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Aspiration-achievement paradox of immigrant-origin youth in Finland at the end of
comprehensive education

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This literature review aims to look at the aspiration-achievement paradox of immigrant-origin youth at the end of comprehensive education, both in the international and Finnish context. Transition to post-comprehensive education is a high-stakes situation and one in which immigrant-origin youth often lag behind their native counterparts with their facilities and resources. Widespread research has shown that despite low educational achievement, immigrant-origin youth as well as their parents possess high educational aspirations.

In the case of Finland, the gap in academic achievement between native and immigrant students in at the age of 15 is one of the largest in the OECD countries despite available educational opportunities. Immigrant-origin youth and their families are hindered by factors that make it unable for them to utilize these opportunities and achieve positive educational outcomes.

Based on previous multidisciplinary literature, this thesis sets out to find the possible causes that have been outlined in relation to this phenomenon.

Keywords: aspiration-achievement paradox, aspirations, achievement, immigrant, immigrant-origin, comprehensive school, post-comprehensive school

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1 Introduction

Education has always played a large part in acting as a gateway to structural integration into society; for children of immigrants, their educational achievement is the first measure by which they can accomplish this (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2012). In European countries, the persistence of ethnic disparities in educational and labor market outcomes has shown that only a small number of immigrants are able to realize success (Salikutluk, 2016). This points to the reality that children of immigrants are not able to produce the educational outcomes that are needed to compete with their native peers.

A large body of research has shown that despite low educational performance, immigrant children and their parents tend to have high aspirations when it comes to education. According to OECD (2015) many immigrant parents “hold expectations for their children’s lives that match or even exceed those of non-immigrant families” (p. 18). Miyamoto, Seuring and Kristen (2018) have noted that sociological literature emphasizes the notion that both immigrant parents and immigrant students have higher educational aspirations than the majority population. Finally, Khattab (2014) found that recent generations of students “tended to develop ambitious future plans (aspirations) regardless of their actual educational achievement” (p. 1).

The above-mentioned paradox, coined the ‘aspiration-achievement paradox’ (Kao & Tienda, 1998) and has also shown to be present in the Finnish context. Finnish youth of immigrant-origin have shown to have high educational aspirations that are most often academic (Kalalahti, Varjo & Jahnukainen, 2017). Similar to what wider research has indicated, they are found to have below-average school performance (Harju-Luukkainen, Nissinen, Sulkunen, Suni & Vettenranta, 2014) and below-average education levels (Larja, Sutela & Witting 2015). The case of Finland is

particularly compelling in the wider international context due to the recent nature of immigration, contrasted with its “high-achieving yet equal education system” (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2012, p. 167).

In this thesis, I aim to analyze the ‘aspiration-achievement’ paradox in relation to what has been studied about the educational decision-making and trajectories of immigrant-origin youth in Finland at the end of their comprehensive (compulsory) education. The final year of comprehensive education is seen as a critical time in a youth’s educational and occupational trajectory and is “one of the first transitional points at which young people’s future-oriented agency and imagination are called into play” (Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016).

My research questions are:

- 1) *What is the aspiration-achievement paradox?*
- 2) *How is the aspiration-achievement paradox present in the future educational and occupational decision-making processes of immigrant-origin youth during the final year of comprehensive education?*

The aim of this literature review is to also shed light on the current and unique situation of immigrant-origin youth in Finland by exploring the possible reasons for their stated low educational achievement compared to their native peers in a country that is well known for its educational success. My personal interest in this topic comes first from the perspective of someone who has experienced navigating the post-comprehensive Finnish education system as an immigrant-origin youth at the critical age of 15. My second reason comes from my future profession as a teacher who will most likely teach in a multi- and intercultural classroom. Through this thesis and future research, I aim to contribute to what has already been studied about the position of immigrant-origin youth in the Finnish education system and larger society.

