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Special issue of International Journal of Social Welfare:

Integrating young people in the labour market, integrating methodologies

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Editorial:

The challenges of integrating perspectives in looking at youth transitions to employment

In contemporary societies, young people face strong uncertainties upon transitioning into the labour market. Transitions from education to employment have become reversible, unstable, following scarcely predictable yo-yo trajectories (Biggart and Walther, 2006). The opportunity structures – as contexts of possibilities and constraints affecting the expected outcomes of individuals' experiences and in which young people are demanded to make reflexive choices, have also changed towards increased complexity (Roberts, 2009). Young people have been described as disadvantaged outsiders (Lindbeck and Snower, 2001, Cuzzocrea 2011), exposed to higher risks of unemployment and precarization (Kalleberg, 2009), with above-average turnover rates between jobs (Piopiunik and Ryan, 2012) and prolonged scarring effects on future life chances (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). Research shows that these dynamics may be even more acute during crisis and economic downturns

(Coppola and O'Higgins, 2016), such as the Great Recession or the recent Covid-19 pandemic. In periods of turmoil, being the last-in group youth also tends to be the first-out, facing dismissals and transitions in and out of employment.

Scholarly research on school-to-work transitions has widely addressed youth disadvantage in the labour market, building a highly complex and multi-layered picture where multiple risk factors intersect, from individual characteristics to economic and demographic conditions and local specificities, as well as to the institutional configuration of the education system, of the labour market, and the welfare state (O'Reilly et al., 2019; Scandurra et al., 2021a). At the micro-level, the outcomes of the school-to-work transition can be related, among others, to occupational status, education–job mismatch, wage and wage growth, security of employment, job and career mobility, participation in training, and job satisfaction (Wolbers, 2007; Caroleo et al., 2017). Education is positively associated with labour market outcomes: higher-educated people experience faster and smoother transitions (Zamfir et al., 2020). Conversely, low-educated adults bear a particularly high risk of labour market marginalization (e.g., Abrassart et al., 2013; Quintini et al., 2007). However, the first too may lack the requested working experience, and might thus experience precarity (Furlong et al., 2011). This double skill bias (Ryan, 2008) – or youth experience gap (Pastore, 2015) – represents a common characteristic of post-industrial societies.

The entry in the labour market is dependent upon individual decisions but is also shaped by the different structures of opportunities and constraints produced by socio-economic conditions, the institutional context and the diffusion of discourses orienting the governance of youth policies (Roberts, 2009; Dale and Parreira do Amaral, 2015). Cross-country differences in youth labour market integration have been linked to varying institutional arrangements, as well as to cyclical and structural factors shaping the transitions from education to work (De Lange et al., 2014). Scholars have examined the impact of various characteristics of the institutional configuration of education systems on transition outcomes, such as the degree of standardization and stratification and the vocational orientation (Bol and Van der Werfhorst, 2013; Eichhorst et al., 2015).

The comparative turn in school-to-work transition research (Raffe, 2014) saw several authors comparing groups of countries with similar institutional arrangements shaping the passage from education to work, identifying different typologies of transition systems, regimes, or skill formation systems (Smyth et al., 2001; Walther, 2017; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012). Yet, typologies have been criticized because they are not able to adequately describe the complexity of institutional configurations, so that most of the cases would figure as mixed or outliers within the types and should be treated as a unique case study (Lassnig, 2020; Roberts, 2018). Other scholars stressed that

countries and typologies at national level tend to take for granted a high degree of internal homogeneity (Scandurra et al., 2021b; Cefalo et al., 2020). Moreover, research on territorial cohesion and spatial disparities showed that Europe harbours relevant regional and local differentiations, so that within-country variation is often higher than variation between countries (Iammarino et al., 2018; Storper, 2018; Cefalo and Scandurra, 2021).

Education, vocational training, lifelong learning and active labour market policies are the main policy fields considered as able to improve youth integration and mediate the impact of common trends or conjunctures, as for instance the economic crisis of 2008 (Piopiunik and Ryan, 2012). As a common trait, critical perspectives point here at the overarching emphasis on individuals' own responsibility in managing labour market risks, as discursive opportunity structures impacting policies and the definition of legitimate courses of action (Dale and Parreira do Amaral, 2015; Antonucci and Hamilton, 2014). These discourses are mirrored in policy perspectives and debates variously referring, for instance, to activation, social investment, human capital, skills matching, and lifelong learning.

