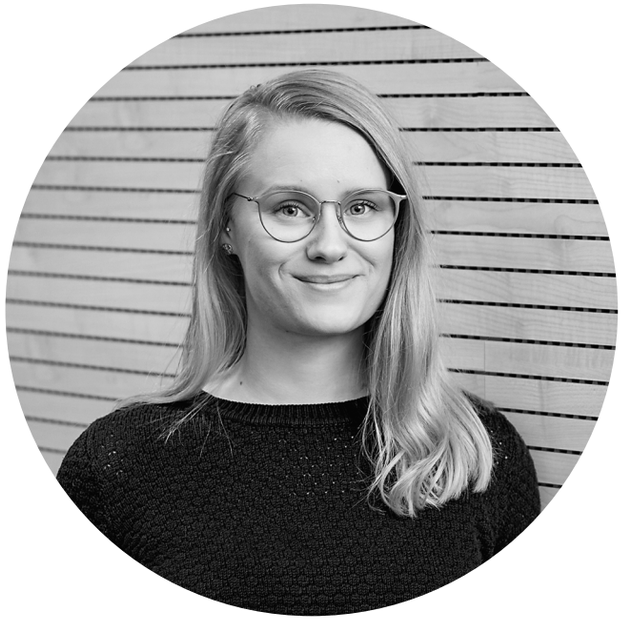

Marika Kettunen is a human geographer whose research interests revolve around geographies of youth and education. In this study, she brings multidisciplinary discussions concerning youth educational paths into dialogue with geographical theorizations of space. In doing so, the aim of the study is to investigate youth educational paths as 'spaces of education'. Thinking space relationally, she explores the complexity of the spatial dynamics and inequalities that shape youth educational paths in Finland, with a particular focus on young people at the end of their comprehensive schooling. Her work highlights the connections between and across a range of seemingly distant sites and scales, ranging from global economic relations to regional transformation and the everyday lives of northern Finnish young people.

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# Rethinking spaces of education: a multi-sited study of youth educational paths in northern Finland

Marika Kettunen

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# Rethinking spaces of education: a multi-sited study of youth educational paths in northern Finland

Marika Kettunen

Academic dissertation to be presented with the permission of the Doctoral Training Committee for Human Sciences of the University of Oulu Graduate School (UniOGS) for public discussion in the lecture hall L10 on the 29th of August 2025 at 12.

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## Contents



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## Abstract

This dissertation is situated at the intersection of geography, education and youth studies. It examines the transitional stage between lower and upper secondary education among 15–16-year-old young people in northern Finland. The decisions made during this stage are increasingly consequential in youth educational paths. In Finland, like elsewhere, youth education has become a central cog in the push to keep up with global competition and knowledge-based economization. However, concerns have been voiced over increasing spatial inequalities in and between different Finnish regions in terms of educational accessibility and educational attainment levels.

To address the complexity of these spatial dynamics and tensions, this inquiry approaches youth educational paths as *spaces of education*. Drawing on relational theories of space and particularly the work of Doreen Massey, these spaces are considered as dynamically constituted across multiple sites and scales. The material used in the study comprises state education policy documents as well as materials generated during school visits in urban and rural northern Finland in 2019, including interviews with young people and ethnographic fieldnotes. The three sub-studies included in the dissertation explore how spaces are constituted at the intersection of policy, everyday life, and emotion.

The study shows how the spaces of educational paths are constituted through state policies that dictate what kind of education is available and where. It brings to the fore how young people in northern and sparsely habited regions often face the expectation to be mobile when navigating their educational choices. The study also shows how these spatialities extend from policy spatialities to relations with and between different places at the site of young people's everyday life. The study also highlights how spaces of youth educational paths entwine with emotions, discussing how the entwined emotional and spatial dimensions of youth educational paths entail a strong orientation toward futures – and how these futures pertain to imaginations about the state, northern regions as well as young people.

This dissertation contributes to the rethinking of spaces of education via a multi-sited and multi-scalar approach that enables a nuanced understanding of the spatialities of youth educational paths. The study underlines that youth educational paths are not merely linear transitions from one educational stage to another but involve complex and dynamic spatialities at the nexus of policy, everyday life, and emotion. Such a spatially attuned reading highlights how spaces of youth educational paths and related inequalities are not fixed or uniform but are actively produced and thus open to change.

**Keywords:** education policy, emotional geographies, northern Finland, spaces of education, spatiality, upper secondary education, young people, youth mobility

## Tiivistelmä (abstract in Finnish)

Tämä väitöskirja sijoittuu maantieteen, kasvatustieteen ja nuorisotutkimuksen risteymiin. Se tarkastelee perusopetuksen ja toisen asteen koulutuksen välistä siirtymävaihetta 15–16-vuotiaiden nuorten keskuudessa Pohjois-Suomessa. Tämän siirtymävaiheen ja koulutuksellisten päätösten merkitys nuorten koulutuspoluilla on korostunut. Suomessa ja muualla nuorten kouluttautuminen nähdään keskeisenä tekijänä globaalin kilpailussa mukana pysymisessä ja tietoperustaisen talouden edistämisessä. Samalla koulutuksen alueellisen ja tilallisen eriarvoisuuden on katsottu lisääntyneen niin koulutuksen saavutettavuuden kuin koulutustason eriytymisen suhteen sekä Suomen alueiden sisällä että niiden välillä.

Näiden tilallisten jännitteiden ja dynamiikkojen moninaisuuden tarkastelemiseksi tämä tutkimus tarkastelee nuorten koulutuspolkuja *koulutuksen tiloina*. Tutkimus ammentaa relationaalisesta tilateoriasta, erityisesti Doreen Masseyn ajattelusta, ja tarkastelee näitä koulutuksen tiloja dynaamisesti rakentuvina eri paikoissa ja mittakaavoissa. Aineisto koostuu koulutusta käsittelevistä asiakirjoista ja aineistosta, joka on tuotettu sekä kaupunki- että maaseutualueilla sijaitsevissa pohjoissuomalaisissa kouluissa vuonna 2019. Aineistoon sisältyy nuorten haastatteluja ja etnografisia kenttämuistiinpanoja. Väitöskirjan kolme osatutkimusta syventyvät tarkastelemaan tilojen rakentumista politiikan, arjen ja tunteiden tilallisuuksien risteyskohdissa.

Tutkimus osoittaa, kuinka koulutuspolkuja muovaavat kansalliset politiikat, jotka ohjaavat millaista koulutusta on tarjolla ja missä. Tutkimus näyttää, miten keskitetyn koulutusverkon vuoksi Pohjois-Suomen harvaan asuttujen alueiden nuorilta odotetaan usein liikkuvuutta. Tutkimus tuo esiin, miten tilallisuudet ulottuvat politiikan tilallisuuksista nuorten arjen paikkasuhteisiin. Lisäksi tutkimus korostaa, miten nuorten koulutuspolut tiloina kietoutuvat tunteisiin, ja tarkastelee, miten tunteiden ja tilallisuuden yhteen kietoutuminen suuntautuu vahvasti tulevaisuuteen – ja miten nämä tulevaisuudet kytkeytyvät kuvitelmiin paitsi nuorista myös valtiosta ja pohjoisista alueista.

