



Working Class Youths' Engagement with and Responses to Gendered Transition Structures: Resilience and Reworking Strategies

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The classed and gendered structures shaping the transitions of vocationally oriented youth – from lower to upper secondary education and subsequently into the labour market – are well documented. Less attention has been paid to how young people engage with these structures during their transitional journeys. This study draws on repeated interviews with Swedish youths who enrolled in and later on graduated from the vocational upper secondary programmes Vehicle and Transport and Health and Social Care. The dataset comprises 33 interviews with four girls and two boys. The first interview round was conducted when they were in their first year of upper secondary and the last five years after graduation. The interview data were synthesised using the case-profile method and analysed through the lens of disaggregated agency – a three-tier framework for interpreting social responses to perceived injustices and structural constraints. The findings reveal how they navigated classed and gendered structures during their educational transitions and entry into the labour market, and how they responded to challenges related to schooling and the school-to-work transition. They further reveal that resilience was a prevalent response among participants, expressed in similar ways by both girls and boys. Reworking was also a common strategy, though it was shaped by sector-specific conditions and exhibited clear gendered patterns. Notably, they did not voice criticism or express views that could be construed as forms of resistance. The study underscores the enduring impact of class and gender on young people's post-educational trajectories and highlights structural inequalities within the labour market.

ABSTRAKT

De klass- och könsbundna strukturer som formar övergångarna från grundskolan till gymnasieskolan och vidare till arbetsmarknaden för ungdomar som väljer yrkesprogram är väl dokumenterade. Mindre uppmärksamhet har ägnats åt hur de förhåller sig till strukturerna. Denna studie bygger på intervjuer med svenska ungdomar som gått yrkesprogrammen fordon och transport samt vård och omsorg på gymnasiet. Datamaterialet består av intervjuer med fyra flickor och två pojkar. Den första intervjun genomfördes under första året på gymnasiet, och den senaste fem år efter avslutad utbildning. Datan har bearbetats med hjälp av caseprofile-metoden och analyserats med stöd i 'disaggregated agency' – ett tredelat ramverk för att tolka sociala responser på strukturella begränsningar och upplevda orättvisor. Analysen uppehåller sig vid hur

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de navigerade de klass- och könsbundna strukturer som genomsyrar utbildning- och arbetsrelaterade övergångar samt hur de bemötte utmaningar kopplade till dessa. Resultaten visar att resiliens var en vanlig respons bland ungdomarna, och detta sätt att hantera utmaningar såg ungefär likadant ut för flickor och pojkar. Omarbetning (reworking) visade sig också vara en vanlig form av respons, men denna påverkades av arbetssektorspecifika villkor och uppvisade tydliga könsmönster. Däremot gav de inte uttryck för sådant som skulle kunna tolkas som motståndshandlingar. Studien belyser hur klass- och könsrelaterade strukturer formar utbildnings- och arbetsrelaterade övergångar för ungdomar som gått gymnasiala yrkesprogram, och synliggör strukturella ojämlikheter på arbetsmarknaden.

INTRODUCTION

Although young people's education and work trajectories often appear diverse and individualised, they are fundamentally shaped by structural forces, with class and gender exerting significant influence (Imdorf et al., 2015; Kowalewska, 2023). For example, upper secondary is an institution that is deeply structured by class and gender, with significant implications for individuals' life trajectories (Nylund et al., 2018). Vocational pathways tend to attract young people from working-class backgrounds to a greater extent than those from other social groups, and gender plays a decisive role in shaping their distribution across specific programmes. For instance, the vehicle and transport programme is typically male-dominated, whereas the health and social care programme is among the most female-dominated (Fehring & Herring, 2013; Ledman et al., 2018). Upon entering the labour market, graduates of these and other vocational programmes encounter a landscape that is markedly classed, gender-segregated, and unequal (Reisel et al., 2015). Male-dominated sectors within the low-skilled labour market tend to outperform their female-dominated counterparts in terms of income development. This disparity has been conceptualised as part of *gendered transition structures*, which highlight how gendered pathways into vocational education and employment reproduce inequalities in labour market outcomes (Lorentzen & Vogt, 2022).

