

Article

# Successful Transitions? Tracing the Experiences of Migrant School Leavers in Scotland

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the experiences and aspirations of migrant young people in Scotland. It focuses on students approaching the end of compulsory education and presents findings from a study on the outcomes of young migrants in the transition to adulthood. The research is based on empirical fieldwork carried out with students in two schools ( $n = 95$  in depth interviews). It finds evidence of unique and distinct educational pathways for school leavers with a migrant background. Three themes emerge about the practice of transition for young migrants, (1) the significance of family support and expectations, (2) the impact of the migration process and (3) the changing nature of migrant identity through transition. The study highlights the need for local and national policies which support transition for young migrants.

**Keywords:** migration; transition; integration; education; Scotland



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Importance of Transition

Transition to adulthood is a critical period within the life course [1]. A season laden with risks and opportunities; where significant decisions are made and life chances are shaped [2,3]. These changes are forged by individual decisions as well as macro-level conditions, with implications for individuals, families, the labour market as well as wider society [4–6]. For all young people this period of intense decision making, prior to the end of compulsory education, is an important time; “reflecting on who they are (their beings), who they can be (their becomings) and where and who they feel attached to (their belongings)” [7]. Attention has often, rightly, focused on the long-term trajectories of students from less affluent families and the potential for intergenerational social mobility [8–10]. In this study, which is framed within theoretical debates about migrant education and integration, the focus is on another axis of difference, the influence of migration experience.

Educational transition is defined here as the period of decision making which takes place at the end of compulsory education. The school leaving age varies between countries. In Scotland, the site for this research, the minimum age is 16 years old with optional studies available for another 2 years. This is younger than in many other countries, including England, Germany and Finland where young people are required to remain in education or training until they are 18. This dynamic period is important for several reasons. First, the risks involved with entering an increasingly precarious labour market, with limited access to scarce jobs, particularly for the inexperienced as well the rising cost of living and increasingly unaffordable housing [11–13]. Second, the inequalities associated with the nature of school-to-work transitions. Scholars have identified a separation between ‘slow’ and ‘fast’ transitions: young people whose families can afford for them to continue in education, take a slower route into the labour market by spending longer in education; while young people from less privileged backgrounds who are more likely to take a faster route, leaving full-time education at a younger age, entering the labour market and assuming adult roles earlier [14–16]. There is also evidence of these divergent pathways can have significant impact on health and wellbeing, as well as future earnings and opportunities [1,17].

Gariépy and Iyer [18] observe the mental health impact of these post-school trajectories in Canada. Using a large representative sample the authors identify a link between poor mental health outcomes and young people Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) after leaving school. It is argued that the association is complex (affecting male and females differently for example) and context-specific, with a need for tailored interventions for all school leavers. The study concludes with a call for more longitudinal (rather than cross sectional) research which follows the same students over time; something this study aims to do. Research in Scotland has shown the implications of post-school destinations on income and occupational positions twenty years after leaving school. Ralston, et al. [19] used longitudinal data to track students over three time points (1991, 2001 and 2011 Census) and found that leaving school and not entering employment, education or training (sometimes described as NEET) is a strong marker for subsequent negative outcomes, including long term disadvantages in the labour market. They found that those who were NEET tended to occupy a lower occupational position 20 years and underlines the importance of post-school destinations. This Scottish study provides a unique insight into the very long-term impact of post-school outcomes over thirty years. In this longitudinal qualitative project, the gap between time points is condensed to a few months to offer a rich insight into the lived experience of educational transition.

