a distinction between herself and the students who spoke more fluent Finnish and were achieving good grades, but she also described herself 'a very motivated student':

Now I am in my second year and I have already undertaken all my courses and done the matriculation examination in three subjects. I hope to graduate in December. If I graduate, I would like to become a doctor. I am not going to give up. I don't know how I am going to make it, it is so hard to get into medical school here, but I want to believe I can do it. I have already gone through so much without giving up. I will not give up! Sumaya

Sumaya said that she had been practising Finnish a lot in her free time. She also explained that sometimes the teachers had allowed her to answer in English in course exams, so that she could bring out her knowledge, which was not possible in Finnish. This, however, would not be possible in the final exams. Instead, her grades had got better on the way as she had learned Finnish and that was a reason she was thinking that if she delayed her graduation in order to learn better Finnish, it would help her do better in the matriculation examination. Doing better will become highly important because the ongoing reform of HE admission emphasises the role of the matriculation examination. Matriculation examinations are in Finnish and, in order to succeed, the student needs an excellent level of knowledge of the Finnish language. Students, who study Finnish as their second language, had previously enabled some compensation points. Nowadays upon case-specific evaluation candidates with other first languages than Finnish receive two extra hours in order to correct linguistic errors in the exam instead of receiving extra points by request. Abdi considered that the extra time provided does not change his linguistic skills, as the problem is not on the pace of reading or writing, but the actual knowledge of grammar. Sofia also reflected questions of language proficiency and general upper secondary school studies:

There are so many things I just don't understand in Finnish. When the teacher tells me the right answer, I think I would have known it, but just not in Finnish. Language is the reason I can't get my answers in exams correct. It's hard, but you know the matriculation examination is in Finnish, and I don't think I could do it ... well I am not sure whether I still can do it ... but I could not do it if I would study only in English here. Sofia

As Sofia described, language certainly was a challenge to our interviewees (see also Laaksonen, Niemi, and Jahnukainen 2021). When asked about their own evaluation, how would they perform if they could answer in their first language for example in mathematics or biology, both Amir and Mehdi evaluated they would perform about 20% better, which for them in certain disciplines would mean a good grade (8/10) or even an excellent grade (9/10). Both knew more than four other languages well. Therefore, the connection between the embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) and linguistic skills in a language other than Finnish the young person knew, was not functioning as capital in the field of accessing HE in these most competitive disciplines, but was rather misrecognised as non-valuable capital (see Skeggs 2004). Simultaneously, some of the students pointed out that for working in multicultural societies one would think that a medical doctor, who is able to operate in several languages in addition to Finnish and English, such as Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish, would be of value. Possessing the skills that could lead to the institutionalised form of cultural capital in the form of acquiring a study place in HE in Finland are strongly interrelated with the recognition and misrecognition of different linguistic skills, not the actual content in mathematics or chemistry, for example. Our analysis, in contrast, showed that obstacles related to Finnish come on the way to materialising this aspiration (see also Laaksonen, Niemi, and Jahnukainen 2021).

There was an obvious mismatch of these young people's dreams, the form of student counselling they received and the viewpoint the staff had on their possibilities of succeeding in accomplishing those dreams in general. The staff often discussed the option of becoming a medical doctor as a 'good dream' to which it might take a 'detour' of a kind to get to (see also Kurki 2019). Many describe how it might be 'unrealistic' for these young people to gain admission to Finnish universities with such low grades and 'insufficient' skills in Finnish, which they consider being interconnected. Here, just as indicated by Högberg, Gruber, and Nyström (2020) in Sweden, the teachers become positioned both as helpers as well as gatekeepers of the Finnish education system for those with 'insufficient' linguistic skills. Some of the teachers and other staff at these schools seemed to emphasise that with as low grades as these students had, one could never be admitted to these disciplines in universities. Therefore, the relatively poor school performance, strongly interconnected to the level of mastering Finnish, would probably get in the way of this aspiration locally:

The problem is that I know it is almost impossible to be accepted to med school [in Finland]. But then of course I have an option, that if I don't get accepted to med school, I can apply to become a nurse and then, after graduating from there I could again apply to med school and the nurse education would probably help me there. Sumaya

This notion includes the idea of impossible learners (Youdell 2006): the staff seemed to hope that these aspirations, which also Sumaya brings up, would materialise, even if they were fairly sceptical towards them. The interconnection between the skills in the language of instruction and the general attainment in the content areas are two

different versions of embodied cultural capital. However, the lack of linguistic skills is preventing the actual performance of the knowledge in content, which then could be used as a tool for accessing higher education. Here the cultural capital (linguistic) these young people possess is lacking mobilisability in the national field of higher education and is thereby becoming non-valuable capital (Skeggs 2004) in the admission process to tuition-fee-free higher education.