The classed and gendered structures encountered by vocationally oriented youth during their transitions to upper secondary education and subsequently into the labour market are well documented. However, what remains underexplored is how young people engage with these transition structures at the individual level, that is, studies that pay particular attention to individuals' agency. This study draws on qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) comprising interviews with six Swedish young people who pursued upper secondary programmes in Vehicle and Transport and Health and Social Care. Through repeated interviews conducted between 2017 and 2025, their career trajectories were traced over time, including their transitions into upper secondary education and later into employment, focusing on how they as individuals navigated and acted in the transitions. The central research question guiding this study is: How do young people engage with and respond to classed and gendered structures when navigating the transition from lower to upper secondary education and subsequently into the labour market? The overarching aim is to contribute to scholarship that foregrounds the gendered, classed, and procedural nature of young people's educational and occupational transitions, by adopting a micro-level and longitudinal perspective – focusing on individuals' agency and its embeddedness within broader social structures.

While much of the literature on youth transitions has concentrated on problematic aspects of youth transitions such as unemployment, marginalisation, and NEET status (e.g. Avagianou et al., 2022; Nielsen et al., 2019), this study seeks to shed light on the more mundane and everyday patterns of transition – specifically, the trajectories of 'ordinary' working-class youth as they navigate (vocational) education and entry into the labour market. This is not to suggest that these transitions are devoid of challenges or risks. Scholars have drawn attention to the difficulties associated with gender-segregated labour markets, gendered workplaces, and the broader instability of contemporary labour conditions (Rönnlund & Tollefsen, 2024, 2025). Several studies link these challenges to the dynamics of a fast-paced, globalised, and increasingly precarious labour market, marked by deepening social and economic inequalities, weakened collective protections for workers and widening wage disparities (Boréus et al.,

2021). In the context of growing individualisation and insecurity, young men and women are increasingly left to navigate a competitive and demanding economic landscape on their own (Basnet et al., 2023; McDowell, 2020). This study foregrounds the perspectives of young people themselves in this context, allowing their voices to be heard and their experiences to inform our understanding of educational and labour market transitions among working class youth.

THE SWEDISH VET AND LABOUR MARKET CONTEXT

In Sweden, as in other Nordic countries, vocational programmes attract fewer students than academic ones (Rönnlund et al., 2026) – a trend that has prompted a series of policy investigations and reforms. For instance, a 2011 reform aimed not only to increase enrolment but also to better align vocational education with labour market demands. It removed the requirement for students to undertake university preparatory courses and opened up more opportunities for the provision of vocational education through apprenticeship models. However, in response to persistently declining enrolment in vocational pathways and growing labour shortages, a reform in the opposite direction was introduced in 2023. This reform made advanced courses in subjects such as Swedish and English the default option, thereby enhancing eligibility for tertiary education. Nevertheless, students retained the option to replace courses with non-qualifying alternatives if they so choose. The pronounced gender coding of Swedish upper secondary vocational education has also been the focus of reform initiatives aimed at achieving a more balanced gender distribution across programmes (e.g. SOU, 2019). Nevertheless, despite decades of policy work – the interest for vocational upper secondary programmes is decreasing, and the gender segregation persists (Lappalainen et al., 2019; Ledman et al., 2021).

Those young people who nevertheless opt for a vocational programme often come from working-class backgrounds, in the sense that their parents typically have limited post-secondary education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). The vocational programmes whose students have the lowest proportion of parents with post-secondary education are the Vehicle and Transport programme and the Health and Social Care programme. Graduates from these and other vocational programmes tend to transition relatively quickly into employment, although the speed and stability of these transitions vary depending on the specific programme and student group. Male-dominated VET programmes, such as Vehicle and Transport, tend to yield the highest post-graduation employment rates. According to Swedish National Agency for Education (2018), over 60% of students who completed the Vehicle and Transport and Building and Construction programmes with final grades and basic eligibility had established positions in the labour market one year after finishing upper secondary school. In comparison, the corresponding figure for graduates of the Health and Social Care programme was notably lower (just under 50%). One year after completing their studies, graduates from the five most male-dominated programmes were more likely to be in full-time employment and earned significantly higher incomes than those from programmes with a higher proportion of female students (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study explores how young people position themselves and navigate in relation to classed and gendered transition structures – how they enact and engage with these frameworks as they move from education into the labour market. The analysis draws on Katz's (2004) conceptual framework of disaggregated agency, which offers a nuanced lens for understanding individual responses to structural constraints.

Human agency refers to the capacity of individuals to make choices, exert influence, and derive meaning from their environments through intentional, reflective, and innovative action (Katz, 2004; Smarika, 2025). People respond to their circumstances based on past experiences and routines, but they also exercise agency in relation to their present situations and imagined futures. Agency, in this sense, is a dynamic interplay between individuals and the environments that shape them.