The first research question in this thesis will be answered by outlining the theoretical studies that have been previously done by researchers to explain the aspiration-achievement paradox. To answer the second question, I will look at the research that has been conducted on the aspiration-achievement paradox of immigrant-origin youth at the end of comprehensive education, specific to the context of Finland and discuss the findings in relation to what has been outlined in the theoretical background.

2 Dimensions of the aspiration-achievement paradox

The paradoxical nature of immigrant schooling, where high educational aspiration meets lower school achievement, which is known as the ‘aspiration-achievement paradox’, has been studied somewhat extensively in the international context (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Hill & Torres, 2010). According to Salikutluk (2013) “educational inequalities do not only emerge due to academic performance gaps between social or ethnic groups” (p. 7). Rather, Erikson and Jonsson (1996) have found that educational decisions are a major contributing factor; particularly at major transitional points. Salikutluk (2013) believes that in order to comprehend these processes we must look at the role of educational aspirations in 1) shaping choices that are relevant for the educational career and 2) school related behaviour which has an impact on school performance (p. 7). In this section I will explore what the aspiration-achievement paradox is and what potentially causes the gap between aspiration and achievement in immigrant-origin youth as compared to their majority peers.

The concept of ‘aspirations’ was first introduced as being vectors of powers that lead to goal-striving behavior and attitudes towards one's aims (Dembo, 1931). Aspirations have also been described by Haller (1968) as “the cognitive orientational aspect of goal-directed behavior” (p. 484). They can present in the form of abstract statements or values and beliefs regarding future plans (Khattab, 2014). However, there is no agreement among social scientists regarding what aspirations exactly are or how they should be measured (Salikutluk, 2013).

Theoretically, aspirations can be split into two camps, idealistic and realistic aspirations (Haller 1968). Idealistic aspirations are those that are mainly based on wishes and are consequently free of constraints (Salikutluk, 2016). They are more indicative of an individual's hope or desire to

achieve (Miyamoto et al., 2018), rather than reflecting any definite socio-economic realities which might impact or determine future mobility (Marjoribanks, 1998). Idealistic aspirations can be said to be “rooted in the cultural sphere of society (within common shared values)” (Khatab, 2014, p. 1), while historically being higher than realistic aspirations “due to being more heavily influenced by societal norms” (Jacob & Wilder, 2010, p.1).

While idealistic aspirations can be detached from any concrete restrictions or prior experience (Miyamoto et al. 2018), this is not the case for realistic aspirations. According to Miyamoto et al. realistic aspirations refer to “what a person believes he or she can attain” (p. 18). This is an outcome of students’ assessment of the social and economic opportunities that are tangible to them in the context of their home and the larger society, while also considering previous and current academic performance (Khatab, 2014). Realistic aspirations are “determined by the perceived structure of opportunity within society” (Khatab, 2014, p. 1). Reasons for realistic aspirations being lower than idealistic aspirations include, for instance, “limited financial resources, insufficient academic abilities or low probabilities of success” (Salikutluk, 2013, p. 8). One thing to note is that realistic aspirations are also referred to as expectations (Mickelson, 1990; Marjoribanks, 1998) in much of the earlier research on this topic.

Measures implemented in empirical contributions are not reflective of the distinction between idealistic and realistic aspirations, rather they apply the same operationalization for both concepts (Morgan, 2006). However, according to Jacob and Wilder (2010), in practice they are very distinct concepts; “expectations [realistic aspirations] refer to what individuals *think* will happen while aspirations [idealistic aspirations] refer to what they *hope* will happen” (p. 3).

Because idealistic and realistic aspirations are both empirically and cognitively different, Bohon, Johnson and Gorman (2006) propose that they are therefore conceptually different. Early research on this topic has treated the terms as interchangeable (Jacob & Wilder, 2010). Nevertheless, both orientations have proved relevant in examining learning and hence educational achievement (Miyamoto et al., 2018).