Väitöskirja edistää koulutuksen tilojen uudelleenajattelua monipaikkaisen ja -mittakaavaisen lähestymistavan kautta, joka tuottaa uutta tietoa nuorten koulutuspolkujen tilallisuuksista. Tämä työ tekee näkyväksi, että nuorten koulutuspolut eivät ole pelkästään lineaarisia siirtymiä koulutusasteelta toiselle, vaan niihin liittyy monimutkaisia ja dynaamisia tilallisuuksia politiikan, arjen ja tunteiden risteyksessä. Tällainen tilallinen näkökulma tuo esiin, että nuorten koulutuspolkujen tilat ja niihin liittyvät eriarvoisuudet eivät ole pysyviä tai yhtenäisiä, vaan aktiivisesti tuotettuja ja siten myös muutettavissa.

**Avainsanat:** koulutuspolitiikka, koulutuksen tilat, nuoret, nuorten liikkuvuus, Pohjois-Suomi, tilallisuus, toisen asteen koulutus, tunteiden maantiede

## List of original publications

Original publications as they are referred to in the dissertation.

Article I Kettunen M & Prokkola E-K (2022) Differential inclusion through education: Reforms and spatial justice in Finnish education policy. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40(1): 50–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544211001383

Article II Kettunen M (2023) Negotiating Multiple Spatialities: Geographies of Youth Educational Subjectivity. *YOUNG* 31(3): 215–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088231151354

Article III Kettunen M & Sitomaniemi-San J (in press) Feeling (the) rules: Emotional landscapes of rural youth educational mobilities. *Children's Geographies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2025.2542746

The three original publications are available in the appendices of the printed version of this thesis. Article I is reprinted with permission from SAGE Publishing. Article II is reprinted under the CC-BY 4.0 Creative Commons Attribution license. Article III is included as the author's accepted manuscript.

## Author's contributions

*Article I* was co-authored by Marika Kettunen and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola. Kettunen was responsible for formulating the research design and research questions as well as gathering and analyzing the research material. Both authors took part in the process of writing and editing, with Kettunen responsible for drafting. Kettunen was responsible for the submission and review process of the article, with a contribution from Prokkola.

*Article II* was authored by Marika Kettunen, who planned the research design, generated and analyzed the research materials, wrote the article as well as responded to the peer review. In the role of dissertation supervisors, Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola and Johanna Sitomaniemi-San commented on the manuscript throughout the process.

*Article III* was co-authored by Marika Kettunen and Johanna Sitomaniemi-San. Kettunen generated the research material. Kettunen and Sitomaniemi-San jointly formulated the research design and research questions. Both authors took part in the process of analysis, writing, and editing. Kettunen was responsible for most of the drafting. Kettunen was responsible for the submission and review process of the manuscript, with a contribution from Sitomaniemi-San.

I have not used generative AI or AI-assisted technology in the planning and writing of my dissertation. I take full responsibility for the content of this dissertation.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my supervisors, Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola and Johanna Sitomaniemi-San, whose supervision has profoundly shaped my journey. To Eeva-Kaisa, thank you for believing in me from the very beginning – often more than I believed in myself. I appreciate the time and effort you have invested in my doctoral training, as well as your thoughtful yet critical engagement with and detailed feedback on my work throughout the journey. To Johanna, thank you for your careful and critical engagement with my work. Your comments, suggestions and questions have challenged my thinking and writing. I am also grateful for our warm discussions on what it means to be a scholar, and for you being an example of how to make academic spaces more livable.

I would like to thank Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and David Farrugia for kindly agreeing to review my thesis. Your careful and critical feedback helped me finalize the synopsis and made me feel heard and recognized. I am honored that Louise Holt accepted the invitation to be my opponent. I look forward to our discussions.

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I am also grateful to a number of places and people in and beyond Oulu that have significantly shaped my thinking and writing. I cannot name all the people, places and events, but please know that the conversations, provocations and support have been meaningful. A central platform for my development as a scholar has been the Society for Regional and Environmental Studies (AYS). It extended my collegial network and has offered valuable insights into science as a collaborative effort. I am thankful for all the wonderful thinkers and critical minds I have had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with.

I would like to thank also the young people and schools involved in this study. This research would not have been possible without all those people who kindly took part in it. *Suuri kiitos kaikille tutkimukseen osallistuneille nuorille ja kouluille; kiitos kun otitte minut uteliaisuudella ja lämmöllä vastaan.*

I would like to express my gratitude to the Finnish Cultural Foundation's North Karelia Regional Fund, the Geography Research Unit, the Kyösti Haataja Foundation, the OLVI Foundation, the University of Oulu Graduate School, and the University of Oulu Research Professionals for funding my doctoral training and research. Your support made this work possible.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Setting the scene

This study sets out to investigate spaces of education through an inquiry into youth educational paths in rural and urban northern Finland. I do so with a specific focus on the transitional stage between lower and upper secondary education. In the Finnish educational system this is the moment when 15- to 16-year-old young people are expected to apply for study places in post-compulsory upper secondary education through the national application process.[1] The moment of applying and enrolling for upper secondary school marks the first major differentiating event after nine years of compulsory basic education: young people choose between the two main tracks of upper secondary education available in Finland: *vocational upper secondary education* or *general upper secondary education*.[2] Whereas the former has traditionally focused on providing vocational education and training, the latter is commonly considered the academic path and is strongly associated with continuing studies in university. The application process is competitive, with admission based on academic performance and possible entrance exams. In national education policy, both of these three-year-long tracks are considered equal since they both provide eligibility to apply for higher education (see Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). However, the general track more frequently leads to higher education whereas only a minority of vocational graduates continue their studies in higher education (Haltia et al. 2022; Kettunen & Prokkola 2022).

In this study, the transitional stage between lower and upper secondary school is considered "*a spatially consequential juncture*" (Kettunen & Prokkola 2022: 51) in youth educational paths. In recent decades in Finland, much like in other Nordic countries, there has been a tendency to decrease the number of educational institutions, which has led to decreased accessibility of upper secondary education especially in the northern and rural sparsely populated areas (Beach et al. 2018; Bernelius & Huilla 2021; Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). These development trajectories in educational access in northern and rural areas go hand in hand with youth outmigration and a skewing population structure: diminishing youth cohorts and depopulation have been a central rationalization for school closures and the centralization of educational opportunities in and around urban areas (Kiilakoski 2016; Lehtonen 2021). Especially for young people in areas characterized by weakened accessibility to education and long distances to the closest upper secondary institution, the educational choices they make are far-reaching decisions entwined with mobility (Armila et al. 2018; Kettunen 2023). In Finland, youth educational mobility is also subsidized by the state in the form of school transportation and housing benefits, although financial support from parents is often crucial (see Käyhkö 2016; Vehkalahti & Armila 2021).

1 Whereas in 2019 when the fieldwork was executed the legal school-leaving age in Finland was 16, a later policy changed this to 18, making upper secondary education compulsory in the country. This notwithstanding, in Finland there is a strong social norm that young people ought to continue studies after lower secondary school.

2 It is also possible to combine the general and the vocational into a joint degree or spend one year in preparatory education (*tutkintokoulutukseen valmentava koulutus* in Finnish). Although significant regional differences exist in application rates regarding the two main tracks, most young people continue their studies in either vocational (44% in year 2020) or general upper secondary (52% in year 2020) (Statistics Finland 2024).