Katz's notion of disaggregated agency challenges narratives of disorganisation, fragmentation, and passivity by recognising that agency can manifest even under conditions of constraint. She

identifies three distinct forms of social response: resilience, reworking, and resistance. These categories represent different ways individuals respond to perceived injustices and unequal power relations.

It is important to note that the young people in this study entering adulthood had limited prior experience with oppressive structures related to education and work. Nonetheless, Katz's typology provides a useful framework for interpreting how they respond to and position themselves in relation to the labour market structures they encounter upon graduation.

The three forms of agency are briefly outlined below, drawing on Katz's original definitions and Smarika's (2025) interpretation in her study of social responses among ageing non-European migrant women. *Resilience* refers to creative survival strategies that do not necessarily challenge existing social relations. It involves drawing on internal and external resources to cope with adversity. Rather than being a fixed personal trait, resilience is understood as a process shaped by the interaction between individuals and their environments. This perspective encourages attention to adaptive pathways and coping mechanisms. *Reworking* encompasses strategies aimed at reconfiguring one's life to improve access to resources and enhance living conditions. It acknowledges structural constraints while enabling realistic actions that reshape everyday barriers. Reworking involves accommodating oneself to prevailing conditions in ways that offer safer or more feasible routes to power, even when such power is limited. *Resistance*, by contrast, entails overt criticism and opposition to perceived injustices and unequal power relations. Acts of resistance may include voicing experiences of oppression, challenging dominant narratives, and imagining alternative futures. Resistance seeks not only to survive or adapt but to subvert and transform the structures that produce inequality.

METHODOLOGY, METHODS AND DATA

The methodological approach underpinning this study is grounded in the view that career-related processes must be understood biographically. Biography is conceived as a lifelong process of meaning-making, in which each new situation is interpreted through the lens of accumulated and continually renewed knowledge (Brockmann, 2021). Accordingly, the ways in which individuals make sense of the social world – how they engage with and enact transitions and construct their career trajectories – are shaped by past experiences, as well as by aspirations, hopes, and imagined futures. A central tenet of this approach is that individual biographies of transition not only offer insights into young people's lived experiences and subjective worlds, but also serve as a means of accessing broader social contexts and conditions (Sandberg, 2011). Personal narratives thus provide a valuable entry point for exploring wider discourses on gender, education, and working life in society (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

The study draws on QLR data collected over a period of 9 years (2017–2025) within the framework of two separate research projects, conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). Interviews were conducted with six young people (three girls at Health and Social Care and two boys and one girl at Vehicle and Transport) who completed vocational training at a secondary school in a small town in northern Sweden with a population predominantly composed of working-class and lower middle-class residents. Their upper secondary education was dominated by one gender, but in both school classes there was also a gender minority represented. After upper secondary they began working in male- and female-dominated workplaces. The dataset comprises 33 'educational biography interviews' (cf. Hegna, 2017), i.e. biographical interviews where issues related to education and career have been in focus. The first interviews were conducted when they were in their first year of vocational upper secondary school and the last was conducted five years after they had finished upper secondary. The interview occasions varied between the individuals as they, for various reasons, chose to forgo one or two interview rounds. Two of the individuals have been interviewed seven times, two six times, and two five times, respectively.

Throughout the project, interview data have been continuously analysed using the case-profile method developed by Rachel Thomson and colleagues (Thomson, 2007; Thomson & Holland, 2015). This approach involves condensing data from each wave of interviews into individual 'case histories' (Thomson, 2007, p. 573), which trace the evolution of personal transitions over time across key biographical domains – in this study, specifically the domains of education and employment.

The analytical process began with a close reading of the six case histories, which were then synthesised into a single overarching ‘case narrative’. In the next phase, this narrative was coded and thematised with a focus on two key transition phases: the move to upper secondary education and the subsequent transition into the labour market. The data were interpreted through the lens of a three-step classification framework, resulting in the identification of three central themes: challenges linked to education, challenges linked to the school-to-work transition, and resilience and reworking responses.

Following the thematic analysis, I returned to the case histories to identify two individuals who had been particularly articulate and reflective about their transitions throughout the interview rounds. These two also participated in the highest number of interviews over time – seven each. Both had lived their entire lives in the municipality where the school was located, and their parents, employed in working-class roles within the local industrial and service sectors, were also locally rooted. While these two individuals are not intended to serve as ideal types for the entire participant group, their case histories illuminate key aspects of the broader case narrative and its identified themes. In this way, they offer valuable insights into how the six participants more generally engaged with transition structures, thereby enabling a deeper understanding that extends beyond the selected cases (cf. [Kogler et al., 2022, p. 9](#)). After selecting the two case histories, the corresponding interview transcripts were examined to extract representative quotations that exemplify the themes.