4.2. Transformation and misrecognition of economic capital: obstacles in international admission

The harsh competition over study positions and the urge to create distinction to other applicants in medicine provide a space for marketing private tutoring and other private educational services, which in the Finnish context are still considered fairly marginal. Nonetheless, the use of private economic capital in the admission process was peaking up here and there during the whole period of our fieldwork, such as can be seen in this excerpt from our fieldnotes promoting private universities abroad:

Only two months before the matriculation examinations and five months prior to the university entrance examinations, a new advertisement in Finnish on one of the largest private tutoring companies had appeared in the lobby on the noticeboard of the high school.

Heading abroad for studies. We will help you to get into a European university easily and safely. Our student counsellors can be reached via phone, email or face to face. We will help you with everything related to the admission: from filling in the application forms to writing the motivation letter. We will take care of the admission process for free! As we operate as a representative of many universities in Finland, we can offer you the help in admission for free. 9/10 get the study positions of their dreams with our help. Come along!

The advertisement has a list of ‘medicine, economics, law, architecture, art, psychology, communications, journalism, pharmacy, etc.’ in this rank order. The poster has the logo of the company and a cappuccino with a figure of an airplane on the foam. I am wondering, what is this ‘operating as a representative’ of many Finnish universities, as all the universities are explicitly refusing from any co-operation with these private tutoring companies.

Field-notes from school 1, January 2020

The main two themes discussed including investing private money amongst the students in general were 1) preparatory courses aiming at improving success in the entrance examination to Finnish public universities (and to some extent courses aiming for matriculation examinations) (Sumaya, Khadija, and Amir), and 2) tuition-fees in private universities abroad (Khadija, Amir and Mehdi). Needless to say, attending private, tuition fee-based tutoring preparing the students for entrance examinations to highly competitive disciplines in Finnish universities, such as medicine, was not a popular practice among our interviewees, even if nationally more than 70% of the admitted medical students have attended a course (Kosunen et al. 2021).

Only Amir and Khadija had even considered attending preparatory courses preparing for entrance examinations, as they thought they would be excluded from the matriculation examination quota in admission due to expectedly low performance in the exam in Finnish. Khadija also attended courses preparing for matriculation examinations and was

planning to attend one prior to the university entrance examinations. In our fieldnotes, Amir was also asking for more information on preparation for admission to foreign universities from one of the private tutoring companies visiting the school, as the school's student counsellor seemed to be completely unaware of these institutions and considered that guiding students towards them was not their task. Both Khadija and Amir's school performance, especially in mathematics, was relatively low. In comparison, from what could be seen in our fieldnotes, some other students from upper-middle-class and Finnish-speaking backgrounds were participating in both types of courses during admission despite their far better school attainment and very good skills in Finnish.

Khadija was primarily seeking a study place in a Finnish university. She had previously participated in two private tuition fee-based courses when preparing for the matriculation examination. She had funded the courses with the help of her parents and a scholarship that she had received upon application. Khadija's experiences in the courses were rather critical, not due to tuition fees, but because of the pedagogical practices they used in the courses. Although Khadija had negative experiences from the preparatory courses, she mentioned those as a kind of a self-evident route towards studying medicine when she described her current plans to apply for a study place in a Finnish university:

- Khadija: A year ago I didn't know whether I want to go abroad or not [...] But now I don't think that it will be through to the final, that I try to apply for a study place in Finland. No matter of the city.
- Interviewer: Okay, in this year, did you also apply for [a study place in Finland]?
- Khadija: In this year I didn't because I was about to apply for a study place abroad. But then I didn't. So, now I try to, eee ... go to those courses. Preparatory courses for medicine.

