Transitions and trajectories for school students requiring additional support: a local lens
Per-Åke Rosvall

Department of Applied Educational Sciences, University of Umeå, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Background: In many countries, educational opportunities and choices may differ according to factors related to location. This may have a significant impact on young people’s life chances and trajectories. The in-depth, ethnographic study reported here focuses attention on rural/non-rural variations in transition programmes for school students requiring additional support.

Purpose: The research sought to explore why, seemingly counter-intuitively, students requiring additional support in rural Swedish areas might experience more successful transitions than students in some less rural locations.

Methods: Data included field observations from selected municipalities and interviews with school staff and local officials. Using themes drawn from the data, the Local Learning Ecologies framework was adopted as an analysis tool to capture the detail of relevant macro-, micro- and intermediate-level factors and experiences.

Findings: Fine-grained analysis of the rich data suggested that the national expansion of school choice and decentralisation in Sweden has affected the organisation of transition programmes. In particular, decentralisation has led to the concentration of national programme provision in city centres, meaning that some students in municipalities may have abundant options but require substantial commuting to access them. Overall, important factors for successful transitions may include short distances between school institutions (facilitating information flows); collaboration between teachers, other professionals and students, and clear options for students.

Conclusions: The study highlights that although decentralisation may have, on the face of it, appeared to broaden options for young people in some (particularly commuter-belt) municipalities, their trajectories appear to have become more opaque and choices potentially more restricted. In contrast, short distances between institutions and better collaboration between staff, students and local entrepreneurs in rural municipalities seem to provide clearer options for students within transition programmes.

Introduction

Internationally, access to educational options can differ substantially according to factors related to location. For example, it can be difficult for young people in rural areas to transfer from compulsory education to further or higher education due to social, cultural
and material constraints associated with geographical distance to relevant institutions (Corbett and Forsey 2017; Thissen et al. 2010; Rosvall, Rönnlund, and Johansson 2018). This may have a significant impact on young people’s life chances and trajectories: in many jurisdictions, post-compulsory education is often now needed to get a job (European Commission 2018), as manifested in both statistics (SNAE 2019) and students’ awareness of education’s importance (Nylund et al. 2018; Down, Smyth, and Robinson 2019).

In some educational systems, students who lack qualifications and require additional support may be enrolled on national or regional programmes which are intended to facilitate transitions to post-compulsory education or work (Maguire 2015). In Sweden, there is a critical transition when young people generally enter upper secondary education at the age of 16. Upper secondary education programmes are available for those students who are not eligible for a programme finishing with an examination. These are called Introductory Programmes (IPs) and will be described in more detail later in the article. Factors that may help or hinder young people’s transitions in Sweden have been explored in a multi-study project called Moving On, involving the author and several other researchers. During the course of the project, the research group encountered some interesting and unexpected patterns in relation to differences in outcomes from IP education between municipalities classified as Rural, Small town and Commuter (Lundahl et al. 2020). The study reported in this paper offers an in-depth exploration of this issue, through fine-grained analysis of ethnographic material from the project Moving On. However, before presenting the research in detail, it is contextualised below with reference to relevant literature and the wider project.

Background

Research into young people’s aspirations, experiences and trajectories (e.g. Stam 2017; Jacobsen and Nørup 2020) highlights the complexities and importance of this area of study. It also draws attention to the risks associated with stereotyping young people’s attitudes and behaviours (Maguire 2015) and the imperative for deeper understanding of the relationships between contextual factors, the needs of individual learners, inclusive educational provision, educational systems and life chances (e.g. van der Veen et al. 2010; Rix and Twining 2007; Reay 2002; Allmendinger 1989). Students with low, or no, qualifications tend to be channelled into programmes for students requiring additional support. Such programmes are often described as being reactive (to students’ failure) rather than proactive (towards students identified as needing support) and may be shortsighted in terms of their implementation and organisation (see, for example, Alegre et al. 2015; Roiha and Polso 2020).