The findings are presented in three sections. The first outlines the overarching case narrative, structured around the three identified themes. The second and third sections present the individual case stories of Sam and Maya, respectively.

THE CASE NARRATIVE

The young individuals did not encounter significant difficulties when applying to upper secondary programmes; for all of them, a vocational track appeared to be the most ‘natural’ and self-evident choice. Many came from families where parents lacked post-secondary education and were employed in low-skilled or semi-skilled sectors of the labour market, and none of the participants explicitly reflected on the gendered or classed nature of their educational choices at the time. As such, the decision to pursue vocational education was not experienced as a difficult one. However, the three years spent in upper secondary school proved to be challenging for some, in particular in terms of navigating the expectations and structures of their chosen programmes. Challenges were most pronounced among students in the Vehicle and Transport programme. Overall, these students felt that the programme did not adequately equip them with the professional skills required for entering the labour market – a concern that became particularly evident during their internship periods. This sentiment was especially strong among students specialising in body work and car painting, whose training followed an apprenticeship model. In contrast, students in the Health and Social Care programme generally viewed their education as high quality. Regardless of programme, a gendered pattern characterised the students’ upper secondary studies: girls tended to choose higher education preparatory courses, while boys did not.

All of the young people transitioned into employment either immediately after completing their education or shortly thereafter. Their workplaces were distinctly gendered: graduates from the Vehicle and Transport programme entered strongly male-dominated sectors, while those from the Health and Social Care programme found employment in predominantly female-dominated environments. For the Vehicle and Transport graduates, the transition into the labour market was generally experienced as smooth and unproblematic. In contrast, students from the Health and Social Care programme encountered challenges. These included difficulties in managing work tasks and coping with demanding working conditions. For some, the challenges extended beyond the workplace, involving the complexity of coordinating various aspects of adult life. Transitions into adulthood are multifaceted, encompassing not only education and employment but also intimate relationships, friendships, housing, and leisure ([Cieslik & Simpson, 2013](#)). For several participants, the move into professional work coincided with other significant life changes – such as relocating, forming new relationships, and adapting to new forms of mobility, including commuting – which made the overall transition more demanding.

The young people responded to the challenges they encountered primarily through resilience (Katz, 2004). For example, students in the Vehicle and Transport programme made concerted efforts to keep up during their internships, despite feeling underprepared and lacking essential skills. Similarly, students in the Health and Social Care programme worked hard to adjust to what they perceived as demanding working conditions upon entering the labour market. One common strategy for coping with these challenges was to use their free time for rest and recovery. Rather than engaging in leisure activities, several participants described deliberately taking it easy outside of work in order to sustain their energy and manage the demands of their jobs. Another recurring response was reworking (Katz, 2004), a process through which they actively reshaped their employment situations. This included changing industries entirely or pursuing further education within their current field. All six participants engaged in some form of reworking, although their motivations, strategies, and resources varied. By contrast, they did not voice criticism or express views that could be construed as forms of resistance. Overt opposition or subversion of structural constraints was largely absent from their narratives.

SAM'S STORY

Sam found the Vehicle and Transport programme well aligned with both his personal interests and his aspirations for a future career. His choice also reflected his family background: both parents had completed vocational education at the secondary level, and his older brother was employed within the Vehicle and Transport sector. The programme began with a shared curriculum in the first year, followed by specialised tracks in the second and third years. Sam opted for the bodywork track, citing his enthusiasm for working on cars in his spare time – he particularly enjoyed ‘doing stuff and screwing things in cars’.

However, it turned out that the education did not meet his expectations. Sam found that very few of the courses were relevant for a specialisation in bodywork.

It would have been better to have a textbook tailored to each specialisation. I want to study bodywork, but there's only one section in the book that actually covers it.
(2017)

As Sam was about to begin his second year, his first year of specialisation, the bodywork programme underwent a restructuring into an apprenticeship model. Sam was unhappy about this shift. He felt misled, stating that the school had not informed him about the change when he initially chose the programme. Had he known, he said, he would have selected another specialisation. As he prepared to begin his internship at the assigned car repair shop, Sam felt anxious. He believed he lacked the basic skills necessary for the profession and described feeling insecure and incompetent in the face of the practical demands of the workplace.