### 1.2. *The Focus on Young Migrants*

Ethnic and migrant background is critical to these debates about educational transition. For young migrants, this can be a particularly significant period. Reynolds [20] suggests that this phase in the life course can be important in developing 'race consciousness' (ibid; 395) and thinking about ethnic and racial identity. Reynolds' research investigated the transitions of young black males in three deprived areas of London, the qualitative interviews took place with young people aged between 16–21 and their parents living in 'black neighbourhoods'. Reynolds (2015) concludes that locally derived social and cultural capital did not translate into access to the labour market or educational opportunities, which led to individuals living in poverty and frustration. Research into citizenship and belonging in childhood has revealed that the process of growing up as a young migrant in Britain can feel increasingly uncertain, particularly since the UK's exit from the EU [21,22]. King [22] carried out interviews with 127 young EU migrants (aged 18–35) in London pre-Brexit (2015/16) and then re-interviewed a proportion of these in the months after the referendum. Participants described their sense of shock at the outcome and uncertainty about the future. It also captured themes of pragmatism and adaptability; something this study aims to explore in greater depth in migrant school leavers. Other studies have highlighted incidents of racism and discrimination towards Central and Eastern European migrants in the UK. For example, McGhee, et al. [23] also highlight evidence of discrimination among Polish migrants who face structural barriers to their integration. Moskal [24] carried out ethnographic fieldwork with 17 Polish young people (aged 12–17) and their parents to examine migrant youth identity. She found a tension between the policy discourse of inclusive nationalism in Scotland and the lived experience of this by young migrants in schools. Moskal's work pays particular attention to the voice of young migrants, something this study aims to build upon. More recently, research on 'Belonging in Brexit Britain' by Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon [7] brings into focus the impact of anti-immigration rhetoric in the UK. The rise in racist hate crime following the European referendum has been well documented [21,25] and the work of Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon [7] relate this to young people. Their study of Central and Eastern European children living in the UK reveals the uncertainty generated by the Brexit vote. Although it does not specifically identify examples of discriminatory practice, it is clear through previous research by Tereshchenko and Archer [26] that as public attitudes to immigration are increasingly negative, incidents of racism and discrimination within schools continue to rise.

### 1.3. *The Focus on Scotland*

In Scotland, increased migration over the past two decades has led to greater cultural and ethnic diversity [27]. In 2021, 151 languages were spoken by pupils in Scottish Schools and around 9% of pupils (approx. 64,000) lived in families whose main home language was not English [28]. Despite the shift in demographics, there remains a lack of existing research into the educational transitions of young people with a migrant background in Scotland. The current 'New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022' recommends further support for migrant young people, particularly those between 16 and 18 years of age, so that they can access education opportunities, and the support they need to “reach their potential and go on to future success” [29]. The latest published data reveals that there is variation in the post-school destinations of students from different ethnic and migrant backgrounds in Scotland [30]. In 2020/21 83 percent of Asian Chinese students moved straight into Higher Education, compared with 43 percent of White Scottish students. Around 10 percent of Asian school leavers left and moved directly into employment, whereas the figure was much higher, 24 percent, for White Scottish students [30]. These trends and the reasons behind them have not been extensively studied in Scotland. In part, due to historically small numbers of migrant students compared with other parts of the UK [31,32]. Also, due to pressing concerns about the poverty-related attainment gap, which continues to widen [33] despite significant investment and policy focus [34,35]. The few historic studies which do exist suggest that children from some minority backgrounds are outperforming the majority population in schools, even in deprived areas [36]. In this context, understanding the lived experience of Scotland's migrant school leavers is increasingly important. These insights complement and enrich the scholarship of colleagues interrogating the policy landscape; examining how institutions and governments facilitate the integration of migrants in schools. This paper is designed to provide a rich contextual grounding to broader debates on effective migrant integration in schools at a critical time of rupture [7,37] and geopolitical change [21,38]. It considers how migrant young people manage their educational transitions amid shifting ethnic and migrant identities as they transition to adulthood. Specifically, the study will answer the following research question, how does migrant background shape experiences of educational transition?

## 2. **Materials and Methods**

To answer the research questions above, this paper focuses on a subset of data collected within a large mixed methods project (which used qualitative approaches alongside national administrative datasets) to examine post-school destinations and aspirations of pupils across Scotland. Attention here is given to the analysis of the qualitative fieldwork which took place between September 2016 and December 2017.

### 2.1. *Research Context, Selection of Sites*

The research was undertaken in two regions of Scotland—Edinburgh City and Angus. The areas were selected for three reasons; demographic, educational and geographic. Both regions have experienced changes in the composition of their population over the last decade, with growing numbers of migrant pupils. Educationally both regions had been subject to high profile initiatives to support school leavers through transition. Finally, the two areas represent very different geographies, in terms of educational and employment opportunities. There are four Universities in Edinburgh, a large urban area, and none in Angus, which is predominantly rural. The labour market in Edinburgh has local, national and global links with a mix of sectors represented in the local economy. In Angus, the agriculture sector is a large employer alongside tourism and the public sector. These places share some similarities, but also represent significantly different regions to provide a rich contrast. The sample of secondary schools within the two regions was carefully considered. The schools ethnic and socio-economic composition was examined as well as published data on attainment and post-school destinations. Finally, for the project to be successful, a sufficient level of support and engagement from school management and staff was essential.

I originally approached three schools and received a positive response from two of these. Following face to face meeting with Head Teachers in two schools (and ethical clearance from the educational authorities in both regions) I was granted permission to undertake qualitative research in two secondary schools, one in Edinburgh (referred to here as the Urban school) and one in Angus (termed the Rural school).