The concept of educational aspirations thus acts as an umbrella term that encompasses various meanings depending on the study, e.g. “academic wishes, educational plans, or chances to successfully attain higher educational degrees” (Salikutluk, 2013, p. 8). Educational aspirations can also be seen as “orientations composed of specific beliefs about one’s future trajectory through the educational system” (Morgan, 2006, pp. 1528–1529). In this thesis, similar to Salikutluk (2013), aspirations in this context will be defined as “overall educational goals determining educational decisions at transition points” (p. 8). School achievement is defined as the students’ level of academic learning, where the existence, extent or depth of said learning is measured most commonly by “grades in math, science, and reading, standardized achievement tests, and IQ tests” (Sirin & Gupta, 2015, p. 42).

Many reasons have been proposed for the aspiration-achievement paradox in immigrant students as compared to their majority peers. Three approaches which claim to explain this gap in aspiration and consequently achievement is outlined in many previous researches. *Immigrant optimism* is the first approach, and it posits that the impact of parents on their children is twofold: first, parents use their educational degrees as models and secondly use that to communicate their own expectations as definers (Kao & Tienda 1995). However, according to Salikutluk “the modelling function of immigrant parents can be diminished when they have acquired their education in their country of origin” (2013, p. 11). Thus, immigrant parents strive for upward mobility in society and manifest

this desire in the form of educational aspirations towards their children, despite not being able to properly guide them.

This is due to the second reason known as *information bias* (Kao & Tienda, 1998). According to Kao and Tienda, missing information or knowledge about the educational system in the host country can produce a biased perception in expectations and aspirations in both immigrant parents as well as their children. This can explain the reason for idealistic aspirations, as parents do not have the same resources, or social capital, as their native peers to help their children navigate a system they themselves have never operated within. This lack of information can be compensated in the form of teachers, friends and relatives, but they also have the possibility to distort parents' perception further (Salikutluk, 2016). Particularly if parents' social network consists of members from the same ethnic background.

Lastly, *social capital* has been extensively studied as a critical issue related to education and can also be used to better understand the aspiration-achievement paradox of immigrant parents and their children. Social capital as a concept gained traction in the social sciences (Tokas, 2016) and is multidisciplinary, drawing on sociology, economics, political science and education (Kilpatrick, Johns & Mulford, 2010). Woolcock and Narayan (2000) define social capital as a set of norms and networks which allow people to act collectively. Similarly, social capital according to Fine (2002) are the norms and social relations that are ingrained in the social structures of a society and that makes it possible for people to achieve shared goals. Therefore, social capital refers to the connections between people as well as anything that facilitates action among them, individually or collectively, generated by networks of trustworthiness, relationships, reciprocity and social norms (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Membership in a group entitles actors within it an aggregate of actual or potential resources that belong to, or are in the possession of, their network; actors are

provided with the backing of the collectively owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The central idea behind social capital then becomes that ‘relationships matter’ and ‘social networks are a valuable asset’, individuals build communities and commit to them by creating a sense of belonging and concrete experiences that bring about great benefits in the form of various types of exchanges (Tokas, 2016, p. 258).

The World Bank found that social capital, when discussed as subjective or cognitive in nature, refers to resources such as information, ideas and support that can be procured by virtue of relationship with others (Grootaert, Narayan, Jones & Woolcock, 2004; Portes, 1998). According to Haq, Akram and Farooq (2015) social capital exists in three prominent practices as information channels, as social norms and as obligations and expectations. Information channels are the ways in which people within a network are able to receive proper and reliable information, social norms refer to individual action, ethics, bonding and engagement with the society, while obligations and expectations are more fluid and can be used when essential (Haq, Akram & Farooq, 2015, p. 96). Furthermore, there are three types of social capital networks or ties; bonding networks, bridging networks and linking ties (Woolcock, 1999). Woolcock states that bonding networks are those we share with family, friends and members of our tribe, bridging networks are networks that connect acquaintances or others that are in a similar position but of a different group/community and linking ties are between those in different social groups or power hierarchies. Through these means, social capital is created and recreated, it is simultaneously drawn on and reproduced (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000), it increases with the passage of time and its value rises with more use as compared to other types of capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Coleman (1988) first investigated the association between social capital and education, and found that student’s network, which consists of family, friends and school had a significant influence on