Local differences, and in particular urban-rural differences, can have considerable implications for young people’s trajectories and educational transitions. In many European countries, people with inadequate economic and societal resources, particularly with limited education and access to education, are disproportionately concentrated in the countryside (Bernard 2019; Shucksmith et al. 2009). Accordingly, one of the European Union’s eleven ‘European Youth Goals’ is called Moving Rural Youth Forward and includes an aim to ‘Ensure equal access to high quality education for young people in rural areas’.² Important sources of information regarding occupational possibilities and associated socio-economic issues include the content, and organisation, of programmes for students requiring additional support (Alegre et al. 2015).
The Swedish context

In Sweden, an increase in school choice in education has fuelled centralisation of schooling around larger cities (Fjellman, Yang Hansen, and Beach 2019). Students living in both rural and urban areas have generally been affected by the amplified focus on school choice; for example, it may mean that students have to commute further. However, it is important to note that, in the case of students who do not have qualifications, opportunities may be restricted to local offerings (Lind 2019; Rosvall, Rönnlund, and Johansson 2018). So, although Nordic countries are often argued to have school structures based on provision of egalitarian educational opportunities for all, facilitated through a strong welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990), such premises have been questioned due to the decentralisation and market-oriented steering implemented through reforms that started in the 1980s (Lundahl et al. 2013; Magnússon 2020). It follows that there are now disparities in how Swedish schools organise their education provision that relate to variations between municipalities with different characteristics (density of inhabitants, distance to educational institutions, etc.). This includes IPs: i.e. the programmes aimed towards young people who do not possess the required qualifications to enter a national upper secondary programme (Erixon Arreman and Dovemark 2018).

In the Nordic Social Democratic type of governance of the 1950s to 1980s, central state planning was important (Jørgensen, Christian, and Lundahl 2019). However, in all the Nordic countries, but especially in Sweden, responsibility has shifted to local actors and larger proportions of private (relative to public) actors from the late 1980s onwards (Rönnberg et al. 2021). There are numerous reports on the effects, including a shift from state to municipality steering, which, in addition to competition with private actors, has led to leaner organisations with smaller financial margins (Lind 2019). As a consequence of national policies, upper secondary schools in commuter municipalities now generally offer fewer programmes. However, municipalities are responsible for funding their students, and paying for students who choose a school in another municipality can be costly (Lind 2019). They are also legally obliged to offer places for all students who have not attained the required qualifications for a national programme and thus will enter an IP. Therefore, in some small rural municipalities with few students (not included in this study) and commuter municipalities with few students choosing their municipality’s upper secondary school, the IPs may be more or less the only upper secondary-level activities.

Sweden has a mandatory 10 years of compulsory schooling, starting with preschool class at the age of 6, followed by grades 1–9. Compulsory schooling is supposed to involve no streaming or tracks. After compulsory schooling, about 95% of a cohort continue to one of the 18 national upper secondary education programmes. Students obtaining at least grade E (on a scale from F to A) for eight subjects (including Swedish, English and Mathematics) are eligible for one of 12 vocational programmes. Those with at least grade E in 12 subjects are also eligible for one of the six higher educational preparatory programmes. Students compete for places with their average compulsory school grades. For students who do not possess eligible grades in 8 or 12 subjects, including Swedish, English or Mathematics, there are the following IPs: Individual alternative, Language introduction, Vocational introduction and Programme-oriented individual options, with different orientations and goals. To enroll in the Language IP, in addition to not
possessing the qualifications required for a national programme, a student must have been born abroad. The IPs are intended to prepare students for a national programme or work as soon as possible, and there is no final examination.

As suggested by the inclusion of the word individual in some programmes’ titles, such programmes are supposed to be adapted to individual students’ needs and previous qualifications. This article focuses mostly on the Individual alternative IP, which is supposed to enable students to proceed to further education or the labour market. It is intended for young people who need to acquire additional knowledge and guidance to progress in their knowledge development. The government has stated, for example, that these may be young people who want a more general education or have major knowledge gaps and/or weak motivation. The Individual alternative IP is open to students who are not eligible for national programmes. Although its duration is not stipulated, students are, in effect, required to move on because there is a 20-years’ age limit for entry into upper secondary education. Overall, the IPs are the least regulated national programmes in Swedish upper secondary education, and by far the most varied in terms of organisation in schools and municipalities.

Seemingly counterintuitively, research suggests that more students who have started IPs in rural areas have obtained a degree or study certificate within 4 years than is the case in areas within commuting distances of large cities (Lundahl et al. 2020). On the face of it, this seems surprising, as rural areas in many countries are typically associated with factors such as lack of resources, employment possibilities and access to education (e.g. Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2006). Moreover, according to a Swedish survey, access to well-qualified teachers and trained career guidance counsellors is lower in rural areas (Lundahl et al. 2020). This unexplained difference was identified as clearly worthy of further exploration and provided a central focus for the ethnographic research reported in this article.