I'm not looking forward to it, it's going to feel strange. It's like walking into a workplace completely clueless, just standing there like an idiot. (2017)

During the final two years of the programme, Sam spent three days a week at a car workshop in a nearby city, gaining hands-on experience, and the remaining two days attending theoretical classes at school. These classes did not include any higher education preparatory subjects, as Sam had opted out of them. He explained that he had no intention of pursuing higher education and felt that he already struggled enough with the mandatory theoretical subjects, such as mathematics.

As Sam had anticipated, the two years of apprenticeship presented him with significant skills-related challenges. A few months into his placement, he remarked, ‘we don't have any knowledge from school with us’ (2018), a sentiment that persisted throughout the apprenticeship and even after he entered employment. He later reflected, ‘You should learn the basics at school and not on the job. When we came here, we basically knew nothing and had to learn the basics here’ (2019), and again in 2021, ‘It was sad that you didn't learn that much at school and that you didn't really have the foundation to start working on an internship.’

As graduation approached, Sam was eager to secure employment that would allow him to begin working immediately. He felt fairly confident about his prospects, anticipating a position either at the company where he had completed his apprenticeship or at another car repair

shop. As he put it, 'I always get a job' (2019). However, he was not offered a position at the company where he had trained. The outcome was disappointing, particularly as his best friend, who had also completed an apprenticeship at the same company, was offered a workshop position after graduation.

Despite this setback, Sam remained optimistic. He believed he would eventually find employment and expressed a willingness to consider jobs outside the car repair sector. After finishing school, he registered as unemployed with the Swedish Public Employment Service and remained without work for several months. During this period, he decided to retrain for the transport industry. He applied for and was accepted into a 40-week adult education course in light and heavy truck driving, for which he received financial support from the Employment Service.

Sam described the course as short, intensive, and highly effective. He also noted that the students in the programme were significantly more motivated than those he had encountered during his time in upper secondary school.

It's so much better than upper secondary school [...] I'm basically the youngest here [...] There are a few people my age, but no one under 20 – everyone's really mature. They've been through tough times, so they don't take their education for granted or waste the opportunity, which is quite refreshing. There's no messing around in the classroom, nothing that disrupts concentration, none of that. (2021)

He also believed that the training opened up a wide range of employment opportunities across different sectors:

Yes, there are far more job opportunities here than in auto body repair. There's also much greater variety in the kind of work I can do. I can drive large vehicles, operate an excavator, work in distribution or with cranes, and if I want, I can work in a warehouse driving a truck. (2021)

After completing his education, he secured a job at a transport company in the city close to where he lived. His main responsibility was driving a dump truck with a trailer, transporting large containers filled with various materials to and from different locations. Quite often, these containers held construction waste destined for recycling centres and similar facilities.

You often drive from [location] up to [location], or to [location], exchanging containers along the way. Most of the time, these containers belong to construction companies and are placed at building sites, where they're filled with waste. Your job is to replace the full containers with empty ones and transport the waste to the appropriate facilities. (2022)

He enjoyed both his work and his colleagues, and found the salary good. However, the long days and frequent overtime made him take up a position as a garbage truck driver within the same company. He didn't mind that the job was often seen as low-status – he considered it a good and respectable line of work. Despite being new and the least experienced on the team, he found the tasks manageable. In fact, he often completed his daily route ahead of schedule. 'I'm a bit too fast for how they calculated' he said in 2022.

According to him, the pay was still solid, though he was aware that he could earn even more by taking a transport job in one of the mines in northern Sweden. 'You want a good salary, that's almost always what you're aiming for' he noted. One downside, however, was the smell, which was hard to ignore.

The smell isn't very pleasant – especially in the summer. In winter, you barely notice it. You get used to it up to a point, but when it's really bad, it hits you hard, it smells awful [...] But you don't notice it much when you're inside the truck. The odour is mostly outside, or in the garbage room. (2023)

Sam continued to enjoy the job. Often, he completed his pre-planned route ahead of schedule, finishing faster than expected. The work also offered some variety – he drove different routes, sometimes alone and sometimes with a colleague.

Sam was also satisfied with how the company handled workplace safety. He had started to notice that repeatedly getting in and out of the garbage truck was physically demanding, especially on his knees. However, the company had invested in trucks that lower themselves when stopped, helping to reduce strain and prevent injuries.