Policy interventions show wide variations across countries and even regions or localities. This makes the identification and diffusion of best practices and one-size-fits-all strategies difficult, demonstrating instead, once again, the underlying complexity of youth integration. Therefore, several scholars specifically focused on the role of contexts and interactions among actors, institutions, structures and policies. Along this line, Tosun et al. (2019) look at coordination in youth employment and unemployment policies. Brzinsky-Fay (2017) highlights the interplay of educational and labour market institutions with respect to relative youth unemployment. Literature on skill formation uses the concept of institutional complementarities to highlight the outcomes of interactions between educational institutions, the state, the social partners, private companies, and young people (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012). Dalziel (2015) and Benasso et al. (2022) point to the influence of local contexts and the resulting skills ecosystems, due to the impact of contextual complementarities (Kazepov and Cefalo, 2022). Specific conditions related to the contexts may offset the expected positive outcomes of policies and services, or even bring to negative unintended consequences (Kazepov and Ranci, 2017). With respect to studies singling out specific sides, the relational dimension comes at centre stage in the analysis, in the attempt to recognize and unveil the underlying complexity of youth integration in the labour market.

The rationale of this special issue: from perspectives to methods

In a previous special issue in this journal (28:4, 2019) Tosun et al. addressed youth employment from a social policy and political economy perspective, specifically looking at the dimension of coordination in youth unemployment policy. The present issue also touches upon issues of coordination and integration of measures across policy fields, but the scope of the articles encompasses a comprehensive picture covering studies on life course, structures of opportunities, youth, education and labour market policies. It is within this frame that the focus on the integration of perspectives and methods takes centre stage.

To tackle the complexity of transitions from education to work, we argue that a relational element – namely, how different elements at stake play together – needs to develop into a direction which is attentive of the methodological issues it might entail. Integrating different perspectives is generally difficult, as it implies building a dialogue across analytical frameworks, territorial scales and policy fields. The task at stake requires an encompassing view of intersectionality and openness to interdisciplinarity, in order to build a dialogue among highly different contributions. Not only content wise, but also as far as methods are concerned, existing bodies of work have reached a high level of sophistication across the spectrum of quantitative and qualitative research. It is from this reflection that this special issue arises from. On the one hand, we are certainly not the first to bring this node to the attention (Hollstein 2019; Creswell and Plano-Clark 2017). On the other, rare is the case where this concern is brought to full realization.

Integrating perspectives also means integrating methodologies, and this could have a strong added value and significantly enhance the body of knowledge on youth labour market transition. An effort of this kind will take research onto the next level. We have invited authors to address this challenge eliciting papers on youth integration in the labour market, which emphasize the possibility of a dialogue across methods in youth research at a session we organised at the ESPAnet 2019 conference in Stockholm. Our invitation was addressed with parsimony.

There are several reasons for this. First, the complexity of labour markets and their interrelation with a variety of factors: territorial, political, structural, or related to actors' strategies, etc.. Second, the sophistication of methods has gone far. Even if approaches develop around lines that have been established some decades ago, the specialization that is necessary to develop them is currently so high that researchers developed vocabularies that make a dialogue often difficult to pursue (Saltelli and De Fiore, 2022). Third, the current pressure to publish amongst academics, especially early-stage careers researchers, has made journal articles the most sought-after output. Yet, it is obviously difficult to realise an integration of perspectives in a restricted word limit. The popular

dictum ‘one idea, one article’, is not suitable for really discussing the complexity of interrelated aspects such as those under investigation in this special issue.

These difficulties are accompanied by the need to address youth policies. We believe it is important to continue refining methods and experimenting new specialised directions; however, this should not come at the expenses of inter-methodological dialogue. A common ground for discussion must be strengthened-

The articles in this special issue

The contributions in this special issue render an articulated picture of youth transitions to the labour market, demonstrating that mechanisms at stake are heterogeneous, complex and interrelated to one another. Disentangling these complexities might be also a methodological challenge and the contributions gathered try in integrating different approaches. Specifically, the contributions focus methodologically and empirically on selected aspects of this integration and present case studies across several countries. The peculiarities of adopting mixed methods approach is discussed throughout (specifically Verd), as well as specific intakes on looking at both young people and (youth) policies contextually (Mellberg et al., Valdebenito and Sepulveda; Rambla and Kovacheva). Authors discuss methodological implication of taking up this challenge. The contribution by Verd discusses the use of a hybrid data collection tool that was implemented in two different research projects examining the relationship between the labour market trajectories of young people and the use of network social capital in these trajectories. Mellberg and colleagues apply a mixed methods approach in order to investigate, through the lens of interactive governance, how municipal variation in NEET rates is related to local governance arrangements in Sweden. The article by Valdebenito and Sepulveda adopts a mixed design that combines both quantitative and qualitative methodological strategies to analyze transitions and post-study trajectories of a sample of young people who completed their secondary technical and vocational education and training studies in Chile. Last but not least, in their contribution Rambla and Kovacheva interview young adults and professionals in charge of lifelong learning policies provision, drawing on the concept of ‘opportunity structure’. They analyze variations between regional institutional arrangements and interactions between professionals and young adults.

All contributions show that integrating methods and perspectives is a fruitful research approach in order to understand the complexities of the impact on young people lives of the efforts required during their transition to adulthood. We envisage other scholars may take up this challenge and bring it further onto the next level.

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