Conceptual framework

Few theories relevant to young people’s transitions take sufficient consideration of the conception of place and dynamics of localities. For example, Farrugia (2014) argues that young people outside major metropolitan centres have been marginalised from the dominant theoretical ‘metrocentric’ perspectives that frame both the transitions and cultural traditions in youth studies. However, Hodgson and Spours (2015) have developed a valuable ecological framework of the dynamics of localities, based on a similar framework developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). This ‘local learning ecologies’ (LLE) framework was identified as a particularly helpful analysis approach for use in the study reported here, as it provided the opportunity to capture macro factors, micro experiences, and experiences at intermediate meso and exo levels. In the LLE framework, micro refers to immediate relationships such as those with family, friends and teachers; meso (for a 14- to 19-year-old) refers to relationships with school professionals and workplace learning providers with no immediate daily contact; and the macro level encompasses international trends and national political factors. The exo 1 level refers to local demography, geography, community traditions and travel-to-learn patterns, while the exo 2 level (added by Hodgson and Spours) comprises the regional economic landscapes and its labour market, including further and higher education. The cited authors also refer to the meso, exo 1 and exo 2
levels as intermediate levels of the ecological model. In this paper, apart from where a specific distinction is needed, the term intermediate will be used to refer to meso, exo 1 and exo 2 levels. According to Hodgson and Spours (2015), the intermediate levels are important in the LLE framework, and they can have diverse forms and conditions:

they can be more or less affluent or more or less organised and mediated by professionals and wider stakeholders; offer more or fewer opportunities at the 18+ for participation in terms of employment or further study and may react differently to these wider factors. (Hodgson and Spours 2015, 29)

Thus, the LLE framework was regarded as useful for understanding more deeply how transitions to further studies, or work, are framed and shaped by a local community’s resources and conditions. For example, it can assist in the analysis of relations of micro-level views of localities, strategic leadership at intermediate local and authority levels, and, at macro-level, national education policy.

**Purpose**

As mentioned above, this article reports on a sub-study of the project *Moving On*, which was funded by the Swedish Research Council (grant no. 2017-03591). It has produced abundant, rich empirical material with high potential value for exploring diverse issues. Two sub-studies have been previously reported, one based on a survey (Lundahl et al. 2020) and another based on interviews with career guidance counsellors, focusing on high stakes counselling with asylum-seeking young people at risk of deportation (Linde, Lindgren, and Sundelin 2021).

The main *Moving On* study had two overall aims. The first was to increase knowledge about young people on IPs and their aspirations. The second, which is the focus of attention in the sub-study reported in this article, was to better understand to what extent and how young people’s aspirations and transitions to further studies or work were framed and shaped by the local community’s resources and conditions. The sub-study reported here focused particularly on students of the Individual alternative programme, who represent a group that has not received sole, specific attention in previous studies. The main question addressed in this paper is *Why might rural areas, seemingly counter-intuitively, more successfully support students who are not eligible for a national programme of further studies or employment?*

**Methods**

**Ethical considerations**

Swedish research ethics legislation and recommendations by the Swedish Research Council (2017) have been followed in all elements of the research project *Moving On*, including the present sub-study, and the project has been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Umeå (ref. no. 2018/173:31). During fieldwork, participants were given oral information about the project, interviewees provided recorded consent, and all informants were informed that places and names would be anonymised for confidentiality purposes in any reporting of the study.
Context

As mentioned above, this article reports a sub-study of the project *Moving On*. The project as a whole included a survey and material collected by ethnographic methods, including field observations and interviews with students, school staff and local officials. To explore local conditions and variations between municipalities with different characteristics, we selected three pairs of Swedish municipalities. They were categorised as A2, C6 and C8, according to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions’ *Classification of Swedish municipalities* (2017). These are, respectively: *Commuting municipalities* (A2) near large cities (where more than 40% of the working population commute to work in a large city or municipalities near a large town); *Small town municipalities* (C6) with a population of at least 15,000 in the largest urban area; and *Rural municipalities* (C8) with a smaller population in the largest urban area and very low commuting rate. In the survey (Lundahl et al. 2020), questionnaires were sent to representatives in all municipalities in Sweden categorised as A2, C6 and C8 (112 of the total number of 290 municipalities) and responded to by 139 career counsellors and head teachers working in IP. Analysis of the responses has been previously reported (Lundahl et al. 2020) and the results prompted further data investigations which lie outside the scope of what is reported in the qualitative study that is the focus of the current paper presented here. As explained in the background section above, a particularly noteworthy and unexpected aspect was the indication that more students who started IPs in rural areas have obtained a degree or study certificate within 4 years compared with areas within commuting distances of large cities. The study reported in this paper adopted a qualitative, ethnographic methodology to explore this unexpected rural/non-rural contrast, using the rich data acquired through the project *Moving On*. The following subsections provide details of the qualitative and ethnographic methods used for data collection and analysis.