their educational success. According to Coleman and Hoffer (1987) parents' obligations and expectations as well as the types of networks or ties they have can greatly impact students' academic achievement. Disparities in academic success can be linked to how strongly these resources, networks and norms are recognized. Social capital is critical in explaining variations in, and capacity for learning (Field, 2005) and creates more chances for self-recognition and success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Immigrant optimism and information bias can both be said to be caused by poor parental social capital. Family and community social capital is an important resource that determines educational aspirations and upholds student's self-efficacy in both realizing their aspirations, and in turn attaining their goals (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). Social capital can also compensate for low socio-economic levels. According to Modood (2004) "economic disadvantage can be compensated by social capital in the form of family norms, values and networks, as well as a broader set of community values and networks which promote particular educational goals." Coleman (1990) highlights that students with high levels of "intergenerational closure", the level to which their parents know the parents of their friends, will have better educational outcomes than those students with low levels of intergenerational closure. This is due to the fact that parents are then able to assess if the goals and aspirations they have for their children are consistent with those of their peers, by using their children' friends' parents as a valuable resource (Carbonaro, 1998). As Marjoribanks (2002) points out, high parental expectations can only be impactful if they are transmitted through forms of strong social capital.

It is possible that immigrant's high aspirations are not unrealistic, but rather they may not be able to be realized due to barriers in the destination country or not adjust their school-related behaviour to suit their aspirations (Salikutluk, 2013). Mickelson (1990) believes that minority students also

perceive the opportunity structure and benefit of higher education in a different way than their native counterparts, which leads them to holding positive attitudes on an abstract dimension.

Khatab (2014) proposes a community-level intervention targeted at parents of immigrants, in order to “equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to help their children convert their high aspirations into actual attainment” (p. 10). This is especially important as there has been found to be a negative relationship between social capital and mobility, which can be seen in the case of immigrants (Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote, 2002).

3 Perspectives to the aspiration-achievement paradox of Finnish youth with immigrant origin

In the first chapter, we looked at the international research that has been done on the aspiration-achievement paradox. In this second chapter, the focus will shift to the Finnish-context and what has been found in regards to immigrant-origin youth at the end of their comprehensive education and the transition to post-comprehensive education. Prior to discussing the studies, it is first crucial to make clear 1) the structure of the Finnish education system and possible educational tracks at the end of comprehensive education, as well as 2) what we mean by “immigrant-origin children” in Finland.

3.1 Educational tracks at the end of comprehensive education

The Finnish education system has a nine-year comprehensive schooling system which is compulsory for all children of school age (7-16) (Opetushallitus, 2016). Comprehensive education, which is also referred to as basic education, is provided within a single structure and is not segregated into primary and lower secondary tracks (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018).

After completing comprehensive education, students make the transition to post-comprehensive schooling. Based on students’ assessment on the basic education certificate (*peruskoulun päättötodistus*), they can apply for entry into the post-comprehensive track of their choosing (Kivijärvi & Mathias, 2015). In case students have difficulty making the transition to post-comprehensive education, they are entitled to extra support in the form of a year of flexible basic education (*joustava perusopetus*) (Numminen & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2009). According to Numminen and Ouakrim-Soivio, flexible basic education refers to a form of action that prevents early school

leaving and young people leaving school without a certificate. This program helps to ensure that students will be admitted to a place in post-comprehensive education after improving their grades.