In sparsely populated northern Finland, the lack of educational opportunities is thus entwined with a 'culture of migration' (Komu & Adams 2021). In other words, youth outmigration has become a normalized part of what it is to grow up in these places (e.g. Adams & Komu 2022; Juvonen & Romakkaniemi 2019; Kettunen 2023; Kiilakoski 2016; for similar discussions in other contexts, see Farrugia 2016; Corbett 2013; Forsberg 2019; Ravn 2022). Scholars have discussed how such mobility imperatives are underpinned by cultural and symbolic hierarchies wherein the city is positioned as the setting where modern life happens – 'the place to be' for young people – whereas other places and rural areas specifically come to be constructed as either idyllic sanctuaries or dull and conservative backwaters (e.g. Farrugia 2016; Ollila 2008; Sørensen & Pless 2017; Valentine 1997). Therefore, cities and urban areas are not only seen to offer more abundant educational and work opportunities, but they are also considered as being differently positioned in the 'metrocentric economies of cool' (Farrugia 2014: 302) that underpin hierarchies between different places and life expectations (see also Ollila 2008 for the Finnish context). Although from a global perspective the country may not be perceived as having big metropoles, in Finnish policy and public discourses Helsinki and the capital city region in the South are positioned differently than northern areas, which are often deemed peripheral or lagging behind (e.g. Lanas 2011; Moisio & Sirviö 2021; also Eriksson 2008 for a similar argument in the Swedish context). The imperative of being mobile therefore manifests not only in the lives of those living in rural areas but also in those in northern cities, too (see Kettunen 2023).

This notwithstanding, northern urban areas do also face challenges different from sparsely habited rural areas. Indeed, whereas the availability of education has been identified as one of the key challenges for educational equality in rural and sparsely habited areas, in urban areas increasing concern has been voiced over the socio-spatial polarization and segregation of schools based on young people's social and ethnic background (see Bernelius & Huilla 2021). With their diverse educational opportunities, the Finnish larger cities also attract young people from surrounding areas. This means that the application process is more competitive and student intake at the upper secondary level is more selective in urban than in rural areas (see Bernelius & Huilla 2021: 93).

Irrespective of spatial differences and inequalities, and their consequent social and cultural implications for youth educational paths, in Finland there is a strong social and political imperative to enroll in upper secondary education right after the compulsory lower secondary schooling without so-called gap years (e.g. Kettunen 2023; Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). In Finland, like many other places, youth educational paths are interlinked with the normative assumption that one should become *something* or *someone* through education (Holloway et al. 2010; Mills & Ducket 2016; Worth 2009). It is a commonplace to point out that in contemporary society it is difficult to find employment without upper secondary education, and that those who do not participate in education or training are vulnerable or at risk of becoming marginalized or socially excluded (e.g. Brunila et al. 2017; Butler & Hamnett 2007). These ideas can also be seen in recent Finnish educational reforms: the Finnish government decided that, starting in 2021, the school leaving age would raise from 16 to 18, that is, to cover upper secondary education (Government program 2019). This was done with an aim to enhance young people's inclusion and wellbeing by ensuring that all youth continue their studies and have qualifications at the upper secondary level.

In Finland, state-led spatial restructuring and reforms emphasizing the role of education in young people's lives can be traced back to the late 1980's and early 1990's,

when the fostering of social mobility and specific educational attainment levels began to be considered central for the development of so-called knowledge-based economies (see Johannesson et al. 2002). Particular emphasis was placed on youth educational transitions, which were to be smooth and efficient to foster both individual and national wellbeing and success (e.g. Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). The changes in economic production and related educational reforms also reflect a distinctive re-evaluation of state education policies towards neoliberal ideals, with a stronger emphasis on individuals and their educational choices and less on the impacts of socio-economic differences and the spatially differentiated schooling network. Although education in Finland continues to be primarily free of charge and publicly owned, these development trajectories can be perceived as challenging social and spatial equality in education, which has long been regarded a central tenet of Finnish welfare state policies (Beach et al. 2018; Lappalainen & Lahelma 2016; Tervasmäki et al. 2020).

In attributing special significance to education, the gradual yet rather rapid shift towards the Finnish knowledge-based society has brought youth educational paths into closer alignment with the advancement of the state economy. Because a knowledge-based society so heavily relies on the acquisition of education and formal degrees, the prevailing ethos dictates that it is everyone's responsibility to pursue their educational aspirations and acquire education, irrespective of the spatially differentiated network of opportunities or other structural deficits (Käyhkö 2016; Cairns 2013b). Neoliberal development trajectories such as this have also been criticized for individualizing the structural burdens: it locates "*the makings of a successful future within the individual and converts conditions of risk and uncertainty into matters of personal choice and opportunity*" (Cairns, 2013b: 343; see also Pimlott-Wilson 2017). Consequently, the moment young people find themselves at the end of compulsory schooling is characterized by a tension between the expectation to have educational aspirations concerning educational futures and a strong sense of uncertainty in the face of far-reaching choices (Brown 2011; Tolonen & Aapola-Kari 2022; Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San in press). The increased pressure and expectations placed on young people and their schooling have led to increasing criticism voiced by scholars as well as by the youth that the policies 'target'. For example, Tomi Kiilakoski and Mikko Piispa point out how Finnish young people, in the wake of ecological crises and climate change, have begun to question the imperative of schooling and acquiring formal degrees, criticizing the ability of the current educational system, and schooling more broadly, as a means to ensure a good and just future (Kiilakoski & Piispa 2023; see also Sivenius et al. 2018).

## 1.2 Research aim and questions

In this study, I seek to attend to the dynamics and tensions between education, regional transformation and spatial inequality from the perspective of youth educational paths at the time of ending compulsory school. In attending to youth educational paths in the particular national and regional context of northern Finland, I seek to investigate the complexities of space and the multiple spatialities at play in the constitution of educational paths. The aim of this inquiry is therefore to study how youth educational paths constitute *spaces of education*. Drawing on relational theorizations of space and the work of Doreen Massey (2005) in particular, by spaces of education I refer to spaces that can be conceived to be constituted in and through youth educational paths across multiple sites and scales. I investigate youth educational paths from the viewpoint of spatialities, through which I seek to excavate the ongoing constitution of spaces.

The research questions for the dissertation are formulated as follows:

1. How do youth educational paths constitute space?
2. How do different spatialities figure in this constitution?

I answer these questions by investigating the constitution of spaces at the nexus of policy (articles I and III), everyday life (articles II and III) and emotion (article III) (Table 1). The analytical approach to the study of educational spaces and spatialities is therefore threefold. First, spatialities are considered from the viewpoint of state education policies, which stipulate, for example, when young people should apply, what is available, and importantly, where education is available. Second, spatialities are also considered from the viewpoint of those young people who are expected to make their educational choices amidst, on the one hand, policies steering young people to enroll in upper secondary education (despite limited educational opportunities), and cultural expectations of mobility on the other. Third, spatialities are also investigated from the viewpoint of emotionality, with a particular focus on how policy intersects with the social and cultural norms concerning youth and their educational decision-making processes. My approach to the study of spaces of education thus resonates with Thiem's (2009) call to take "*seriously the ways in which educational systems, institutions, and practices* constitute space" (Thiem 2009: 167, emphasis added) yet it also brings in the young people navigating within these spaces.

**Table 1.** Summary of the dissertation articles as they relate to the main research questions of the dissertation.

| **Main research questions** | RQ 1. How do youth educational paths constitute space?<br>RQ 2. How do different spatialities figure in this constitution? | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Article** | I | II | III |
| **Sub-questions as per article*** | • What kind of spatialities are at play in Finnish education policy?<br>• How have these spatialities changed between 1989 and 2011? | • What kind of spatialities are at play when young people in northern Finland negotiate their educational paths at the end of compulsory school? | • What kind of spatialities are at play at the time of the national application procedure?<br>• How do these spatialities entwine with emotions and emotionality? |
| **Primary research materials** | Policy documents | Interviews with young people | Ethnographic materials, interviews with young people |

*The sub-questions presented here are not the research questions of the original publications but have been modified to serve as sub-questions for the dissertation as a whole.