Data collection

The ethnographic approach adopted was sensu Hammersley and Atkinson (1995):

> The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 2).

Accordingly, a year of continuous fieldwork was planned in six municipalities, with approximately 20 field days in each municipality (in total, 123 field days) divided between one compulsory school and one upper secondary school, during 2019–2020. In ethnographic terms, this represents an intermittent time mode (Jeffrey and Troman 2004), which was seen as appropriate for meeting the aim of the study. The field days included diverse activities, such as undertaking classroom observations, shadowing career guidance counsellors, attending staff meetings and having conversations with students and staff, all of which were carefully recorded in field notes. The fieldwork was carried out by four researchers, each responsible for activities at one or two research sites.
The collected material also included interviews with students, school staff and local officials \((n = 151)\) interviewees. However, in the analysis of the sub-study reported here, I have concentrated on my own and my colleagues’ field reports and the interviews \((39)\) with school staff and local officials \((11)\). This is because these were considered to be the most informative regarding the municipalities’ overall organisational support \((a\ focal\ concern\ here)\). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised before analysis. In many cases, the most relevant interviewee in respect of the research question was obvious, as some of the schools only had one career guidance counsellor or head. The teachers interviewed were those who followed during the field visits. To recruit local officials to interview, we contacted the person with responsibility for such matters on each municipality’s educational board.

**Data analysis**

The analysis focuses on transcripts of the 39 interviews with school staff \(\text{\(career\ guidance\ counsellors\ \(n = 18,\\ teachers\ \(n = 16,\\ heads\ \(n = 5)\))\ and\ local\ officials\ \(n = 11)\,\) supported by field observations in the municipalities, mostly in compulsory schools \(\text{\(approximate\ student\ age\ range\ 15–16\ years)\ and\ upper\ secondary\ schools\ \(approximate\ student\ age\ range\ of\ 16–20\ years)\).\} The six municipalities were coded as Commuter 1 or 2, Small town 1 or 2, and Rural 1 or 2 depending on their locational classification \(\text{\(described\ above)\).\} Once\ the\ interviews\ were\ conducted,\ interviewees’\ comments\ were\ thematically\ analysed\ in\ Swedish.\ The\ selected\ citations\ were\ translated\ when\ integrated\ into\ the\ manuscript\ and\ linguistically\ checked\ for\ clarity.\ The\ interview\ transcripts\ were\ initially\ read\ without\ the\ theoretical\ framework\ in\ mind;\ subsequently,\ themes\ were\ tested\ in\ relation\ to\ theoretical\ frameworks\ in\ what\ Walford\ \(2008)\\ refers\ to\ as\ theory\ cycling\ \(thematising\ data\ and\ testing\ against\ theoretical\ concepts\ to\ assess\ their\ explanatory\ value)\).\ Several\ frameworks\ were\ tested\ and\ discarded,\ since\ they\ did\ not\ cover\ understandings\ of,\ and\ possibilities\ of\ discussing,\ localities,\ situatedness\ as\ a\ lived\ experience,\ and\ the\ levels\ and\ factors\ affecting\ the\ locale.\ However,\ as\ noted\ earlier,\ the\ LLE\ framework\ \(Hodgson\ and\ Spours\ \(2015)\)\ fitted\ the\ study’s\ aims\ more\ comprehensively\ than\ the\ other\ tested\ theories.\ Thus,\ in\ a\ second\ phase\ of\ reading,\ field\ observations\ and\ interview\ excerpts\ were\ translated\ and\ coded\ thematically\ in\ accordance\ with\ the\ theory\ \(\text{\(Braun\ and\ Clarke\ 2006)\).\ In\ a\ third\ reading\ phase,\ excerpts\ were\ organised\ thematically\ and\ analysed\ using\ the\ theoretical\ framework,\ leading\ to\ the\ findings\ summarised\ in\ Table 1\below.\ Throughout\ the\ coding\ and\ thematic\ analysis,\ the\ validity\ and\ coverage\ of\ extracted\ codes\ and\ themes\ were\ assessed\ by\ the\ project\ group\ \(i.e.\ the\ other\ three\ researchers\ who\ had\ conducted\ the\ interviews\ and\ field\ visits\ and\ the\ project\ leader\)\ during\ project\ meetings.