Post-comprehensive school consists of two non-compulsory education tracks: general (academic) and vocational upper-secondary school (Kupiainen, Hautamäki & Karjalainen, 2009). Students are also able to opt to simultaneously complete both tracks and attain a dual qualification (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2017). This system is unique in that it offers students the flexibility to decide their educational trajectory, while making sure that there are no educational dead-ends in the system. While the dual-track system leads students to either vocational or academic careers, it still guarantees that both post-comprehensive tracks lead to the qualifications to access higher education (university or university of applied sciences) down the line (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011). Despite the reality that a higher education degree offers a wider range of choice, vocational upper-secondary school should not be considered a marginal trajectory. Rather, in the Finnish context, vocational education has established itself as valuable in the labour market and according to the OSF (as cited in Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016), 40% of youth continuing onto post-comprehensive education choose the vocational route.

During the Finnish comprehensive education, the disparities in educational and learning outcomes is small and the system has proven to work well, with only a small percentage of early school leavers (OSF, 2015a). According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (2018) 90 per cent of students make the transition to general or vocational upper secondary studies right after completing their comprehensive studies. However, the transition to post-comprehensive education is still a high-stakes situation for immigrant-origin youth. They are up to four or five times more likely to be positioned outside the education and workforce as compared to their native peers (Myrskylä, 2011).

In addition, Finland is in a unique position as it can be categorized as a universalistic transition regime. According to Walter's typology (as cited in Kalalahti et al., 2017), "a universalistic transition regime – commonly found in the Nordic Countries – is characterised by an extended public sector and a wide variety of counselling and activation policies" (pp. 5-6). Kalalahti et al. point to the fact that Finland possess a comprehensive and post-comprehensive education system that ensures equal access to tertiary education (university or university of applied sciences), while also providing "counselling [that] is widely institutionalized throughout all stages of education, training and the transition into employment" (pp. 5-6). This is due to the alarming rate of students who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), especially in Finland (Helms Jørgensenm Järvinen & Lundahl, 2019). This system helps to create a pathway to eliminate growing numbers of youth that exist at the margins of society.

3.2 Immigrant as a category

If we intend to discuss students whose immigrant-origin backgrounds group them into a subcategory of research, we must first clarify the possible definitions this takes on as well as the limitations it can have. The term "immigrant" is often used as a blanket term when referring to someone who moves to a country that is not their original country of origin. This term is passed down through generations and applied to the offspring of foreign-born as well as non-foreign-born parents.

In Finland, the definitions of who can be considered an immigrant is ambiguous. When examining the population with immigrant background at the end of 2017, Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) based its definition on citizenship, country of birth, language and origin. According to OSF, when the immigrant population in Finland was smaller, it was enough to consider foreign citizenship as

the main indicator, however it is now insufficient as foreign-born individuals who eventually acquire Finnish citizenship are no longer registered in the database as an immigrant. Estimation is then based on language, which is similarly unreliable as all those who speak a foreign language as their mother tongue are considered to be of immigrant origin (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011). Foreign language speakers are considered as “persons whose first language is other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami, which are the national languages in Finland” (Ministry of the Interior Finland, 2018, p. 77). While this definition does not severely impact first generation immigrants and groups them more accurately, it raises questions around second generation immigrants who were born in Finland but have a registered language that is not Finnish or Swedish as well as “more established ethno-linguistic minorities” that do not have foreign-born parents, ex. Roma, Karelian, Tatar and Russian- speaking minorities (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011, p. 80).

In many research, students of immigrant-origin background have been classified into three basic groups: first generation, second generation and mixed group. According to Kilpi-Jakonen (2012) first generation children are those who have foreign-born parents and have themselves been born outside the destination country (Finland). The second generation are children who are born in Finland to two foreign-born parents who themselves have been born outside the country, or have arrived at the beginning of comprehensive education (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2012). Children from the mixed group are subsequently those with one foreign-born parent and one native parent and are considered of Finnish origin (OSF). However, it is important to note that is possible for children of one foreign-born parent and one native parent to be categorized as of immigrant-origin (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018). The index on immigrant background (IMMIG) has the following similar categories:

(1) native students (those students born in the country of assessment, or those with at least one parent born in that country; students who were born abroad with at least one parent born in the country of assessment are also classified as ‘native’ students), (2) second-generation students (those born in the country of assessment but whose parents were born in another country) and (3) first-generation students (those born outside the country of assessment and whose parents were also born in another country) (OECD, 2014, p. 261).