Yes, it can be a bit tiring, especially the constant jumping in and out of the truck, which takes a toll on your knees. But so far, it's been manageable. The company has also upgraded the truck cabs, removing the steps and installing a system similar to buses that lower when they stop [...] That change has really made a difference, it makes me feel better. (2025)

He still felt he was earning a good salary and wasn't concerned about unemployment. Garbage collection is essential for all municipalities, and in the city where he worked, at least two competing waste management companies relied heavily on labour. He believed his education had given him a broad foundation and noted that there are 'many different types of transport jobs in the industry'. He also felt confident that he could return to workshop-based work if needed, as there was a strong demand for trained labour.

Sam saw himself continuing in transport-related jobs for the rest of his career. As he put it, 'there are many different types of transport jobs in the industry', and becoming a crane operator was something he hoped to pursue in the future. He had no plans to attend college or university. 'No, I don't think I'll try that. I haven't even thought about it', he said.

MAYA'S STORY

Maya applied to the Health and Social Care programme out of personal interest, motivated by a genuine aspiration to pursue a career in healthcare. Her familiarity with the profession stemmed from her mother's role as an assistant nurse, which had provided her with valuable insight into the nature of the work and its everyday responsibilities.

Maya began the programme with high expectations and was not disappointed. She found the structure to be coherent and well-organised, with clear progression across both theoretical courses and practical components. Each year included a six-week internship in a different area of the healthcare sector, and students were adequately prepared for these placements through a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on training. This integration of theory and practice contributed to a sense of readiness and professional learning throughout the programme.

I find the programme well-structured. In the first year, the focus was on elderly care. We first acquired foundational knowledge, including care practices, treatment approaches, and practical skills such as assisting individuals out of bed. This was followed by an internship in the same area, allowing us to apply what we had learned. Upon returning to school, we reflected on our experiences before progressing to the next major area, disability care. In this phase, we studied various types of disabilities, the assistive devices that might be required, and approaches to affective treatment. In the final year, the emphasis shifted to healthcare more broadly. (2019)

The internships were perceived as both engaging and insightful. Maya observed that full-time staff occasionally appeared fatigued, and that workplaces often struggled to secure temporary cover when regular employees were absent due to illness. These experiences prompted her to reflect on whether obtaining a nursing qualification might lead to improved working conditions. Consequently, she ensured that she took university preparatory courses to maintain eligibility for future nursing studies. As she remarked, 'It's good to take advantage of the opportunity now' (2018).

Following graduation, Maya obtained a summer position in the emergency department of the hospital where she had previously interned. After a probationary period, she was offered a permanent role. However, after a year and a half, she chose to resign and apply for a position in one of the hospital's orthopaedic departments. Her decision was influenced partly by the demanding nature of the tasks and partly by the working hours associated with her previous role.

Partly, it was the working hours. In the emergency department, most patients come in during the evenings, so there was a lot of evening and weekend work, you'd end up working every other weekend. And then you don't have time to see the people you want to see, because you're working when they're off. That wasn't much fun. Some of the tasks were also pretty tough, and I didn't really enjoy them. When traumas or really tragic cases came in, it didn't happen often, but it did happen, I didn't feel properly prepared. I got the sense that people expected me to be able to handle everything [...] But even if you've been in the emergency department for a year, you're still a beginner." (2021)

She felt more comfortable in the orthopaedic department, at least to begin with.

I still really enjoy it. There's a lot more hands-on care, and many of the residents are older. [...] Some of them have broken a leg, and yeah, it can be physically tough helping them learn to walk again, but I actually like that part. (2021)

She felt her working hours had improved – she now worked fewer evenings and only every third weekend, compared to every other weekend before. Still, she found the schedule challenging at times: 'If you work an evening shift and then have a day shift the next day, you get home at half past ten and then have to get up at five. You don't get much sleep.' (2021)

Financially, she managed, even though the salary 'wasn't the best': 'You don't get the best salary in the world as an assistant nurse, especially not when you work in the public sector, but I manage.' (2021). She compared her situation to that of peers who had enrolled in male-dominated vocational programmes at the same upper secondary school.

There are others who studied vocational tracks, like carpentry, plumbing, or truck driving, and most of them earn more and probably don't have such awkward working hours. [...] It would've been nice to have something like that. And when you think about the kind of work we do, it's a bit different. But yeah, it works. (2021)

After working as an assistant nurse at the orthopaedic clinic for two years, Maya applied to a nursing programme in the nearby university city and subsequently began her studies there. She explained her motivation by stating that she wanted to 'learn even more and gain more knowledge and take on a bit more responsibility, even though it can be a little scary sometimes' (2021).