## 2.2. Selecting Participants

A structured sampling technique was used to ensure the sample included pupils from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds as well as a mix of academic abilities, see Table 1. The sampling frame was discussed with school staff who were key gatekeepers in the school environment [39]. After an initial visit to recruit pupils for the project, I realised staff were keen for certain students to participate in the research, perhaps with an interest in showcasing some of the brightest pupils or, equally, in order to motivate other students who were less engaged in school. To address this, I attended events in the school and a school excursion which was short staffed, this led to interaction with a much broader cross section of students and allowed pupils who were not always recommended by staff to hear about the project. Once a sample of pupils from a mix of socio-economic, migrant/non-migrant and academic backgrounds had been identified (approximately 20 in each school) the pupils were gathered as a whole group to hear more about the project and invited to participate. The final sample was formed of 18 pupils from the urban school and 16 pupils from the rural school 2 ( $n = 34$ ). See Table 2 for the summary of the participants. All the young people were aged between 16 and 18 and were studying in the final years of compulsory education. Attrition was an inherent risk with repeat interviews, particularly during a dynamic period such as finishing compulsory education. All 34 participants completed interview 1, 30 participants completed interviews 1 and 2 and 28 participants completed all three waves (16 from the rural school and 12 from the urban school).

**Table 1.** Original sampling frame used in discussion with school staff.

Characteristics	Details	Number of Pupils *
Socio-economic characteristics	Pupils eligible for a free school meal	At least 5 pupils
	Pupils not eligible for a free school meal	At least 5 pupils
	Pupils living in SIMD 20 areas **	At least 5 pupils
	Pupils not living in SIMD 20 areas	At least 5 pupils
Ethnicity/Migrant background	White Scottish pupils	At least 5 pupils
	Pupils from non-White Scottish backgrounds	At least 5 pupils
	Pupils with English as an Additional Language (early acquisition English)	At least 1 pupil
Academic capabilities	Pupils with English as an Additional Language ('3 = Developing confidence' or '4 = Competent')	At least 3 pupils
	Taking only Highers and Advanced Highers	At least 5 pupils
Post-school destination	Taking only National 4's or National 5's	At least 5 pupils
	Expressed an intention to leave school before the end of S6 ***	At least 2 pupils
	Expressed an intention to remain in school before until the end of S6	At least 2 pupils

\* Note—pupils are likely to fit in more than one category; \*\* SIMD 20—Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government 2012). Living in the most deprived 20% communities in Scotland; \*\*\* S6—Secondary 6, final year of Secondary Education.

**Table 2.** Summary characteristics of final sample.

Characteristics	Number of Participants		
	Rural School	Urban School	Total
Gender			
Male	6	6	12
Female	10	12	22
Ethnicity			
White Scottish	6	10	16
White Other	7	2	9
Asian Scottish	0	4	4
Mixed Multiple Ethnic Group	1	2	3
White British	2	0	2
Parental occupation (NSEC5)			
1—Higher managerial administrative and professional occupations	6	5	11
2—Intermediate occupations	1	4	5
3—Small employers and own account workers	1	3	4
4—Semi-routine and routine occupations	7	3	10
5—Lower supervisory and technical occupations	1	0	1
0—Never worked and long-term unemployed	0	3	3
Actual/Expected initial destination (by end of fieldwork)			
Higher Education	10	19	19
Further Education	2	5	7
Apprenticeship	1	0	1
Employment	0	1	1
Gap Year	1	0	1
Unsure	2	0	2
N/A	0	3	3

### 2.3. Research Instrument

The process of conducting repeat research interviews has been termed longitudinal qualitative research [40]. It can be understood as a series of complex social encounters in which listening and responding to participants is just as important as asking questions [41]. The complexity of conducting repeat interviews required a detailed field diary as well as the transcripts from each interview. Each interview was semi-structured in nature and each wave had a slightly different focus (see Table 3). The first interview included a timeline activity, filling in details about when and where they were born, if/when they migrated and other significant life events. Scholars have suggested that this process of graphic elicitation may encourage contributions from interviewees that are difficult to obtain by other means and can provide a complementary addition to conventional interview stimuli [42]. Bagnoli [43] also reports using timeline activities within a project on migration and identity which proved useful to discuss the past as well as discuss the future. In this case, the timeline activity created a focus for the first interview and was used as a springboard for wider exploration of the background of participants as well as their experiences of educational transition. The final interview incorporated a sorting exercise which allowed students to discuss the key influences on their lives. The exercise gave a starting point for discussion, and analysis of the third interviews revealed that this exercise

provided a vehicle for expanding and developing complex ideas around agency, structure, personal motivation and natural talent/ability.