### 1.3 Situating the study within multidisciplinary debates

The study brings multidisciplinary discussions concerning youth, education, and youth educational paths into concourse with geographical theorizations of space, thus engaging with research in the fields of geography, education and youth studies. The first line of literature this study engages with, and seeks to contribute to, concerns geographies of education, specifically where they intersect with scholarship on political and emotional geographies. In general, geographies of education that involve a specific national or regional focus have produced insight into the spatial provision of schooling and its consequences for regional development and educational inequality (see Butler & Hamnett 2007; Kraftl et al. 2020; Kučerová et al. 2020). In turn, scholarship that concerns the intersection of geographies of education with political geographies has investigated topics such as the interlinked nature of educational and spatial restructuring (Witten et al. 2003), the political economies of educational restructuring (Holloway et al. 2010), the formation of particular educational citizens and subjectivities (e.g. Mitchell 2003, 2018; Moisio & Kangas 2016; Waters 2007), and the interchange of geopolitics, education and schooling (Lizotte & Nguyen 2020; Moisio 2018). In contrast, scholarship at the nexus of geographies of education and emotional geographies has produced important insights into the emotionality of educational governance via investigation of topics such as the emotionality of neoliberal policy and its implications on young people's lives (e.g. Brown 2011; Cairns 2013b; Nairn & Higgins 2011; Pyyry & Sirviö 2023). Some studies in this vein have focused more explicitly on young people's perspectives via topics such as the emotionality of student mobility in regional (e.g. Boyd & Harada 2022; O'Shea et al. 2019) and international contexts (Lee & Waters 2024), and on the emotionality of citizenship and subject formation in the context of education and schooling (Cairns 2013b; Wood 2013). An increasing interest amongst geographers has been how emotional geographies relate to teaching (e.g. Blazek & Stenning 2023; Guinard & Lanne 2021) and conducting research (e.g. Bondi 2005b; Waters 2023). Despite their broader interest in space and spatiality, these studies rarely engage with spatial theorization as such. What is more, there are very few studies that attempt to bring together geographies of education and emotional and political geographies. Notable exceptions to this are studies like Karen Nairn and Jane Higgins (2011), which focuses on the emotional geographies of neoliberal school reforms in alternative education and how policy intersects with student experiences and the entwined formation of emotional spaces.

Relatedly, the second line of literature engaged with here has to do with geographies of children and youth. This line has produced important insights into the nexus between space, education and everyday life with respect to children and youth. Much of the scholarship within this line of literature, as in social studies more widely, draws on the key paradigms of the so-called 'new social studies of childhood' that emerged in the late 20th century and thereafter (James & Prout 1990; see Holloway & Valentine 2000 for discussions concerning geography; for discussions concerning other fields see e.g. Vehkalahti 2022 on histories of childhood). Seeking to challenge traditional temporally oriented, psychological and sociological notions of childhood, attention was steered from considering children as "*adults in the making*" (Brannen & O'Brien 1995: 730) towards thinking childhood in terms of a socially constructed "*state of being*" (Brannen & O'Brien 1995: 730). Building on the key premises of new social studies of childhood, geographies of childhood and youth called for better recognition of children and young people as social agents and for the need to afford greater 'voice' to children and young

people (see Ansell 2008; Holloway et al. 2010) while also bearing in mind the relationality of young people's societal positions (see Kallio & Häkli 2013; Philo & Smith 2003). Often with a focus on mundane spaces and everyday life contexts, this line of scholarship has been influential not only in terms of its societal impact (see Kraftl 2013a) but also in terms of its influence on the development of geographies of children and youth (see Holloway 2014).[3] Investigating topics such as citizenship education (Wood 2012, 2013), school councils (Kallio & Häkli 2011) and how young people 'learn to be citizens' (Kallio 2018), studies within this line of literature have provided important insights into a range of spaces of schooling and education from the viewpoint of young people's experiences (e.g. Hammond 2021; Weller 2003), politics (e.g. Elwood & Mitchell 2012; Kallio 2014) and agency, as well as its relatedness and limits (e.g. Holt 2024; Kettunen 2020; Schäfer 2007; Trott 2021; Webb & Radcliffe 2014) in or in relation to these spaces, for example. Many of the analyses within this body of literature are youth-centered in their emphasis on young people's agency, politics and experiences as they relate to particular spaces and places rather than on the constitution of spaces as such.

In resonance with the key premises of new social studies of childhood, it has also been pointed out that a taken-for-granted point of departure in youth studies and education has historically been the idea that 'youth' is primarily a question of time and temporality and that this has further led to overlooking the role of space and spatiality (see Farrugia 2018). This brings us to the third line of literature, which concerns multidisciplinary discussions within the fields of youth studies and education. Within these fields, like in many other social sciences, the so-called spatial turn of the latter half of the 20th century criticized the prevailing emphasis on time and temporality, highlighting instead the importance of spatial issues and concepts (see Correia 2021; Gulson & Symes 2007; Kraftl 2016). In the wake of this 'spatial turn', scholars in the fields of youth studies and education called for "*a deeper engagement with spatial thinking*" (Farrugia & Wood 2017: 211; see also Taylor 2009) as well as further engagement with temporality and spatiality together (Farrugia 2018; Wood 2017; O'Connor & McLeod 2023). Engaging with these debates, studies within these fields have increasingly come to address how spatial issues and concepts relate to youth and education. Yet, when it comes to inquiries concerning youth educational paths and youth transitions in particular, space is often approached in a relatively narrow manner: it is the space, or rather the place, in which young people make their educational decisions (e.g. Armila et al. 2018; Komu & Adams 2021; Ollila 2008; Schäfer 2007; Tarabini et al. 2022) and navigate their identity (e.g. Farrugia et al. 2014; Hickey et al. 2024; Pedersen & Gram 2018; Wenham 2019).

More recently, however, space and spatiality have been increasingly addressed in the multidisciplinary body of literature concerning rural and regional youth. Often via criticism of the prevailing scholarly focus on metrocentricity[4] (e.g. Cuervo & Wyn 2012; Cuervo 2016; Farrugia 2014, 2018; Farrugia & Ravn 2022; Østergaard et al. 2024a), studies within this line of literature have begun investigating young people's lives and educational trajectories in the context of the so-called 'mobility imperative' (Farrugia 2016) and culture of leaving (e.g. Armila et al. 2018; Adams & Komu 2022; Corbett

3 This line of scholarship has also made significant contributions to political geographies (see e.g. Kallio & Häkli 2013; Philo & Smith 2003; Skelton 2013).

4 Some youth scholars have argued that 'methodological urbanism' – an analogy to 'methodological nationalism' – has dominated youth studies (Østergaard et al. 2024a), limiting the type of questions and topics that are considered relevant or even imagined possible in the first place (see also Tedre & Pöllänen 2016).