It is clear that immigrant-background students can fit into many categories and are not a homogenous group that is representative and should not be treated as such. According to Harinen et al. (2004) the term “immigrant” has become “more and more obscure, uncertain and irrelevant” and cannot be used as a blanket empirical category (p. 162). It is important to note that the definition of the terms first- and second-generation immigrants are dependent on, and can vary between studies. We can only aim to study and attempt to construct a more in-depth analysis of the unique situations and experiences of students of immigrant backgrounds, rather than trying to explain a whole group of individuals. It is imperative to acknowledge the abstract nature and construction of the terms “immigrant-origin students” or “immigrant youth.”

The definitions above do not attempt to make any ethnic or economic variation between immigrant groups. In all the studies explored in the next section, the definition of immigrant-origin students will follow what has been outlined above. Any instances pointing to a group from a specific ethnic or socio-economic group will be made clear, but for the most part, the definition of the term “immigrant” will refer to what has been outlined.

3.3 The situation of immigrant-origin youth in Finland during the transition to post-comprehensive education

According to Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2014) “transition to upper-secondary education is a high-stakes situation, one in which immigrant-origin youths often lag behind native youths with their facilities and resources.” Children of immigrants in Finland tend to have lower levels of school achievement at the end of comprehensive school than the majority (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2012). This difference between immigrant-origin students and the majority population has been found to be larger than in other OECD and Nordic countries (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2014). Furthermore, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results reveal that in Finland, the gap in academic achievement between native and immigrant students at the age of 15 is one of the largest in the OECD countries (OECD, 2016).

The situation of immigrant-origin students in the final year of comprehensive education (9th grade) has not been studied extensively. However, the few studies that have been done have brought us a step closer to better understanding the paradox of immigrant schooling in Finland. Holmberg (2018) examined the envisioned trajectories of Finnish students during this transitional period in eight municipal schools in southern Finland. Envisioned trajectories here are understood as specific pathways to future orientations (Heinz, 2009), the “interplay between structure and agency—or, more accurately, between the institutionalized life course and subjective biographies—with regard to education” (Walther, Ule & du Bois-Raymond, 2015, p. 350). According to OSF (2015b) the schools in this study represented socio-economically diverse and urban areas with a large population of immigrant-origin students. The aim of this study was to describe and contrast “educational and career aspirations of youths of immigrant- and Finnish-origins” specifically from the aspiration-achievement paradox point of view (Holmberg, 2018, p. 563).

Similarly, (Kalalahti et al., 2017) conducted a study on Finnish youth with immigrant backgrounds as they made the transition from comprehensive school to post-comprehensive school. The sample included both immigrant-origin youth and Finnish-origin youth from three schools in Turku and five schools in the Helsinki Metropolitan area. The schools were both culturally diverse and had a high population of immigrant-origin students. Kalalahti et al. (2017) focused on indecisiveness in post-comprehensive school choice and career aspirations. The goal of this study was to utilize the results in order to better career guidance and counselling.

Findings in both studies showed that all youth possessed both academic and vocational aspirations to more or less the same degree (Holmberg, 2018; Kalalahti et al., 2017), with immigrant-origin youth having academic aspirations that seemed to be more idealistic than realistic in nature slightly more often than their native peers. In particular, immigrant-origin girls were found to aim for academic professions and professional fields more often than their male counterparts (Holmberg, 2018), and applying to general academic upper secondary education (high school) due to aspirations for tertiary-level education (Kalalahti et al., 2017). Kilpi (2010) found that Somali-origin girls surpassed Somali-origin boys in education, which is in line with the above findings. This reason in gender difference can be due to the resilience of immigrant-origin girls when it comes to doing well academically in spite of challenges faced (Salmela-Aro et al., 2017). Immigrant-origin students, particularly boys, also had a more positive attitude and higher trust towards education, which could reflect 'immigrant optimism' (Kao & Tienda 1995; Kalalahti et al., 2017).