Maya enjoyed her studies and found the programme interesting, but expressed concern about her future professional life. These worries were shaped, in part, by the impressions she formed during her internships at various healthcare settings.

At almost every internship, you hear people who work there say they're not feeling great and question how things are run. [...] There are quite a few problems in the workplaces. [...] Some of my classmates have seen their supervisors crying from stress, and others have been told, 'Don't apply here for the summer, you won't feel good working here.' It's not very encouraging when the people you're supposed to work with say, 'Don't come here, it'll just be awful.' (2023)

Despite these experiences, Maya remained hopeful that she would be able to contribute to positive change in the workplace once she began her own nursing career.

I talked to someone who said that when you're new, you have a lot of hope, you feel like, 'I can change things, I want to do a lot when I start.' [...] But then, after you've been working for a while, you kind of give up. You think, 'Well, nothing's changed. It doesn't matter what I say.' That's a bit sad. Still, I feel like I want to go in with some hope and try to make a difference. (2023)

At the time of the final interview, Maya was working as a nurse in the cardiology department at the city hospital. She found the work meaningful and varied, yet also physically and mentally demanding.

It's busy almost all the time. When I started here, each nurse had five patients, but then they increased it to six and sometimes even more. [...] So yeah, some days are really stressful, there's a lot to do, and some patients can be seriously ill. (2025)

I usually stay quite calm and try to make a plan, either in my head or on paper about what needs to be done. I focus on prioritising the most important tasks first. Then I discuss things with the assistant nurse, since we share responsibility for the patients [...] But there's almost always a staff shortage [...] There's supposed to be a nursing resource on the ward to support us, especially with tasks like rescheduling or other things we might not have time for ourselves. Ideally, that extra support helps us manage the workload. (2025)

Although she perceived weekend work as an intrusion into her private life, she nonetheless appreciated it for being less stressful compared to weekday shifts.

Working on weekends is usually calmer and more pleasant [...] it feels like everything moves at a different pace. Many of the scheduled examinations and other routine tasks are put on hold unless there's an emergency, which creates a more relaxed atmosphere. You have more time for the patients and for conversations with colleagues. On some weekdays, it feels like we're just rushing past each other, constantly busy, and only at the end of the day do you stop and think, 'Wait, what actually happened today?' (2025)

Although Maya did not regret her career trajectory, she occasionally found herself imagining a completely different path – one that, in her view, might be less demanding.

Sometimes I catch myself thinking how nice it would be to just drive a truck and deliver packages, or work in a pastry shop, baking all day. I actually find baking kind of fun. (2025)

By the time of the final interview, she had begun to consider pursuing further training to become a district nurse, believing that the role would offer more favourable working conditions.

I've been thinking about maybe studying to become a district nurse in the future. They usually work at health centres or in municipal home health care, and sometimes in student health services too [...] The hours are more regular, mostly daytime, and there are fewer weekend shifts. (2025)

DISCUSSION

Revisiting the study's central research question – how young people engage with and respond to classed and gendered transition structures when navigating the transition from lower to upper secondary education and subsequently into the labour market, the findings indicate that such engagement was predominantly characterised by adaptive and anticipatory agency, rather than by forms of resistance. Through resilience and reworking strategies, the young people actively navigated structurally unequal educational and labour market pathways, making these transitions manageable and meaningful within the constraints they encountered.

The ways in which young people approached the transition from lower secondary school to vocational upper secondary education largely mirror patterns identified in large-scale studies and official statistics: young people from working-class backgrounds are more likely than others to choose vocational programmes, and these choices are strongly gendered ([Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023](#)). This study adds a micro-level perspective to these well-established patterns by highlighting how intersections of social class and gender are at play in school-to-work transitions. The young people in the sample had enrolled in programmes with comparatively low proportions of students whose parents had post-secondary education: the boys in a programme linked to the production sector, and all but one girl in a programme associated with the reproductive sector. They described gender-typical vocational programmes as 'natural' choices, suggesting that engagement with gendered and classed transition structures had begun well before entry into upper secondary education. Rather than resulting from explicit reflection, these choices can be understood as forms of practical engagement with socially intelligible and locally available pathways. In this sense, gender and class operate not merely as background variables but as structuring principles that shape what is perceived

as possible, desirable, and appropriate. The intersections of class and gender thus organise both access to and orientations within the opportunity structure, mediated by family histories, peer cultures, and gendered and classed imaginaries of work. Selecting a gender-typed vocational programme thus functioned both as a way of navigating structurally patterned opportunities and as a means of constructing and expressing identity within these structures (cf. [Rönnlund et al., 2026](#)).