2007; Kiilakoski 2016) that young people face growing up in areas characterized by sparse population, scant educational opportunities, and high youth outmigration. These studies have provided important insights into young people's educational decision-making processes and the entwined nature of spatial disparities (e.g. Armila et al. 2018; Cairns 2013b; Corbett 2007), highlighting the complexity of youth educational mobility via studying feelings of (non-)belonging and place attachment (e.g. Haukanes 2013; Juvonen & Romakkaniemi 2019; Ravn 2022). This line of inquiry has also provided novel insights into the thematic of leaving/staying by highlighting staying as a reflexive practice (Østergaard et al. 2024b) and bringing to the fore young people's 'right to immobility' (Forsberg 2019; see also Adams & Komu 2021). In many of these spatially attuned studies, the analytical focus is often on investigating young people's perspectives via embodiment, lived experiences or agency, less often on the constitution of the spaces which young people navigate (Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San in press; see however Farrugia 2018 on 'spaces of youth').

Ultimately, engaging with and bringing together the three different strands of literature addressed above enables the contribution that this study seeks to make concerning scholarship on spaces of education. By investigating youth educational paths and how they constitute space across multiple sites and scales, I seek to widen the scope of what 'counts' as a space of education (Holloway et al. 2010). Previous studies have examined the nexus between space, spatiality and education from a range of perspectives, including spatial approaches to the study of education policy and school curricula (Gulson 2015; Pyyry & Sirviö 2023; Thiem 2009), alternative education (Kraftl 2013b; Nairn & Higgins 2011), particular school subjects such as citizenship education (Cairns 2013b; Pykett 2009) as well as to the production of transnational and/or cosmopolitan subjects within these spaces (Waters 2007). Focus has also been directed to a range of different spaces of learning and/or pedagogy, such as online spaces (Boler & Davis 2018; Harris & Whiting 2024), spaces of higher education (Moisio & Kangas 2016) as well as more 'concrete' spaces such as classrooms (Ang & Ho 2019; Kraftl 2016), architectural spaces (Birkett et al. 2022) and urban spaces (Pyyry 2017) wherein teaching and learning might take place. The present study seeks to provide a different approach via its focus on the constitution of educational spaces from the viewpoint of youth educational paths and related spatialities. Specifically, engaging with Massey's relational theorization of space (Massey 2005), this study treats spaces of youth educational paths as spaces that are constantly changing and unfolding across different scales: spaces of youth educational paths not only intersect with regional and state spatialities and spatialities of the global (knowledge-based) economy but are also produced through spatialities and emotionalities at the site of the school and young people's everyday life.

By attending to youth educational paths as spaces of education, the concept of youth educational 'paths' is in this study embraced as a metaphorical concept that enables examining and bringing together spatialities of youth educational choices and transitions from multiple perspectives. While it has been legitimately pointed out that the social and political incentives to secure 'successful' educational transitions put a lot of pressure on individual young people (e.g. Grytnes 2011; Kintrea et al. 2015), the wisdom of treating youth educational transitions and educational choices as merely individual is an issue widely debated and criticized in multidisciplinary youth studies. Individualizing youth educational choices is considered to reflect and foster an overly narrow understanding of youth and youth transitions in terms of linearity (e.g. Fu 2023) and futurity (e.g. Holt 2024), in a way that also risks detaching questions concerning youth and

education from those of space and spatiality and the broader structures of inequality (see also Hörschelmann 2011; Farrugia & Wood 2017; Wood 2017). Hence, in attending to the spaces of youth educational paths, I seek to investigate the spatialities that at once constitute youth educational paths as well as the social and spatial conditions of possibility that allow for those paths to be formed.

Methodologically this study draws on post-qualitatively, post-structurally and feminist oriented scholarship. I draw inspiration from post-qualitatively attuned approaches and from scholars (e.g. Jackson & Mazzei 2023) who have sought to problematize the positivist legacy in qualitative research and the ways in which theory and research material are understood and utilized in qualitative inquiry. Rather than understanding theory as something to be applied, I take it as something to think with and that can be put to work (Jackson & Mazzei 2023). In my study of space and spatialities, I draw specifically on Massey's theorization of relational space. This also resonates with the post-qualitative orientation, since Massey's theorization, as articulated by Marion Werner, "*does not offer a model but rather a set of conceptual provocations against dominant mobilisations of space as a static, passive surface*" (Werner 2024: 248). Furthermore, in investigating the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths, I draw inspiration from feminist and post-structurally oriented scholarship in geography and beyond that has considered the question of knowledge-production and the ways in which the research and the researcher constitute spaces and spatialities through the inquiry (e.g. Rose 1993; Katz 1994; Sharp & Dowler 2011).

### 1.4 An overview of the original articles and the structure of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of three independent research articles and an integrative chapter, hereafter referred to as the synopsis. Each of the original articles brings together different yet interlinked, multidisciplinary discussions concerning the spatiality of youth educational paths, expected transitions to upper secondary education and youth educational mobility in Finland. In this way, each article contributes to the overall aim of examining how spaces of youth educational paths are constituted. The foci on education policy (articles I and III), everyday life (articles II and III) and emotions (article III) are taken as entry points to study how different spatialities figure in the constitution of youth educational paths, enabling a multidimensional examination of the constitution of spaces at the nexus of policy, everyday life and emotion. The articles are discussed in the order in which they were written.

*Article I*, 'Differential inclusion through education: Reforms and spatial justice in Finnish education policy', co-authored with Prof. Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola, serves as an entry point to investigate the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths from the viewpoint of national education policy across a range of scales. The article provides an analysis of the educational reforms implemented in Finland and the Finnish regions between 1989 and 2019 and sets a historical contextualization for the following articles.

*Article II*, 'Negotiating multiple spatialities: Geographies of youth educational subjectivity', allows an investigation of the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths from the viewpoint of young people. The article draws on interview material generated in interview encounters with young people in a regionally specific context in rural and urban northern Finland and considers the multiple spatialities at play when young people negotiate their educational decisions at the end of compulsory schooling.

*Article III*, 'Feeling (the) rules: Emotional landscapes of rural youth educational mobilities', is co-authored with Dr. Johanna Sitomaniemi-San. The article draws on material generated through school visits and interviews with young people in rural northern Finland to study the emotional landscapes of education and youth educational paths. It serves as an entry point into the study of the spatialities and emotionalities involved in youth educational paths specifically from the viewpoint of the rural.

This synopsis is organized in six main chapters. Chapter 2 discusses how space has been theorized in the field of geography and elaborates on how the relational notion of space and related spatialities are taken up in the study. Chapter 3 introduces the research process and discusses the methodological, ethical, and analytical choices as they relate to the research material utilized in the research. Chapter 4 discusses the key findings of the original publications from the perspective of the research questions of the synopsis. Chapter 5 discusses the theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions as well as the limitations; the chapter also offers ideas for further research before moving on to concluding thoughts in Chapter 6.

## 2 Theorizing spaces of education

### 2.1 Space and place

Space is often considered to be among the key concepts and topics of inquiry in the field of geography. Although extensively used in geographic literature, it has proven to be a difficult concept to define – perhaps because of the many, often contextually contingent ways in which it has been employed. The concept of space is sometimes utilized without a deeper definition of its meaning, or it is contrasted or coupled with other key concepts such as place (for in-depth discussions, see e.g. Agnew 2005; Elden 2020; Kobayashi 2017). On other occasions, space is treated as a verb to better capture the ongoing process of 'spacing' and 'how space becomes' (e.g. Doel 1999).