**Table 3.** In depth interviews overview.

Wave	Topic Covered	Purpose	Timescale
1	Introductions. Visual timeline of life events to date	Historical Storytelling and context building.	September/October 2016
2	Life at present—experience of transition and future planning.	Exploring concepts of capital, belonging, motivation.	January/February 2017
3	Life in the future—sorting exercise of key influences and discuss changes since last meeting	Exploring ideas of identity, transition, change.	October/November 2017

The interviews were conducted in English, they took place within class time and on school premises, usually lasting between 30–40 min. These in-depth interviews (three over fourteen months) with a cohort of 34 school leavers generated rich data about the lived experience of educational transition. These individual narratives were further interrogated through analysis of two focus groups and semi-ethnographic fieldwork. The cohort included school leavers from diverse backgrounds (gender, socio-economic, ethnic and migrant background) providing opportunities for comparison of the experiences of young migrant/minorities with White Scottish groups. The results which follow draw predominantly on the narratives of young people in the sample who moved to the UK as children (referred to throughout as young migrants). This focus on the significance of the migrant experience in transition has emerged from the analysis of the entire cohort of participants thereby enabling a comparative perspective. These young migrants had been born in a range of countries including Brazil, Bangladesh, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, the Philippines and the United States.

#### 2.4. Approach to Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using two methodological approaches. The first phase used a thematic analysis in NVivo using deductive coding. Then, a narrative analysis was conducted to give a more detailed understanding of each participants' experiences across all three waves of the research. This provided a multi-dimensional understanding of each young person's experiences of transition, focusing on how participants told their individual stories and on patterns in the data which connected across narratives. Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of the young people who took part.

#### 2.5. Theoretical Frameworks

This project explores concepts of capital, belonging and identity throughout a dynamic period of transition. It draws on Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital as well as Coleman's later extension of them [44,45]. These theoretical framings help us to consider why educational transition may be successful for some young people, in terms of educational attainment, post-school destination and social mobility, and not for others. Secondly, this study explores how migrant and minority identities are negotiated, asserted, and constructed in the transition to adulthood. These questions are informed by theoretical ideas used in the literature on Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory. These frameworks focus on being attentive to minority and migrant voices as well the interplay of multiple identities, for example gender, ethnicity, sexuality and religion.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Family Support and Expectations

When asked about experiences of educational transition the theme of 'family' surfaced regularly in the fieldwork. In part this can be explained by the age of participants who all

lived at home. However, it often went beyond the household to wider family networks. In the following section, we see how the nature of familial support among young people with a migrant background is distinctive in two ways: first transition is marked by an awareness of family responsibilities, to support their parents both now and in the future; second, 'successful' transition is framed by family expectations.

### 3.1.1. Family Responsibilities: Supporting Parents

Existing research has shown that parental sacrifices can have a motivating impact on the children of migrants, influencing educational attainment and their plans for the future [46]. Piotr, in the quote below, illustrates this clearly. He is asked what difference he feels migration has had on his outlook and aspirations for the future and responds—

*I feel like because I see my Mum working this hard, I see her coming back and her legs are sore because she walked all the way home. I feel like I'm determined to, not be it. . . . it makes me not want to do that. Like, I see my Dad . . . working hard and coming in dirty from whatever he's working on. I just don't want to be that. That's what made me want to go into Ethical Hacking [a degree programme]. It might be subconscious, we're going into psychology here! But I shunned away from that, computers are the complete opposite of working on a building site, it's sitting at a computer looking at a screen! Doing internet stuff, that's the opposite of being a builder.*

Piotr, born in Poland, rural school

Piotr begins to define himself and his future direction in reference to his parents. As he describes the everyday reality of transition, Piotr's experiences are marked by what he observes about the daily routine for his parents; the physicality of his father's role and the toil of his mother's long walk home. Piotr indicates that the choices he is in the process of making are designed to resist the embodied reality of his parents' experiences. Over the course of the interviews, Piotr expresses his hope that a graduate salary will allow him to support his parents financially. Similar discourses were evident in other interviews with migrant young people expressing a strong sense of commitment and responsibility for their parents, and a recognition of the challenges that migration brought their parents.

### 3.1.2. Family Expectations: Repaying a Debt

In the case of Piotr and others, family responsibility was portrayed positively and remained largely unquestioned. For others, the sense of responsibility was less evident and instead the term *expectation* was used more commonly. Interviews with White Scottish participants also discussed parental expectations, with young people either viewing this as additional pressure or embracing it as a form of support. For young people from a migrant background, this sense of expectation was often more nuanced and conflicted in nature because it was accompanied with a sense of guilt or at least heightened awareness of the sacrifices made by parents. The quote below illustrates this point.