It is interesting to note that in contrast to the general academic track, all youth aimed at the vocational track equally (Holmberg, 2018). According to Holmberg, the key factor behind aiming for vocational education for Finnish-origin youth was the education level of the parents, meaning

that students with parents who had vocational or basic education levels had vocational aspirations in comparison to those with university-level educated parents. Vocational aspirations were consistent for immigrant-origin youth despite parental education level or studying difficulties (Holmberg, 2018).

In summary, Kalalahti et al. (2017) and Holmberg (2018) found the immigrant paradox of schooling, immigrant optimism and aspiration paradox to be present in immigrant-origin students when looking at their possible trajectories after comprehensive school and the aspirations they held for their futures. Yet, they remain hopeful that students will be able to overcome their difficulties and succeed in their envisioned trajectories (Kalalahti et al., 2017) and that their academic aspirations were “justified and rational” (Holmberg, 2018).

Furthermore, Ismail (2018) studied second generation Finnish-Somali students’ inability to materialize educational opportunities and the source of their underperformance in regards to their transitions to post-comprehensive and higher education. Despite growing numbers of high school aged children in the Finnish-Somali community, “access to higher education institutions is almost stagnant” (Ismail, 2018, p. 720). Ismail argues that this disparity in performance between second generation Finnish-Somali students in comparison to their native counterparts calls into question the effectiveness of the education system; regardless of the perceived equal distribution of educational resources. Research shows that Somali parents in fact do possess high educational aspirations for their children (Open Society Foundation, 2013; Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002) which is consistent with the aspiration-achievement paradox, yet negative parental social capital can spell dire outcomes for the second generation. It has been reported that Somali parents’ “views on and knowledge about their children’s education vary greatly” (Piattoeva, 2010, p. 5), yet they are still hopeful in overcoming these barriers. Warsame (2010) interviewed 10 parents from both the Oulu

and Helsinki areas and his results indicated that there was a need from parents for increased teacher cooperation in overcoming the school-related difficulties their children faced.

In the end, it is crucial to not only address the performance gap of immigrant-origin youth in comparison with their native peers, but to also make clear that “the provision of equal resources is not enough to solve the problem, and that far worse, the provision of equal resources may sometimes mask the real inequality” (Ismail, 2018, p. 731).

4 Discussion

The aim of this literature review was to look at what has been found on the aspiration-achievement paradox both internationally and in Finland.

According to international research used in this thesis, the educational aspirations of immigrant youth and their parents does not always translate into educational achievement. This can be due to many factors, but most significantly the literature points to the possession of social capital and intergenerational closure as two things that possibly facilitate school success. However, it is important to point out that a common feature of the theories attempting to explain aspiration-achievement paradox, such as immigrant optimism and information bias, is that they lack empirical evidence (Salikutluk, 2013). There is a need for more research in this area.

Aspirations in the end can be seen as a ‘steering wheel’ that directs school performance in the direction of future educational goals, rather than operating as an engine or generator for educational attainment (Khattab, 2014). The OECD (2015) believes that for students who possess realistic aspirations, high educational expectations serve often as a self-fulfilling prophecy, but they do not seem to be the only driving force. In relation to what has been previously outlined about aspirations, Jacob and Wilder (2010) believe that because it is expectations that are subject more often to rational updating based on the acquisition of new information, that they should be the target of social policies that are aimed at increasing educational attainment in youth rather than aspirations.