The ways in which the concept of space has been drawn upon in geographical inquiries, often through spatial metaphors (see Smith & Katz 1993), have developed in parallel with the development of geographical and scientific thinking more widely (see e.g. Merriman et al. 2012, for discussions concerning human geography in particular). Theorizing space in absolute terms was for a long time the dominant conception of space, largely influenced by the ways in which space had emerged as an explicit category in Western philosophy between the 17th and 19th centuries (see Elden 2020). Resonating with these absolute terms, in geographic inquiry space was often treated as a "*pre-existing and immoveable grid*" (Harvey 2006: 2), a neutral container or a static field that can be measured. In the 20th century, theorizing space in such a manner was largely influenced by positivist thinking, and was from the 1950s and 60s onwards further connected to advances in quantitative research methods and geoinformatics (see also Kitchin 2020; Smith & Katz 1993 for a more detailed discussion).

Critiques of, and alternatives for, thinking space in absolute terms have been advanced on different fronts.[5] On one front, positivist legacies were challenged by what later became known as humanistic geography. In the early 1960s Yi-Fu Tuan emerged as one the key figures in developing a post-positivist attuned human geography, advocating for the importance of human experience in the study of space and place (Tuan 1963). Tuan and other humanistic geographers moved from the concept of space to that of place, emphasizing that space can become a place as a result of human action (e.g. Karjalainen 1997; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977; see also Kobayashi 2017), significantly shaping geography as a discipline (see Cresswell 2023 for further discussion). On another front, scholars who took up structuralist-inspired Marxist critique further developed the notion of space, arguing that spatial relations and processes are in fact social processes (see e.g. Massey 1992; Soja 1989). It has, however, been argued that some of the (early) writings in this structuralist line of research were not far removed from theorizations of space as a static field since many of the scholars treated space as "*a surface configured by the play of underlying structures*" (Murdoch 2006: 12; see also Kitchin 2020; Law & Urry 2004). Characteristic of this line of thought therefore was to highlight space and spatial relations at the expense of time and temporality (for in-depth discussion, see Massey 2005).

5 Besides considering space as absolute, there is also a so-called Leibnizian view of space, also known as the relative notion of space, which was developed further into relational space. A relative approach to thinking space builds on two assumptions: first, that space is defined in terms of the entities within it and, importantly, the relations between them, and second, that these relations/distances are not fixed but change over time and across space (see e.g. Elden 2020; Jones 2009; Smith & Katz 1993 for further discussions).

## 2.2 Space and spatiality

The idea that the social and the spatial are entwined was further developed by radical, neo-Marxist, feminist and post-structuralist oriented scholars, starting in the 1970s. What was common to this wide range of approaches was that they criticized both the positivist and the structuralist interpretations of space as a field or a container of social processes because it "*failed to recognize the* diverse ways *in which space was produced*" (Kitchin 2020: 323, emphasis added). What was now emphasized was that space should be conceived as being produced by social relations but also as producing social relations (e.g. Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1992; Soja 1989). Consequently:

> "[…] *space functions as a constituent element in social processes – not in a determinist way, but rather as a continually intertwined, made, remade and making.*" (Elden 2020: 316)

The shift to theorizing space in terms of the social and spatial entwined marked an important paradigmatic shift in rethinking the nexus of space and society (see Smith & Katz 1993). An often-cited scholar of this era is Henri Lefebvre (1991). His tripartite notion of space as perceived, conceived and lived sought to conjoin physical, social, and mental spaces, and is widely utilized and developed in geographic scholarship (see e.g. Harvey 1989; Merrifield 1993; Soja 1989).

What was further emphasized in the emerging relational theorizations was that space and spatiality, although often imagined and treated in such a manner in social theory, are not merely the negative opposites of time and temporality. Instead, the relational notion of space highlights how space and time are entwined, how they are co-implicated[6] (see Massey 1994, 2005; see also Harvey 2006). Hence, compared to thinking space in terms of an immovable grid, either a-temporal or separated from temporality, a relational approach to thinking space marked a shift toward a more processual understanding of space. Especially in post-structuralist thinking inspired by process philosophy, space is increasingly thought about "as process *and* in process *(that is space and time combined in becoming)*" (Crang & Thrift 2000: 3, original emphasis; see also Murdoch 2006).

Feminist scholars and approaches have further contributed to discussions and theorizations of space by emphasizing the pluralism and particularity embedded in the constitution (and experience) of spaces[7] (e.g. Massey 1994, 2005; Rose 1993). More to the point, Doreen Massey, a key theorist of relational notions of space, advocates treating space as a "*sphere of multiplicity*" (Massey 2005: 89). Challenging the inherited, limiting ways of thinking space in terms of stasis, fixity, and closure, in Massey's thinking space is not reducible to a surface as a "*sphere of a completed horizontality*" (Massey 2005: 107). Rather, Massey argues that space should be treated as an open, incomplete process, consequently conceptualizing space as "*open, multiple and relational*" (Massey 2005: 59). Massey's notion of relational space therefore brings together an insistence on multiplicity on the one hand, and an emphasis on ongoingness and openness on the other. In this line of thinking, space and place are not considered opposites but rather co-constituted: For Massey, place is similarly a process, an ongoing negotiation

6 The emphasis put on space and time as inseparable also led to new conceptualizations such as timespace (May & Thrift 2001), space-time and spatio-temporality (Harvey 2006; Massey 2005).

7 Being interested in the study of space and spatiality as the product of intersecting social relations, Massey has written extensively on the connections of space, place and gender, addressing how gendered relations are constructed geographically (e.g. Massey 1994).

of different trajectories "*within and between both human and non-human*" (Massey 2005: 140), "*at a particular locus*" (Massey 1994: 154). In her view, it is precisely the entwined ongoing openness and multiplicity of spaces and places that opens up the possibility for change and "*politics in the broadest sense of the word*" (Massey 1994: 4, see also Massey 2005).

Relational notions of space have nevertheless received criticism. With their emphasis on openness and multiplicity, relational theorizations have been criticized for focusing too much on complexity and particularity in a way that emphasizes empirical investigations at the expense of theory building (e.g. Harvey 1987). Massey's relational thinking – specifically how it is presented in her book *For Space* (2005)[8] – and its emphasis on relationality and social practices has also been criticized for overlooking territorial and material dimensions (e.g. Jones 2009; Mitchell 2021). I wish to emphasize here that attending to spaces via Massey (i.e., as open, multiple and relational) is not to deny a certain stability of spatialities or the materialization of social practices (see Allen et al. 1998; Cochrane 2013; McCann & Ward 2010), in the case of this research the spatial organization of the Finnish educational network, for example. Quite the contrary. That said, scholars such as Audrey Kobayashi (2017) have argued that the very concept of space itself should be replaced with that of spatiality. She claims that the complexity of different ways of imagining, theorizing and utilizing the concept of space – both in geography and beyond – has led to the point that the concept of space lacks analytical utility. Kobayashi (2017) goes on to suggest that it is not space per se but in fact *spatiality* that is the focus of attention in contemporary human geography.

Inspired by these discussions, rather than abandoning the concept of space altogether, I take up the concept of spatiality as a conceptual tool that can be employed to attend to the multiplicity and 'messiness' of spaces and their constitution. Thus, while some scholars use the two concepts somewhat interchangeably – including Massey herself sometimes (1999a; for further discussion see also Merriman et al. 2012) – in this study the concept of spatiality is taken up to "*express how space is not inert, or divorced from the flow of history*" (Kraftl 2016: 153). Spatiality is thus embraced as a way to explore the different dimensions and relations that are at play in the ongoing constitution of relational spaces. However, I do not seek to equate spatiality (for example, that of a given social or material phenomenon such as the network of educational institutions) with mere representation. This would be to associate spatiality with stability and closure in a way that would "*flatten life out of time*" (Massey 2005: 26). Spatialities are thus considered as constituting and constitutive of spaces.