*I'm trying to do my best because I know that my Mum brought me here to get my education . . . because it's for me then I feel like I have to give her back, to make her happy [pause] well kind of . . . but be like "mmm, look at that—told you!" Everyone will be like, "oh, I'm so smart" [laughs] So my relatives in Russia will see—look at me I've got my head in education and I went to university.*

Sasha, born in Russia, rural school

Sasha was born in Russia and moved to Scotland less than a year prior to this interview. In the quote above, she describes her future using the language of repayment. She suggests that her own education was the primary reason for moving and therefore she has a responsibility to meet these expectations. She is keen to make her mum happy and knows that the sense of family honour which will be shared by relatives in Russia if she progresses to university. Sasha also hints here of the desire for her family to prove themselves as migrants, not merely to the society they have joined but also to family members 'left behind'.

Sasha visualises a time when they will be able to say, ‘look at that—told you!’ This connects to research by McAreavey [47] on migrants in Northern Ireland, which suggests migrants can feel torn because they are seen as a ‘hero at home’ (country of origin) and a ‘loser at destination’. In this instance, Sasha’s experience points to a more complex scenario where she is not universally accepted as a hero by her family in Russia and this identity needs to somehow be upheld and maintained through educational success.

### 3.2. Learning Lessons through the Migration Experience

For a number of participants migration to Scotland was the second or third international move in their lifetime, having lived in countries as diverse as New Zealand, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Italy and the United States before arriving in Scotland. Thus, the young people in this study with a migrant background have had extraordinary experiences compared to their peers. In this context, educational transition was often a curious topic to these individuals who, in some cases, had begun to embrace and relish change, and for whom transition was normal rather than something to discuss. Intriguingly, the impact of migration was often downplayed and hard for them to articulate. Direct questions proved unfruitful so the examples which follow were often unprompted and naturally illustrated the resilience and flexibility which had been developed unknowingly, through the individual’s migration process.

#### 3.2.1. Change as the New Norm

Fabio attended the urban school at the time of the first and second interview. His family had moved within Brazil, then to Italy and Germany and finally to Scotland. I asked him about his first day at the school he was now attending in a Scottish city.

*I feel alone. So alone. Coz I didn’t know nothing here, nothing, absolutely nothing! On first day just alone, alone, alone. Just me –and me! [laugh] and God, please God! I had one friend on second day I just have one friend Portuguese friend*

Fabio, born in Brazil, urban school

Like a number of other participants Fabio describes the isolation and loneliness of being in a new school where he does not speak the language. He is asked how this compared with his experiences of moving within Brazil and he responds, ‘I was scared, but I could speak my language, I could express my feelings and I can talk with the teachers. I can talk in Portuguese!’ (Fabio, interview 1). The barrier of language learning was highlighted by several students and this was often coupled with the desire for a friendship group. Fabio quickly mentions the importance of peers and his ability to find a Portuguese pupil on his second day. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the narratives of new arrivals such as Fabio, demonstrate that migration experience can have a profound impact on experiences of educational transition. This can include the formation of peer groups, developing awareness of others and a hard-to-articulate sense that migration has been hard, but somehow ‘good’ for personal growth and development. The sections which follow highlight specific skills and capacities which were evident in the transition narratives of the young migrants in this study.

#### 3.2.2. Skills, Confidence and Contingency Planning

The analysis so far underscores the reality that young migrants are a heterogeneous group with a wide range of experiences and outlooks. Differences were noted between ethnic/national groups as well as within them and this complexity is illustrated clearly when discussing the idea of skills and confidence. Whilst students like Fabio describe the challenge of settling into school, others cast their migration experience in a positive light. Indeed, some interviews showed that the migration experience often equips them with new skills, increased confidence and adaptability. The challenge of learning a new language was a common topic in the interviews and therefore, several participants described the sense of achievement at having mastered a new language and discussed the impact this has had

on their confidence. The extracts below illustrates this, Lili is asked how transition might be different if she had been born in the UK and she focuses on the skills her migration experience has given her.

*I wouldn't ever be able to learn Hungarian! [laughs] I am actually happy that I wasn't born here. It might sound a bit weird. I actually like where I'm from . . . everyone says it's cool and I've got a cool accent. I like speaking other languages and I feel that is a success.*

Lili, born in Lithuania, rural school.