**Findings**

Overall, three major themes emerged from the analysis: \(1\) **Structures affecting access**, \(2\) **Structures affecting knowledge transmission of information about students**, and \(3\) **Approach and organisation of staff and teaching**. These are presented and exemplified in Table 1 and are used to organise the presentation and discussion of the findings given below. As evident from this table, the analysis of interviews and fieldwork provided indications of practices that do, and do not, appear to facilitate students’ transitions, and their relations to
| Supporting or opposing transitions to studies or work | Dynamics of the framework (macro, intermediate and micro levels) | Example of focus | Example from field notes or interviews |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Structures affecting access                         | **Macro** | National educational policy, emphasising school choice which has structuring effects | All students starting an Individual Programme in our municipality had to come to our school until just recently when some private actors started to offer the programme. (Interview, Local official responsible for education, Small town) |
|                                                     | **Intermediate** | Local educational strategies, geography, travel-to-learn patterns | We have a tight budget and we cannot offer places in national programmes to students that cannot compete with qualifications. IP students often lack qualifications. (Interview, Head, Rural) |
| Structures affecting knowledge transmission of information about students | **Intermediate** | Networks of professionals | We have a routine for documentation to support transmission of information about students, but that is if the receiving school asks for the documentation, which is not always the case. (Interview, Head, Commuter) |
|                                                     | **Micro** | Strong or weak division of learner communities | It is easy to introduce the Introductory Programme. It is only a few metres away. (Interview, Career guidance counsellor, Rural) |
| Approach and organisation of staff and teaching     | **Intermediate** | Local and regional status, time allotted to the student | The students are by routine scheduled two hours a day. (Field note, Commuter) |
|                                                     | **Micro** | Staff and teaching | Teachers referring to feeling overlooked. (Field note, Small town) |
variations between municipalities classed as Rural, Small town and Commuter. Where relevant, the presentation of findings in the subsections below includes anonymised and translated quotations from the data, in order to illustrate and illuminate the main points.

**Structures affecting access**

According to the data, the intermediate-level consequences of increasing school choice and centralisation included the need for students who were eligible for a national programme in commuter municipalities to travel longer distances, while students in rural municipalities might have fewer programme options. However, the pattern was not straightforward. In some cases, it was evident that rural municipalities had established upper secondary education alliances to meet problems caused by falling numbers of students and reduce financial transactions between municipalities (Lind 2019). This did not immediately affect IP students, as in most cases it was the local municipality that offered the IPs. However, in the transition to a national programme, the programmes that a student wanted to attend might be offered by an allied municipality at a school beyond daily commuting distance.

Thus, it can be seen that major macro trends (i.e. extension of school choice and centralisation) contributed to the narrowing of students’ possible transitions (Fjellman, Yang Hansen, and Beach 2019). This was the case in terms of the step to upper secondary education in commuter municipalities and some rural municipalities, by way of increased social, geographical and economic constraints linked to the transition and related to intermediate levels (Rosvall, Rönnlund, and Johansson 2018; Hodgson and Spours 2015).

It was evident from the analysis that upper secondary schools in both Commuter 1 and Commuter 2 only offered one national programme in addition to the IPs. Thus, the separation of IPs from other programmes was somewhat stronger in the Commuter municipalities, since schools in the Rural and Small town municipalities offered most of the national programmes as well as the IPs. However, although the Commuter municipalities offered only one national programme option at the same school, unlike the municipalities with other characteristics, they had a plethora of school units to choose from within commuting distance. It is important to note that, according to the interviewees, this made the next step after finishing an IP less tangible for both the students and career guidance counsellors in the Commuter municipalities (Rosvall 2020a). When students had met requirements for a national programme and wanted to transfer to one, they usually had to travel to a school located closer to the centre of the neighbouring city, about which they might have little knowledge. For example, as a career guidance counsellor from a Commuter municipality explained, ‘There are too many upper secondary schools within commuting distance. I cannot provide information about them all. I give information about the national programmes, not the schools’.

Another intermediate-level consequence related to the increased competition mentioned by interviewees was leaner economic organisations. For instance, in Small town 2, the head of the IPs explained that, even if an IP student had obtained qualifications required for a national programme, there were few realistic options for the next school year. This was because all programmes were already filled by students with higher qualifications, and there was competition for places. According to the head, few IP students ended the IP programme with highly competitive qualifications; they attributed
the full classes to the municipality’s economic situation and inability to afford to run classes without full numbers of students. The full national programme classes also hindered integration of IP students with students on national programmes: ‘For integration of IP students and students on regular courses we graded F [failed]’.