### 2.3 State space and the question of scale

Relational theories of space have also fed into the ways in which other key concepts, such as the state and state spatialities, have been employed and theorized in geographic research (see Allen et al. 1998; Brenner et al. 2003). In resonance with thinking space relationally, states are not to be thought of as homogenous entities with fixed boundaries but rather as Brenner et al. (2003) describe them:

8 Although Massey addresses the material dimensions of space in her earlier writings on the economy and 'spatial division of labor' restructuring spaces (Massey 1984), what seems to be emphasized in *For Space* specifically is people and social practices.

> "[…] *dynamically evolving spatial entities that continually mould and reshape the geographies of the very social relations they aspire to regulate, control and/or restructure.*" (Brenner et al. 2003: 11)

A relationally informed take on state space and spatiality differs significantly from territorial understandings of state space, according to which states are considered mutually exclusive territorial spaces and territorial containers of society (see Agnew 1994; Brenner et al. 2003). Furthermore, a relational approach to thinking state spatiality resonates with how Massey theorizes places as "*constructed out of a constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus*" (Massey 1994: 154). Thus, in this study state space is considered in the spirit of Massey, as a dynamic constellation of social relations at a particular location, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by these changing social relations (see also Allen et al. 1998). Importantly, state space also shapes and is shaped by the spaces of education that are investigated in the study.

In keeping with a primary aim of relational theorization, that is, to pay attention to the contingency and particularity of spaces (see Massey 1994, 2005), the way in which the concept of state space is utilized in this study is further informed by a line of scholarship that has examined the restructuring of state space. This line of scholarship has provided important insights into the historical contingencies and geographic specificities of the processes and practices of state spatial transformation in Finland (e.g. Kellokumpu 2023; Kivelä 2017; Moisio 2018). This scholarship has shown how a gradual shift towards knowledge-intensive and high-technology dominated societies has made schooling and education – youth educational paths included – ever more central constituents of the processes and practices of state building (e.g. Moisio & Kangas 2016; Pyyry & Sirviö 2024). Inspired by this line of literature, changes in education and educational reforms are in this study investigated in relation to changing state spaces and spatialities, enabling an investigation into how these intersect and entwine with youth educational paths (see Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). Nonetheless, in this study state spaces are not considered merely from the top-down perspective, but they are also approached from a more 'bottom-up perspective', through an inquiry into how young people navigate state schooling and different state policy spaces in different regional and local contexts (Kettunen 2023; Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San in press). This bottom-up perspective aligns with feminist-oriented discussions in political geography which have demonstrated how inquiries across multiple scales offer fruitful insights into how scales ranging from global to national, regional, local, everyday and intimate might be understood as mutually co-constituted rather than fixed or hierarchical (see Hyndman 2001b, 2004; Kofman 2005; see also Massey 2005).

Thus, in thinking space relationally, this study approaches the constitution of spaces and spatialities across a range of scales, not in a hierarchical manner but rather in a way that crosses and co-constitutes scales (for a similar approach, see Allen et al. 1998; Massey 2005). Scalar constructions (e.g. national, regional and local) and geographic categories (e.g. rural and urban) are thus not taken as fixed or static empirical categories. Rather, scales are understood as socially constructed[9] and engaged with as a way to investigate the range of different spatialities involved in the constitution of spaces. The spaces of education investigated in this study are thus considered as intersecting

9 Literature concerning scales as socially constructed has also provided important insight into the 'performativity of scale', shedding light on the production of scalar hierarchies and their change over time (see for example Kaiser & Nikiforova 2008).

with a range of other spaces and spatialities, entwined with the state and the region.[10] Although the empirical focus of the study is Finland and northern parts of the country in specific, in Masseyean spirit such focus on a particular national and regional scale does not mean overlooking global relations or processes that could be conceived as intimate, everyday or 'localized' (see Massey 2005: 181–184, on the mutual constitution of local/global).

## 2.4 Space and emotion

Like the theoretical developments related to thinking space relationally, the study of space from the viewpoint of emotions too has seen burgeoning interest in geography in recent decades. This fact notwithstanding, it is not too long ago that it was widely noted how "*geographers have struggled to come to terms with the notion that emotions are central to our experience of spaces and places*" (Parr 2005: 472; see also Bondi et. al. 2005; Smith et al. 2009). Along with advancements in theorizing spaces and spatialities and moving away from treating space as a neutral container, the nexus between space and emotion has been theorized and taken up as a topic of interest in, for example, humanistic (e.g. Relph 1976; Tuan 1979) and feminist geographies (e.g. Koskela & Pain 2000; Pain 2014; Panelli et al. 2004; Valentine 1989). Humanistic and feminist studies alike have been influential for the development of the subfield of geography of emotions (see Anderson & Smith 2001; Bondi 2005b; Davidson & Milligan 2004; Davidson et al. 2004) and emerging subfields like emotional geographies of education (e.g. Cairns 2013b; Germann Molz 2017; Kenway & Youdell 2011; Kraftl 2016; Lee & Waters 2024; O'Shea et al. 2019).[11]

Within these burgeoning research fields, there are ongoing and rich debates concerning different theoretical understandings of emotion, affect and feeling, as well as how they relate to spaces (see, Kenway & Youdell 2011; Pile 2010; Thien 2006). In this study, I align my approach with so-called socio-cultural theorizations of emotions[12] to consider how "*emotion is both produced in and constitutive of particular spaces and in relation to various scales*" (Kenway & Youdell 2011: 132; see also Pain 2014).[13] Scholars in the socio-culturally oriented line of scholarship have investigated emotions in their social,

10 The aim of this study is not to conceptualize region or regional spaces (for this strand of research, see work such as Allen et al. 1998; Paasi 1986;). In this study the space of the region is understood to be relational and socially constructed (see, Allen et al. 1998), and in a similar manner, the state space to be intersecting and entwining with the spaces of youth educational paths.

11 It is worth mentioning that despite geographers having studied or at least touched upon topics concerning emotions and emotionality already before, some of the more recent developments within emotional geographies since the late-20th and early-21st century have taken place in connection with the so-called 'emotional turn' and the growing interest in the study of emotions in social sciences more widely (see for example Bondi et al. 2005; Davidson & Milligan 2004).

12 Socio-cultural orientations to the study of emotion differ from the way in which emotion, or rather affect, is theorized and taken up in theories of affect in non-representational, post-humanist or new materialist-oriented geographies, which typically engage with the work of Brian Massumi (see e.g. Kraftl 2013a; Pyyry 2017; Thrift 2008).

13 There is also considerable variation among the approaches that might be termed socio-cultural. There are scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2004) who do not seek to make distinctions between the concepts of emotion and affect. Then there are scholars such as Margaret Wetherell (2012) who seek to bridge the assumed distinctions between emotion/affect based on the dualism of emotions as socially communicated and affects as pre-cognitive. The key aim of this dissertation is not, however, to provide a theory of emotions. In this sense I align my approach with Ahmed (2004) since I am not so much interested in what emotions are but rather what they do, and specifically how they "*make space*" (Blazek & Kraftl 2015: 1).

cultural, political and geographical specificity, intimating how emotions and feelings are not merely subjective matter to be considered via investigating the feelings of an individual or their feeling states (e.g. Bondi 2005a; Kenway & Fahey 2011). Thus, approached from this perspective, emotions are not only central to "*our* experience of *spaces and places*" (Parr 2005: 472, emphasis added), but might also be considered as constituting spaces themselves. In this study, in thinking space relationally I also consider emotions as part of the social relations that constitute spaces (for a similar approach, see Nairn & Higgins 2011).