Similarly, Ana describes her experiences and academic success. She expresses disbelief at her results but describes how this has led to a determination to learn another new language, Ana seems to want to utilise and build upon the skills and experiences she has gained through migration.

*Achieving the grades that I got from coming from Poland to here is shocking! I am making myself a challenge of taking Spanish next year! Even though I'm already speaking another language –I feel like I can't do it –but you know, I did it first time so why can I not do it again?*

Ana, born in Poland, rural school

Flexibility and a readiness to make contingency plans were also characteristic of many of the young people with a migrant background as they navigated their educational transitions. Lucas, a Polish student with a passion for IT and computing describes his career plans. He is positive about the future, but also demonstrates realism and openness for things not to go the way he expects. He discussed his ambitious plans for the future with a sense of realism, recognising that things may not turn out the way he expects. He appears to strategically think 'a few steps ahead'. Arguably these are qualities which many other young people might demonstrate so this is tested. Lucas is asked directly whether he feels his background has influenced this.

*I think if I wasn't brought up the way I was then I might not be as flexible, but I think I'd still have the high expectations I do. Because I –now since I've been to so many countries I don't think it really matters where I work and if my work requires travel or me to learn another language or something like that, or where I have to keep moving, then I don't think I would have an issue with that. But if I had stayed in one place most of my life I probably would have grown more sentimental and I would have probably preferred to be in a more stationary"*

Lucas, born in the United States, rural school.

In this quote Lucas describes his 'high expectations' and also the flexibility he has developed. He specifically discusses the role of migration and his openness to travel, learn a new language and to settle elsewhere. Lucas hypothesises that had he been less mobile as a child he might have been 'more sentimental' and less mobile as an adult. Lucas clearly links his flexibility to his migration experience. This section has given voice to the experiences of migrant young people as they articulate their experiences of transition. It has been argued that these vignettes shed light on the particular skills, confidence and contingency planning that arise as a consequence of their migrant experiences.

### 3.3. Evolving Migrant Identities

Having explored the importance of family support and expectations and the specific skills gained through the migration experience, this final section turns to examine the role of migrant identity in shaping the transition to adulthood. It examines how the participants in this study assert, construct and resist their migrant identity in the transition to adulthood.

#### 3.3.1. Migrant Identity Shifting over Time

For some participants it was difficult to articulate the difference 'being a migrant' was making to their experiences of transition. The process and impact was hard to describe and

quantify. However, several young people were able to describe the ways in which they could harness intangible capital which had been gained through migration. Deriving a sense of confidence from their identity and using it as form of capital. Over time, this was enacted and performed in various ways and migrant identity was used as leverage in some situations. Here, Lucas discusses his citizenship.

*Well, at parties for example, saying that I'm American—leading with that—is the cooler thing to do because they hear my accent and they're like 'oh yeah, I thought so!' Then I hit them with the 'oh yeah but I'm Polish as well, I speak two languages' . . . So, at times I call myself American Polish and more recently with the Trump election I call myself Polish American, [laughs] generally I don't find myself to be one or the other. I don't find myself tied to a country.*

Lucas, born in the United States, rural school

Lucas refers to two sources of social capital which he uses in social settings; his ability to speak two languages and his dual national identity. The interview took place in February 2016, a month after US President Donald Trump was inaugurated. The media was filled with polemics around his competency and the likely impact of his presidency. Lucas responds with cool self-assurance. He is capable of shifting between his identities depending on the situation. He states that 'I don't find myself tied to a country' echoing the language used in the literature about the cosmopolitan elite; transnational processes which allow individuals to operate across the usual confines of nation states [48–50]. Cosmopolitanism has frequently been viewed as being the preserve of the global elite [51]. Here, however, this same outlook is being exemplified by the son of a lorry driver living in rural Scotland. Lucas describes how he uses this technique at parties and in conversation with people from the UK, it shows powerfully the connection between the local and the global; a very personal statement about his own identity is a lightning rod, instantly connected to major shifts on the geopolitical landscape. This use of cosmopolitan capital to gain distinction is a fascinating development which requires greater exploration in future research. In particular, what predisposes some migrants to construct and harness this capital if, as has been assumed, it is not simply a classed process and confined to an educated elite.

The longitudinal nature of the research allowed insight into how young people in transition assert and construct their identities over time. Lucas was still at school in the second interview, however by the final interview he had left school and was attending university. The quote below sheds light on how his identity has shifted through this period of transition.