In Khadija's talk, it is evident that she simultaneously criticizes the quality of teaching in such courses, but, for some reason, considers them relevant for her. This notion is in line with the findings of young people attending preparatory courses in medicine and law: many of them did not consider themselves to be 'geniuses' who would get admitted only with their individual preparation for the examinations, and they did not want to become 'losers' who did not get admitted. Therefore, they searched for certainty through private tutoring in an admission situation fuelled with uncertainty and perceived risks of failure. The prices of these courses, however, may be relatively high in Finland and cause economic restrictions for many (Kosunen et al. 2021), such as our interviewees. Khadija is the only one who sees their relevance for her and has managed to gather the financial means for attending such courses through a scholarship that she managed to get with the help of her school staff. This is an interesting overlap of public and private education: the public school helps in organising scholarships for students who wish to participate in private tutoring. The Finnish system of education does not include scholarships as such, at all. Even if on an individual level this is probably aching for more social justice, in practice, it legitimates the role of private tutoring, suitable and required for everyone in university admission to medicine.

Amir had checked out the options of preparatory courses but believed that a private tutoring course aiming at university entrance examinations might be helpful for some. He also stated, however, that this would mean people with a better 'level' than him, meaning the level of Finnish not only as a language but also general school attainment.

Therefore, he did not consider attending a course. By stating that the course might be helpful but ‘not for me’, Amir makes a distinction between himself and those who, with some extra help, might get admitted to Finnish universities in medicine through the general admission process. This can be seen as the embodiment of hopelessness related to symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2018), which, in Amir’s case, operates in the discourse through his relatively poor knowledge of Finnish, which, in turn, also results in poorer general school performance. His own position is, therefore, considered to be somewhere outside the group of ‘realistically’ competitive applicants in the context of public admission, even with help from private, individualised tutoring.

An uncontested relationship of using money in admission in this group was also introduced, which, in a Finnish context of HE, is still considered somewhat exceptional: many of our other interviewees considered using private money in university admission as a relevant option for them. They were aware of tuition fees in different countries.

I’ve decided that I’ll [go abroad] if I get money. Amir

Amir is aware of several tuition fees in other countries and points out that it would be impossible to amass such an amount of money. Nevertheless, the aspiration of applying abroad to study in a medical school is also very much alive with Mehdi, as he considers admission to Finnish HE impossible or at least very difficult.

[I] will try in Finland first, and if I don’t get admitted, as in Finland it is really impossible to get into a university, like, really difficult, if I can’t do it in Finland then I have to go abroad.
Mehdi

Mehdi explicitly states how going abroad would not be his first choice, but in case he does not get admitted in Finland, then he has to, as he wants to attend higher education in medicine. A question of accrediting the qualifications from other countries was a crucial one for many, as almost all of them wanted to enter the Finnish labour market as medical doctors after completing their studies. Finding information about these issues seemed impossible or random for them. Amir had decided to apply abroad, in case he was not admitted into Finnish universities. He had checked several places of study, attended events at which international universities were presenting their ‘services’ and even looked for preparatory courses for getting additional help in admission.

I have checked Romania, that was cheap, but I do not know about their universities. If I get a qualification from there, do I get to work in Finland? And I don’t know who to ask, as I don’t know who knows about this, as the student counsellor did not know. Amir

Amir considers both the costs, which are high in relation to his family’s financial situation, and the outcomes of studying in a foreign university and aiming for the Finnish labour market. He seems to find himself stuck in between the national and international education markets. On the one hand, he was lacking the language-related and thereby academic means to enter the medical faculties in Finland (as they required either high grades in the matriculation examination or success in the entrance examination), which are connected to his migrant background. On the other hand, too high tuition fees in medical faculties abroad, which do not allow him to enter the international market of education due to his current working-class family background, was again

linked to the migration. The interconnection of class and migrant background is visible in his exclusion from medical studies anywhere.