Thus, the economic situation partly described as a result of competition made it difficult for IP students in Small town 2 to enroll in national programmes of their choice; full classes hindered collaboration on courses of national programmes. According to Lind (2019), small rural municipalities have the highest costs per student, partly due to the difficulty in filling classes. This applied to the smallest rural municipality in our sample, which did not quite fill all the places in all programmes. So, when IP students became eligible for a national programme, there were some programmes they could access quite easily.

**Structures affecting knowledge transmission of information about students**

Although some major macro factors were difficult for the municipalities or local schools to influence on intermediate levels, they could, nonetheless, influence other aspects, such as transition procedures. Examples included flows of information regarding students and their introduction to the next level of education. These procedures are described below, together with a discussion of possible consequences.

During the students’ transition from compulsory school to an upper secondary IP, all six municipalities had some sort of procedure for transmitting information about the students who did not have qualifications between compulsory and upper secondary-level school staff. Varying constellations of professionals in the municipalities were involved in this, according to the interviewees. Usually, someone in the health team had the main responsibility, especially for the students due to start an IP, as the lack of qualifications is often associated with social issues, mental health or experiences of educational support.

A short geographical distance between school institutions seemed to facilitate knowledge transmission. For example, in Rural 1, the compulsory school building was situated next to the upper secondary school. Several members of the school staff and different professionals met regularly, and some collaborated in inter- and/or intra-professional teams. Special education professionals attached to the IPs usually obtained substantial information about the students transferring from compulsory school through those interactions. However, according to the headteacher in Rural 2, information was not conveyed as smoothly as would be desired in Rural 2. This was attributed to Rural 2 having a substantial number of compulsory schools spread over quite a large geographical area and an upper secondary education alliance with another municipality. Thus, the information flow was not as straightforward as in Rural 1, since it involved considerable numbers of staff transferring information between institutions. In addition, geographical distance between school institutions seemed to affect the number of interactions. Rural 2 was one of the largest municipalities defined as Rural by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions in terms of number of inhabitants, while Rural 1 was medium-sized in the category. It should be emphasised that Rural 1 was larger than Rural 2 in terms of land area, but since the number of inhabitants and the student base are smaller in Rural 1, the students must travel further, on average, to attend the compulsory school in the municipality centre. Thus, short distances between school institutions seemed to
contribute to effective information flows, since the students lived further apart than in the other municipalities, but the distance between compulsory and upper secondary school was shortest in Rural 1.

Some interviewees highlighted the importance of visits for some students as a way of dispelling stigma that was apparently associated with starting an IP rather than a national programme. Targeted visits were often arranged for students due to start an IP. However, such arrangements generally seemed to be responses to the perceived needs of a specific student or groups of students, rather than parts of a routine, structured activity. For instance, Small town 2 used student ambassadors as lecturers who had successfully taken an IP and made the transition to a national programme and work. There were also other activities, including, for example, introductory meetings involving parents and students, either individually or in groups. In the Commuter municipalities, staff said that they seldom visited the schools that the students would transfer. This was because of logistic constraints, as students moving from an IP to a national programme could have considerable choice of schools. Due to the higher number of options relative to the other municipalities, there seemed to be less clarity among students and school staff about what could and would happen next. As there were many school institutions and individuals at the institutions, the number of options seemed to hinder information exchange. Thus, possible transitions for IP students about to take the next step seemed broader but more opaque. This sense is summed up by a comment from the interviewed head in Commuter 2, who remarked, ‘You’re left thinking Who takes over now?’

It was also apparent from the analysis (especially in Small town 2 and Commuter 2) that recent re-organisations of schools and high turnover of staff were felt to hinder knowledge transmission, as it seemed to depend on established interactions between staff representing compulsory and upper secondary schools. This highlights the importance of consistent and maintained relationships between compulsory and upper secondary education institutions in supporting smooth introductions to IPs.