*As I mentioned in our earlier meetings, I've been trying to expand my social skills, and it has paid off. I've met many new people here [at University] and I do not feel really special anymore, I used to be the interesting one who spoke another language and wasn't Scottish, there's a wide variety of people from just about all corners of the globe.*

Lucas, born in the United States, rural school

Lucas discusses the transition which has taken place since we last met. The move to university, where he feels his investment in his social skills has paid off. His friendship group has widened, and he is candid about how this has influenced his identity. The contrast between his small rural town and a city is stark for Lucas, who admits he no longer feels special or unique. Like many university students, his horizons have widened, and his migrant identity no longer feels as prominent as it once did. This was a sentiment shared by several students who by the final interview were at university and mixing with people from a much broader range of backgrounds. Here, Amelia describes her shifting experience of being Lithuanian.

*Since coming to uni, I am almost ready to embrace my Lithuanian identity again. I've met Indians, Singaporeans and Poles and everyone in between. There are other people out there. I'm no longer different.*

Amelia, born in Lithuania, urban school

Amelia had struggled through school with bullying and feeling different. Here, in the final interview she is keen to embrace her Lithuanian identity. An identity which until recently she had hoped to conceal.

### 3.3.2. Using Educational Transition as a Bridge

As illustrated above, migrant identities, as with all identities, evolve, shift and are dependent on interactions with others. In this final example Piotr describes juggling multiple identities with an increasing awareness of an ability to resist some assigned identities and enact others. Piotr describes a bond with his Polish friends, a group of five or six students ('enough for a lunch table' he says later). He also refers to a group of White Scottish peers which he calls 'the lads'. What is interesting about Piotr's experience is that as he has moved through the senior school and makes this transition to adulthood his friendship group has also expanded, leading him to juggle multiple identities. The interview progresses with more questions about how he switches between these two distinct friendship groups.

*Piotr: I took Advanced Higher Physics and there's only four of us [in the class]. They [other class members] are all part of the 'The Lads', the Scottish lads. . . . I think they—you know people have preconceptions about people, from the one word they said to you, the attitude they give you—you have preconceptions. But when you have to stay with them in one class, the whole year you eventually get to know them!*

*Researcher: Okay, so they've had their preconceptions challenged . . .*

*Piotr: Oh yeah! I've also changed their opinions about other Polish people. They were like 'oh they're Polish', but they see us hang out together and know we're a group of people. So more of my [Scottish] friends now talk to the others.*

*Researcher: That's really interesting, so you're almost a go-between,*

*Piotr: A bridge! I don't know how it happened, I think it's just taking that subject. If I didn't take Maths and Physics, I think I would have just been stuck with the five or four Polish people. 'Stuck'—they are my friends!*

Piotr, born in Poland, rural school

Piotr's reflections reveal a lot about how he is experiencing transition. His identity is pure performance. His final remark about being 'stuck' with the Polish group is telling, on the one hand he is keen to connect with others from his ethnic group, but equally it is easy to notice his delight at being accepted as one of 'the lads'. He narrates his own journey and views his position as a 'bridge' between different groups; for Piotr the process of juggling his multiple identities, a Pole, a male, a Physics student, are all central to navigating the complex relations in the final year of school.

As discussed earlier with reference to Sasha, migrant identity can be disrupted because someone can be seen as 'hero at home' and 'loser at destination' [47]. Listening to accounts of integration in the playground, classroom and dining hall, this dissonance seems especially powerful for young people who appear acutely aware of these conflicting ascriptions of identity. This requires migrants to reconfigure their understanding of the world as they internalise these different ascriptions of identity. In Piotr's case, he seems to be keen to present himself as successful at home and at the destination, perhaps inflating success and concealing challenges in both places. He describes missing family in Poland and the desire to fly home for weddings and christenings, he says at one point 'I could have been a godfather too, but I wasn't in Poland'. The disappointment of missing social events either in Scotland or Poland occupies his thinking. He explains his summer plans which involve flying immediately to Poland. 'then I'm coming back for prom and then I'm also going to my brothers' wedding' (interview 2). He is working hard to maintain his position in both places, as popular school leaver and as faithful brother/uncle/grandson. It's important to note the connection between migrant identity and socio-economic status. Piotr is able to

return to Poland at least twice a year and appears to occupy a higher socio-economic status than other participants in the study. He connects his social and cultural capital with his migrant status and is able to lever those resources to resist categorisations and embrace others. These intersections deserve further exploration and provide further evidence of the distinctiveness of migrant educational transitions which have been the focus of this paper.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings above have addressed the primary research question and explored how migrant background shapes the period of decision making at the end of compulsory education. This section reviews these results in light of the literature and assesses the implications for policy and practice. Asking, how can schools support and enhance the experience of transition for young migrants?