Across both educational and labour market transitions, resilience emerged as the most prevalent form of agency among the participants. In Katz's (2004) terms, resilience refers to creative acts of survival – responses that enable individuals to endure and navigate structural constraints without directly challenging them. In this study, resilience was evident among both girls and boys and across programmes, although it took shape in relation to different institutional contexts. For students in the Vehicle and Transport programme, resilience involved persevering despite feeling underprepared and critical of the quality and organisation of their education, particularly during apprenticeship-based training. For students in Health and Social Care, resilience became most salient after graduation, when they encountered demanding working conditions, high workloads, and emotionally taxing environments in female-dominated care sectors. In both cases, resilience functioned as an active form of engagement with classed and gendered transition structures, allowing young people to remain within these pathways and make them liveable, even when they entailed significant strain.

The prominence of resilience as a response also points to the limited expression of criticism or resistance. Rather than being encouraged to question institutional arrangements or labour market inequalities, the young people appeared to be socialised into values of adaptation, perseverance, and individual responsibility. These values resonate with the dominant discourses of production and care that have been shown to shape the Vehicle and Transport and Health and Social Care programmes respectively ([Nylund et al., 2020](#)). As the findings suggest, such discourses do not lose their force at the point of labour market entry but continue to structure how young people interpret challenges and imagine possible responses in early working life.

Alongside resilience, reworking constituted a second key form of agency through which the participants engaged with transition structures. Reworking involves attempts to reconfigure one's position within existing structures in order to improve access to resources or working conditions ([Katz, 2004](#)). In this study, reworking took different forms and was underpinned by different rationales. Maya's decision to pursue further education can be interpreted as a reworking strategy aimed at achieving better working conditions, greater professional autonomy, and long-term sustainability in a female-dominated care sector. Sam's retraining as a driver likewise represented reworking, but was primarily motivated by considerations related to employment security and income rather than working conditions. These differences reflect the gendered organisation of the labour market and the unequal opportunities attached to male- and female-dominated sectors.

A particularly important and less explored finding concerns how reworking was anticipated and prepared for already during upper secondary education. The girls in the study, regardless of programme, chose higher education preparatory courses, while the boys did not. This pattern suggests that engagement with classed and gendered labour market structures did not only occur reactively, in response to difficulties encountered after graduation, but also proactively, through anticipatory forms of agency. The girls appeared to 'play safe' by keeping future educational options open, anticipating that they might need to rework their trajectories later on in order to secure acceptable working conditions. The boys, by contrast, seemed to place greater trust in the availability of work and reworking opportunities within male-dominated sectors. This preparatory dimension of reworking highlights how agency can be oriented towards future structural positioning, not only present constraints, and underscores the value of a longitudinal perspective for capturing such dynamics.

While the study does not offer a structural analysis of class and gender in themselves, it shows how these structures become visible through young people's situated practices of resilience and reworking. The findings align with broader research suggesting that transitions to adulthood, while increasingly individualised and less standardised, remain deeply structured by gender and social class ([Krahn et al., 2018](#)). The young people's trajectories exemplify what Lorentzen and Vogt (2022) describe as gendered transition structures, whereby vocational pathways lead

into labour market segments characterised by unequal working conditions, income prospects, and opportunities for mobility. The competitive private-sector pathways associated with male-dominated vocational programmes in the production sector offered more favourable employment conditions and stronger income development than the public-sector care and reproduction pathways entered by most of the women in the study. Through their everyday practices of resilience and reworking, the young people engaged with these unequal structures in ways that allowed them to move forward, but rarely to challenge or transform them.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the importance of longitudinal biographical approaches (cf. Thomson, 2007; Vehkalahti et al., 2026) for understanding how engagement with transition structures unfolds over time. The case histories of Sam and Maya illustrate how agency is not a fixed individual capacity but a processual and relational phenomenon, shaped by cumulative experiences across educational and occupational contexts. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The empirical material is based on a small number of participants from a single geographical location and is characterised by a gender imbalance. Moreover, at the time of the final interviews, the participants were still at a relatively early stage of their working lives. It is therefore plausible that resistance-oriented responses to workplace injustices may emerge later in their trajectories, as experiences accumulate and organisational positions become more established.

Among the two cases, Maya most clearly articulated concerns about structural problems in healthcare and expressed a tentative hope of being able to resist such conditions in the future. This suggests that engagement with classed and gendered transition structures may shift over time, reinforcing the value of continued longitudinal research.

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