**Approach and organisation of staff and teaching**

Analysis of staff organisation in relation to IP students indicated emphatically that the programmes were usually embedded in quite a strong structure. Commonly, in all six municipalities, staff worked exclusively on the IPs. This included teachers, career guidance counsellors and special needs teachers – and, in some municipalities, a principal was assigned wholly to the IPs, or to the IPs plus one other national programme. However, the analysis suggests that some, but not all, staff felt that there was a danger that this could become isolating. For example, staff in Small town 2 reportedly sometimes felt forgotten about, because, for instance, information important to all staff was only sent to staff working on the national programmes. They also referred to missing out recurrently on invitations to staff gatherings; further, they mentioned instances of IP students sometimes not receiving invitations to thematic days or sports days which were intended to involve all students. They said that although this happened unintentionally and inadvertently, it sometimes made them feel overlooked. In a similar vein, interviewees in Small town 2 also referred to their courses being staffed only once other courses had been staffed. For example, one teacher explained:
If we are short of staff, you get the feeling that a teacher did not get enough hours in, for example, chemistry in the national programmes, then we get to borrow [with emphasis] the teacher for a few hours in our courses. It is not a permanent solution.

As mentioned above, Commuter 1 offered only one national upper secondary programme in addition to the IPs, at the same school; Commuter 2 had only one national programme in the municipality. Thus, it was apparent from analysis that the strong framing and sense of isolation of teaching staff and students from other national programmes had structural explanations in the two Commuter municipalities that we studied. Significantly, since the IPs accounted for most educational activity in the Commuter upper secondary schools, there were few opportunities for collaborations with students or teachers on other programmes. In general, the analysis did not yield examples of schools establishing micro experiences with teachers or students on other national programmes, and both Commuter municipalities only had one programme with which to establish contacts. However, it should be recognised that there may be advantageous aspects to situations where staff are assigned wholly to IPs: for example, such arrangements could allow teachers more time to establish relationships of trust with their students (Görlich and Katznelson 2015).

Some research indicates that degrees of teachers’ subject specialisation are negatively related to their willingness to make adaptations to include students (Saloviita 2020; Savage and Wienke 1989). It was noteworthy that our analysis identified comments by teachers and other staff that indicated a reluctance among subject teachers on national programmes to receive IP students or make adaptations to include them. However, this was most frequent in Small town 1 and 2. In Rural 1 (and Small town 1’s compulsory school), recorded comments were more commonly aligned with a ‘whole school approach’, which suggested less isolation between teachers representing different subjects or vocations, and an understanding that any challenges were challenges for the school community to solve together, as a single entity.

In addition to differences in how IP students seemed to be approached, there was variation in the amount of time scheduled for the students. For example, according to the analysis, in one of the Commuter settings, it appeared that just 2 h a day teaching time was allotted to students, which was less than stipulated in regulations. There were similar arrangements in the other municipalities, but these seemed to be associated with adaptations to individuals’ mental health or fatigue symptoms, rather than being a regular basis for organisation.

**Limitations**

Generalisations cannot be made and are not intended, from this qualitative, ethnographic study of programmes, students and their transitions in six municipalities of three categories (Small Town, Commuter and Rural). However, the findings that emerged from the analysis of rich qualitative data (through analysis that was as careful and detailed as possible within personal and organisational constraints) contribute insights that are offered in the following discussion section.
Discussion

As mentioned above, various reforms in Sweden, implemented progressively over time, have had the effect of making different post-compulsory programmes more similar in terms of content and length. For example, from 1991 to 2011, all upper secondary programmes provided eligibility for university studies and were 3 years long (Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019). Overall, processes of decentralisation and reform have led to the geographical centralisation of schools, specialisation in specific programmes, smaller school units and more division between programmes.

According to the analysis reported in this paper, it is noteworthy that options for the next step seemed more tangible in the Small town and Rural municipalities. As the interviewees in this study made clear, most students continued at the same school. Although the opportunities to embark upon a national programme after finishing an IP in Small town 1 and 2 could be few and far between (because the qualifications required to enter the programmes that students chose could be quite high), the options seemed more distinct. In addition, interviewees (especially in Rural 1 and Small town 2) cited a small number of actual examples of collaborations with official and private enterprises. Such collaborations could offer IP students workplace learning parallel to their IP studies, which sometimes led to work, and hence some alternatives to studies. For instance, in Rural 1 (and Small town 2 to a lesser extent), it was emphasised that increasing numbers of private enterprises had shown interest in giving marketing presentations at school to counter problems in getting staff, which is in line with findings from a previous Swedish study (Rosvall 2020a).

All in all, the in-depth analysis of rich data in the study reported here has provided important insights into the main research question we sought to address: i.e. Why might rural areas, seemingly counterintuitively, more successfully support students who are not eligible for a national programme of further studies or employment? The analysis suggests several reasons. Some are associated with intermediate-level factors – in particular, closeness of institutions to each other, relations between school staff and students, and relations among school staff involved in different programmes and school levels. A sense of proximity and closeness seemed to help clarify the next step for students and their possible transitions. In addition, the data indicated that municipalities’ success in facilitating students’ progression from an IP into further studies or work may depend on a combination of flexibility and concreteness.