Another caveat brought forth by Khattab (2014), which he finds equally important to study, is the phenomenon of students achieving more than they aspire to. While it is important to understand why students with high aspirations underperform, it is also interesting to examine the situations in

which students with low aspirations produce high educational achievement. Khattab (2014) believes that this is an area that has been severely neglected in this field of study and leaves us with a limited understanding of the place of aspirations and expectations in educational achievement.

The second research questions looked at the situation of immigrant-origin youth in the Finnish context. As mentioned, the categorization of “immigrant” posed a problem as it was ambiguous and cast a wide net that is not fully representative. According to Alitolppa-Niitamo (2004) diversity among immigrants “does not exist only between groups of different ethnic or national backgrounds, but – what most often goes unnoticed – within the groups themselves” (p. 126). While it imperative to recognize the heterogeneous nature of immigrant groups between and within each other, this consideration needs to be reflected in future research.

Research in Finland has found that students of immigrant-origin have high academic aspirations that were idealistic in nature and which is in line with what has been outlined in chapter 1, they are also indecisive when it comes to post-comprehensive education, possessing mostly abstract wishes for future goals. In relation to vocational tracks, students of immigrant-origin were recommended and held higher aspirations towards vocational tracks even when it did not match up with parental education level or learning difficulties. Vocational education can serve as a stable and safe track for students who are struggling in school, and works well in promoting work-life training and lifelong-learning (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). However, there is still a danger for immigrant-origin youth to be directed to this track more often than their native counterparts. According to Koehler and Schneider (2019) “immigrant children were almost automatically sorted into the lowest qualifying vocational track and, in general, had to fight hard when the ambitions were higher than that” (p. 4). OECD (2016) found that when children are directed primarily “to

vocational, rather than academic, courses on the basis that these are the courses that migrants most often attend, their aspirations will be limited” (p. 17).

While immigrant-origin students are nonetheless more likely to choose vocational education tracks, it is still the case that “these aspirations are reinforced by the stereotypes held by careers advisors” (OECD, 2016, p. 18). One last interesting point is the way in which immigrant-origin youth comprehend the structure of the education system; aiming for higher education through means of vocational school rather than the academic general route (Holmberg, 2018). While this is a valid route for students who want to aim high but encounter academic difficulties, it is imperative to keep in mind that while the vocational track can indeed lead to entry to the university system, the rate of successfully navigating this route is low for vocational students (OECD 2015b).

A factor I was not able to include in my thesis, but would like to briefly mention in this portion is the possible role of language in contributing to poor academic performance. This was my initial research topic, but due to limited material, I chose to go in a different direction. According to Miyamoto (2018) “students exposed to the destination language on a regular basis benefit more from aiming high.” (p. 19). In Finland, because students of immigrant-origin are classified by their mother tongue, Finnish is considered a ‘second language’ and students are regulated to the Finnish as a second language classroom. This does a disservice to the student’s translingual identity and operates on the hypothesis that Finnish is not a core part of their everyday lives, and can ultimately hinder their language skills, and consequently their academic ability. Jokinen (as cited in Piattoeva, 2010) rightfully ponders on whether or not the school as an institution has acknowledged “the complexity of the linguistic reality of the students and is able and willing to adjust its teaching contents and pedagogical practices to meet the needs of its multilingual population” (p. 5).

When examining the situation of immigrant-origin youth in Finland, which was the main focus of my thesis, I inevitably encountered the unfortunate issue of operating with limited resources. Due to the lack of extensive research published in this area, I was forced to rely heavily on a select number of materials. One positive was that both studies (Holmberg, 2018; Kalalahti et al. 2017) that were prominently featured in section 3.3 were both highly reliable and contained a large sample size of students. The studies were also very recent and focused primarily on the aspiration-achievement paradox of immigrant youth in Finland at the transition to post-comprehensive school. Due to my passion and connection to this topic, and my belief that it is an area that needs as much commentary and research as possible, I committed myself to it despite knowing I would encounter this issue. In conclusion and considering what has been found during this research, I look forward to continuing in this area in a more comprehensive manner in my master's thesis.

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