Khadija also had investigated various options carefully and she had changed her plans a couple of times. She did not mention if she had talked about her plans with a study counsellor in upper secondary school. When asking her, if she thought that it would be easier to apply for HE entry abroad rather than in Finland, she gave a detailed answer:

It depends on the university, but in Scotland for instance, they want to have something like four *Laudaturs* and two *Eximias* [two highest grades], and according to my diploma, it is out of the question. For instance, these countries like Malta and so on, they have different kinds of what they look at. Some look at your upper secondary school certificate, some look at your matriculation examination diploma. So it depends. But it is very easy to get in to countries in Eastern-Europe, so that they don't even look at what your diploma is. I don't know how it is, is it presumably a bad thing because basically everyone can get in.

A great many of Khadija's perceptions concerning study options abroad seem to derive from the experiences of her acquaintances and friends. When making her decision to seek a study place primarily in Finland, these rumours played an important role in the process.

5. Discussion

The exclusive nature of admission to medical faculties in the spheres of public and private education operated by two different logics: First, the lack of relevant linguistic skills (as misrecognition of embodied cultural capital, i.e. other than local languages, seen as non-valuable capital (Skeggs 2004)) related to the migrant background prevented these students from being admitted locally to public education with their matriculation examination results. Second, the internalised symbolic violence presented in the frame of fatalism restricted their choices (see Reay 2018). The students in this study declared that they might not apply at all to the Finnish non-tuition-fee-based public universities, as they considered their chances of being admitted marginal. The lack of economic capital would also have prevented them from participating in private tutoring that prepares applicants for entrance examinations, which would be the other admission-route, and of which they were aware that the middle classes were using as a tool. Finally, as the public universities were more or less excluded from their options, the lack of economic capital due to working-class family-background also prevented them from applying internationally to private universities. The logic of becoming excluded from both of these admission routes is based eventually on the lack of economic capital, which was considered important in the preparation for selective admission, and which the middle classes were using even if their starting points for the admission might have been stronger in the first place. The situation of these young people is not formally exclusionary, but as the admission situation is relational, they consider their position in admission weak enough in comparison with other imaginary candidates and thereby may self-exclude themselves from admission (Kosunen and Haltia 2018).

As Youdell (2006) has pointed out, social class seems to operate even here as one of the key mediators of social inequalities, but in a disguised form (see Skeggs 2004). Our findings indicate how certain forms of cultural and economic capital, such as the linguistic skills and possibilities of participating in preparatory courses preparing the candidates

for matriculation examinations and/or entrance examinations at the university, are intertwined in everyday life practices of upper secondary school in ways which emerge as social inequalities in educational opportunities. Thereby admission seems partly to be based on transformation from economic to cultural capital, which challenges the grounds of admission based on academic merit. The field of private tutoring business has recently, due to the admission reform emphasising the diploma from upper secondary school, extended largely from the post-secondary education to the under-secondary education stage (Kosunen et al. 2022). It does not function anymore only as something enriching, but rather as a remedial type of teaching (Kosunen et al. 2022; see Baker et al. 2001). The ways of presenting public education as something 'broken' is a typical strategy for private businesses of finding their market. In this article, the discourse around the necessity of buying such courses seems to construct means for exclusion for those who are unable to attend them for various reasons, such as economic means and language skills needed. Especially the lack of the presumably needed economic capital is misrecognised as a lack of academic merit or motivation, which may thereby reinforce the existing inequalities.

We argue that by strengthening study guidance practices at schools, young people would be better advised and supported in seeking information about the educational options in Finland and abroad. As our analysis shows, there is a market for such information, but it will be filled by private business if the public sector is unable to respond to this request. Even more profoundly, what would be needed on the education-system level but also within school practices is revealing more closely the patterns of misrecognising the roles of both, embodied cultural capital (other than skills in Finnish) and economic capital, and the embedded inequalities in their transformations.