A sense of ‘concreteness’ in possible educational or work outcomes in students’ near surroundings (ex 1 and 2 levels) as well as meso-level professional interactions and curricular activities seemed to be important for two reasons. First, this framed the students’ next step within a clear frame of action. In the smaller school units, staff seemed to know each other and, thus, could collaborate well to optimise arrangements for the students. Moreover, there were better connections to local entrepreneurs who could potentially hire students in the smaller municipalities (in terms of inhabitants, not area). Second, interviewees provided examples of a holistic school approach in these municipalities. In the larger Commuter municipalities, the IPs were based in school units offering only one national upper secondary programme and the least teaching time. Interestingly, the two municipalities in our selection that offered the fewest teacher-led hours were both in the Commuter category. In terms of teaching time, it does need to be acknowledged, though, that shorter teaching times are not necessarily undesirable, since longer
teaching times could prevent some IP students coming to school at all. However, on the other hand, few teaching hours may encourage absenteeism, as coming for a short time may not seem worthwhile, especially if commuting times are long (Hjelmér and Rosvall 2017). Overall, aspects including how the staff discussed the students, the numbers of teaching hours students were offered, the contact with local entrepreneurs and their offers of workplace learning gave the impression that the students may have been (and/or felt) more strongly acknowledged and valued in the smaller municipalities.

In terms of macro factors, it was evident from the analysis that national education policies emphasising school choice and competition, together with schools’ financial situations, affected municipalities’ opportunities and scope to organise IP education. Although it must be recognised that intermediate-level factors (e.g. municipalities’ number of taxpayers) also come into play here, overall the analysis suggests that the macro factors implicitly legitimised strong meso-level framing between programmes – including IPs, and sometimes IPs in particular. For example, in Commuter 2, most students eligible for a national programme had left for the centre, and few students remained apart from the IP students. In contrast, there was less competition in Rural 1, which was the smallest municipality in the sample: it seemed less affected by school choice, and thus had weaker structuring between programmes.

It was apparent from the analysis that macro factors affected professionals at meso levels with different exo 1 and 2 characteristics in different ways. However, meso-level professionals also responded to macro factors in different ways that affected the organisation-and curriculum-associated outcomes. Asymmetry between meso-level professionals seemed to affect outcomes negatively (Sampaio and Leite 2021). In this respect, the Commuter municipalities seemed to be affected by macro factors in ways that seemed difficult to counter on a local level (i.e. students flowing to more centralised schools and large numbers of schools in neighbouring municipalities hindering interactions between professionals). Conversely, at the meso level, it seemed important to establish a ‘whole school approach’, which also affected micro experiences, as in Rural 1 and Small town 1.

Overall, the findings from this in-depth, ethnographic analysis allow insight to be gained into the complex issue of how and why progression opportunities for students requiring additional support may be limited. Of course, the educational system itself is part of a wider context, and there are doubtless many other important factors involved that lie outside of this paper’s scope. However, in terms of supporting students on IPs, the study suggests that there are opportunities for municipalities to learn from each other and that macro factors, such as emphasis on school choice, may have greater influence on students’ trajectories from IPs to a national programme or work in Commuter municipalities.

Conclusions

In summary, this in-depth, small-scale ethnographic study of rich data has shone a light on why smaller municipalities may, seemingly counterintuitively, be more successful with students on IPs, despite typically having poorer resources. Moreover, in municipalities with a larger student base, there seem to be fewer realistic options after finishing an IP, largely restricted to a small selection of low-status programmes (Kamm et al. 2020). Of course, much more research is needed to further explore these matters; our analysis also highlights the considerable complexity of the issues involved. Perhaps above all, it speaks
to the overwhelming importance of relationship-building and interpersonal trust within all educational systems and structures worldwide. As Görlich and Katznelson (2015, 213) argue, focusing on the education system, and young people’s trust in it, can contribute to new ways of helping young people who require additional support and find themselves on the margins of their education system.

Notes

1. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0269
2. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:2018:456:FULL
3. The Language IP lies outside of the scope of this paper, as its characteristics differ substantially from the other IPs.
4. Each school in Sweden must have a health team, the organisation of which may vary, but usually includes a Special Education Needs professional, welfare officer, school nurse, head of school, student mentor and sometimes career guidance counsellor (see Rosvall 2020b).

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ORCID

Per-Åke Rosvall http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3737-3244

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