The results above coalesced around three areas. First, the theme of family. Here, it is argued that young school leavers often show a distinctive commitment to and responsibility for their families. The concept of filial piety, the attitude of duty and respect for family members is a significant one in migration literature. Research by Fuligni and Tseng [52] observed its existence among teenage migrants from a range of different ethnic backgrounds in their US study. This commitment to family was a discourse that remained remarkably consistent across the interviews with young migrants in this study, with multiple examples of young people expecting to care for their parents in a variety of ways, both now and in the longer term. The study also found that some young people are acutely aware of the sacrifice of their parents in moving, and this sense of indebtedness drives a stronger commitment to their studies and to achieving their goals in the future. This corroborates existing evidence, which finds that 'parental sacrifices' can have a motivating impact on the children of migrants, influencing educational attainment and their plans for the future [46]. At first glance, it may seem that this has no bearing on the responsibilities of schools and policy makers. However, the findings do underline the importance of genuine home/school partnerships throughout the transition to adulthood. Engaging with families (and communities) rather than just individual pupils. For many schools this is already a priority but it is not without its challenges particularly where parents/carers have limited English and are reliant on their children for translation at school events and parent consultations. Local schools require the resources and support infrastructure to build authentic and lasting connections with family networks in order to support young migrants in the transition to adulthood.

The second finding to emerge centred on the ability of young people to learn new skills, resilience and flexibility through their migration experience. These included demonstrating a capacity to develop contingency plans, cope with disappointment and develop confidence through language learning. This led to a realisation that some young migrants may use their migrant identity in specific ways to gain what is termed here, 'cosmopolitan capital', trading on their migrant identity in specific situations to assert distinction or gain some advantage. This relates to the findings of Fuligni, et al. [53] who suggest that rather than restricting a young person's ability to settle into a culture, retaining a strong commitment to family and their experiences of migration may in fact crystalize their evolving migrant identity and support transition. Similarly, the findings supports Moskal's assertion that migrant experience can be used to enable integration and overcome perceived disadvantages [54]. Some participants were able to use migrant capital to lever advantage and compensate for deficits in other areas (such as limited English or a lack of knowledge of 'the system'). In Scotland, numerous policy statements and legislation have explicitly raised the profile of bilingual learners in Scottish educational establishments [29,55]. Local and national guidelines set out the importance of recognising and consolidating the skills and experiences of migrant students. Interestingly, the findings of this study point to this being most effective when it is embedded in a school culture and happens organically and spontaneously by pupils and staff.

Finally, the third finding from the interviews centred on shifting migrant identities. This builds on the idea of ‘cosmopolitan capital’ but also explores what is involved in resisting and constructing a migrant identity. Through the longitudinal fieldwork, it became clear that constructing and maintaining identity was a key preoccupation during transition and an instrument for demonstrating agency and retaining control. In their paper on youth mobility, van Geel and Mazzucato [56] argue many young migrants experience complex and often sustained mobility patterns which have been overlooked by scholars. Participants had often experienced multiple moves (internal and international) and this dynamic, migratory existence often translates into fluid and flexible identities which were evolving. This also echoes the work of Punch [57] who has explored social class, transition and migrant identity in the global south. Punch found that post-school pathways can be relatively spontaneous and dynamic with identity being negotiated and reshaped at every stage. The findings from this study support this, adapting identity roles seemed an ever-present feature of life, especially in the school environment. Migrant young people saw themselves as distinct, whilst at the same time wanting to fit in, to be a ‘good migrant’, get a job, have a better life, attend university and progress in life. In practice, the implications of this for schools and policy makers are subtle but important. The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022 outlines the importance of recognising the qualifications, skills and learning of ‘new Scots’. However, this research shows that many young migrants feel the need to resist parts of their migrant identity whilst embracing others. School leavers with a migrant background are experts in transition. Often navigating geographical, educational, physical, emotional, and relational change simultaneously. Schools have a role in offering tailored and specific support to young migrants in the transition to adulthood. This study foregrounds the voice of pupils, not their teachers or parents. It strongly encourages establishments to engage young migrants themselves in the policies and practices which affect them. These articulate, reflective young people are well placed to inform and advise policy makers as they set out to develop guidelines on educational transition for young migrants.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that paying particular attention to the narratives of young migrants experiencing transition offers an original contribution to scholarship on educational transition and migrant integration. This focus on the significance of the migrant experience in transition culminated in three broad themes namely, the significance of family support and expectations, the impact of the migration process and finally the changing nature of migrant identity through transition. It underscores the importance of local and national policies which support transition for young migrants and suggests involving them, seasoned experts in transition, in policy innovation and development.

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