It needs to be addressed that this logic reflects the general tendency of privatisation and commercialisation of public services, such as education and health care: commercial privatisation has been seen to exploit and make the public institutions and learners responsible (Beach 2010). As health care business is largely privatised and also used by higher social classes even in Finland (Kallio 2008), the pattern of admitting students from higher social classes to the medical programmes in universities is plausibly a way of admitting students that have more experience of privatised health care as customers than of public (see Burchardt and Propper 1999). The notion our interviewees raised, is there really no need for medical doctors who can speak, e.g. Turkish or Arabic in public health care, is a crucial one. The young medical doctors in Finland are generally not longing for jobs in public health centres (Koskinen 2019). In contrast to this, our interviewees were discussing positions in public health care in the interviews as their plan for the future after medical education in a university. This notion would, however, require further investigation. Along the lines of privatising public health care and education, which this analysis has touched upon, we can very well ask are the patterns of creating a distinction through private tuition-fee-based tutoring actually just another branch of the general tendency of reinforcing the privatisation of public services. In this case, it just happens to flow through the university admission processes, but as an end-product it produces more medical doctors, with possibly limited experience of public health care as a patient after the maternity clinic, which still is largely public in Finland. There are, of course, issues of under-resourcing of public health care as well,

and then the private sector turns out to be an attractive option for the doctors eventually educated mainly in the public sector.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis shows, that the forms of cultural capital these young people are holding, such as their multilingual background, function as non-valuable capital (Skeggs 2004) in the field of national HE admission, whereas less knowledge of Finnish seems to be a barrier. The interviewee's grades from general upper secondary school seem to be hampered by Finnish-language performance in the matriculation examination, even if the students felt that their actual content knowledge was of a decent level, they were eager to study, and their knowledge of several other languages might be useful in the labour market in a multicultural society in the future. These young people explicitly point out, how their intentions are to be recruited in the *public* health care sector, which is atypical of what many of the medical school graduates eventually do. This is an interesting notion in which the hidden privatisation of public education and health care (see Beach 2010) intersect. Their means of applying through general admission to a Finnish public university seems to be something of an option, but only a few considered their positions in that situation to be competitive enough and were thinking of buying private tutoring for support (Khadija and Amir), which we know, being a central tool, many of the admitted upper-middle class candidates use (Kosunen et al. 2021). The symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2018) in the form of fairly hopeless 'that is not for me' statements is present in the debate on public university education. The construction of impossible learners (Youdell 2006) was evidently internalised by some of the interviewees with the notion of idealised others, middle-class Finnish-speaking candidates attending private tutoring, on the side. The transformation of embodied cultural capital (school attainment, which is mediated by skills in Finnish) into institutionalised cultural capital (study place in a public university) was not considered 'possible' for them by the students themselves, in particular, without the mediating transformation of economic capital into cultural capital (in preparatory courses). The financial means of covering tuition-fee-based supplementary courses were non-existent. Therefore, they considered being excluded from the national public higher education market in medicine, and self-excluded themselves from the pool of applicants. The surfaces of public and private education were intertwined, as success in the public market was considered to require access to private education as a mediator.

In addition to the experienced exclusion from public universities based on the lack and misrecognition of cultural capital and lack of economic capital, the young people also described their exclusion from the private education market due to a lack of economic capital, even if they were aware of the private university options (unlike their student counsellors in some cases). The international strategy of aspiring to study medicine abroad among our interviewees relates to the aspiration of acquiring a sustainable labour-market position: becoming upper or middle class and working in a respectable labour market position. The urge to leave the national educational system, however, was not based on the idea of education of a better quality elsewhere or an aspiration for a cosmopolitan career (see Beach and Puaca 2014) but on the mechanisms of social exclusion in the local public system. The lack of social capital (feeling of no one

to ask; see Punch 2015) as well as economic capital (no means of paying for tuition fees abroad) led to a lonely choice of HE with a lot of uncertainty for success (see also Beach and Puaca 2014).

Notes

1. The 'public' universities in this case mean the universities within the administrative branch of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. They are formally independent corporations under public law since the 2010 Universities Act, but do not charge tuition-fees.
2. The focus of the ongoing *Privatisation and Access to Higher Education* (PAHE) study is on the transition to higher education, student counselling and privatisation of public education (see, e.g. Kosunen 2018; Kosunen et al. 2021). The focus of the *Employability, Education and Diversities* (EMED) study was on support practices such as special needs education, Finnish as a second language studies, study counselling and students' participation and sense of belonging during their studies (Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020; Niemi and Laaksonen 2020).
3. All names are pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study has been funded by Kone Foundation (Privatisation and Access to Higher Education, PAHE-project) and the Academy of Finland (Employability, Education and Diversities, EMED-project, Strategic Research Council, grant number 303691).

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