I further align my approach to the study of entwined spaces, spatialities and emotionalities with the concept of 'feeling rules'. Aligned with the work of Arlie Hochschild (1979, 2012), feeling rules refer to the ways in which one 'should feel' in a given situation (Kenway & Fahey 2011), for example when finishing compulsory school. Feeling rules can thus be understood as mobilizing feelings and emotional orientations; the feelings one should feel and the feelings that are considered appropriate might differ from how one thinks about and articulates their feelings. The effort and activity that is put toward regulating one's emotions, that is, toward conforming to the feeling rules, is what Hochschild (2012) calls 'emotional work' and, when part of one's profession, 'emotional labor' (see also Couper 2024). Instead of focusing on emotional work or labor as such, the focus of this study is on investigating what kind of spatialities might be brought to the fore via an investigation of emotions and feeling rules (see Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San in press).

## 3 Methodological considerations

In attending to the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths through different research materials – namely national education policy and materials generated through ethnography – the study unfolds as an inquiry across multiple sites and scales. Theorizing space as relational challenges the traditional method of focusing on a site as single and bounded; here sites are considered "*fluid, crossing scales from the local to the global*" (Sharp & Dowler 2011: 152; see also Katz 1994; Massey 2005). Furthermore, the way in which the notion of multi-sitedness is engaged with in this study at once resonates with but also widens the discussions about multi-sited ethnography. In these discussions, the term multi-sited often denotes conducting fieldwork in different geographic locations (see Marcus 1995). In this study, besides conducting fieldwork in different 'sites' and geographical locations, I also consider the 'sites' of the study as being produced through various research materials and across multiple scales (for discussions on interview sites particularly, see e.g. Elwood & Martin 2000). Therefore, the multiple sites of this study – that is, the site of the policy, the rural, the urban and the national application procedure that are produced through the research materials – are considered to be interconnected beyond the immediate geographical location and across multiple scales. Building on these discussions, this chapter discusses in more detail the material and methods utilized and further elaborates on some key ethical and analytical choices as they relate to the research material.

### 3.1 Investigating education policy

In this study, youth educational paths are studied from the viewpoint of education policy and state education in Finland. By education policy, I refer to policy texts and other textual material concerning initiatives for education and educational issues. Thus, the education policy that this study draws upon also entwines with regional and state policies concerning the organization of education, for example. Although I refer to Finnish education policy, it is important to bear in mind that state policies concerning education also intertwine with global trends and EU-level guidelines, for example (e.g. Rinne 2000).

The policies gathered and analyzed in this study consist of national parliamentary documents and additional materials related to state schooling in Finland. The material consists of the main governmental policy documents that steer state education policy in Finland, namely the government programs and their respective development plans for education and research drawn up by the Ministry of Education and Culture (formerly known as the Ministry of Education). Altogether nine government programs (1988–2015) and respective development plans for education (1987–2012) are included in the material. To account for the diversity and continuous struggle that takes place in policymaking and establishment, also additional material such as policy reports, government proposals and opposition interpellations were included in the research materials (see, Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). Furthermore, to investigate the changes that the implemented policy reforms have had on, for example, the spatial provision of education at the upper secondary level and on educational accessibility within and between regions, also statistical material is drawn upon.

The period under scrutiny spans from 1987, when the first Finnish development plan for education and research was created, to 2019, when the material was collected. During this period, key changes in political and societal decision making with respect to

the Finnish welfare state and its education policies were introduced (e.g. Ahonen 2001; Hellman et al. 2017). The educational policies also reflect and are aimed to advance the emerging Finnish knowledge-based economy (Moisio 2018). Such a choice of material and timeframe enables investigating the changing spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths from the viewpoint of policy. Furthermore, it also enables considering how these changes have occurred in relation to different scales ranging from global to national and regional (Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). From the perspective of the research process, analyzing education policy also enabled situating the later fieldwork and young people's perspectives within the wider societal and policy context (Kettunen 2023; Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San in press).

### 3.2 Contextualizing the schools

Research material was also generated through school visits, with a specific interest in how young people in particular places navigate within the spaces constituted through national education policy and the spatially differentiated network of educational institutions. Thus, spatial inequalities in terms of disparities between rural and urban areas regarding educational accessibility were an important starting point for the study. Moreover, in the Finnish context, there is little research with a regional focus that attends to both rural and urban areas. Four schools in one urban and two rural municipalities were chosen for the study as research 'sites'. The schools and municipalities in which they are located were not, however, chosen for their geographical representativeness or generalizability but for the novel insights they were expected to provide with respect to the spaces of education and the spatialities of youth educational paths in Finland (for a similar approach to choosing research sites, see Lanas 2011: 33). I provide a brief contextualization of the sites before going into detail about the research material.

Each research site is differentially positioned in global relations of power. As socio-economic spaces, rural and urban sites are differentially constituted due to historically different patterns of both state and foreign investment and industrial development, which has also impacted their culture and social relations (see also Massey 1984, on uneven development and the spatial division on labor). The urban site of the study, like urban areas in Finland in general, can be considered to be tightly connected with the global knowledge-based economy with its high-technology industry and start-up scene. The urban site also offers higher education, which is considered crucial for the needs of the knowledge-intensive industry and global competition. Its diverse educational opportunities also attract young people from surrounding rural areas. Northern urban areas do, however, differ from southern urban areas, and the capital city region is often considered to be in the forefront in the development of the Finnish knowledge-based society (see e.g. Moisio 2018 for an in-depth discussion on and analysis of the metropolis-centered spatial imaginaries of the state). Yet, compared to the more diverse educational and labor market opportunities that centralize in the urban areas throughout the country, the northern rural areas do not provide as diverse opportunities in terms of education and work. Whereas one of the rural municipalities included in the study is well known for its tourism industry, in the other natural resource-based industries such as agriculture and forestry make up a big share of the economic structure.

Education in these research sites has also developed as part of these development trajectories. The urban municipality, where two of the schools are located, is characterized by a significantly younger population structure and more diverse educational

opportunities on all levels. This means that there are more educational opportunities that do not require geographic mobility. In urban areas, the overall educational attainment level is higher, which means that there are more young people whose parents have acquired higher education. The urban municipality with its wide range of educational opportunities also attracts students from nearby areas. Thus, there is more competition and educational institutions typically set strict conditions for entrance, which are based on the applicant's performance in previous studies and possible entrance exams (see also Bernelius & Huilla 2021: 93). One of the schools was located in a well-off neighborhood where most of the pupils came from the area. The other urban school included in the study provided education with a special emphasis. Due to their selective admissions, schools with special emphasis often attract pupils from well-off residential areas (see Kosunen et al. 2016; Seppänen et al. 2023).[14] In terms of upper secondary education, although the urban area provides plenty of educational opportunities in upper secondary and tertiary level, some young people aspire to opportunities elsewhere, often schools in southern cities and schools with a special emphasis in a particular subject or field. To provide some context for youth educational mobility, out of the 25 interviewees in these two urban schools, only four considered moving elsewhere for upper secondary education as their first option. A few mentioned that they had considered educational opportunities abroad (see Kettunen 2023).

The rural municipalities where two of the schools are located could be characterized as small towns. Due to sparse habitation, already at the lower secondary level many young people in these municipalities were dependent on school transportation for their daily school going. As highlighted by Bernelius and Huilla (2021), schools in rural areas tend to be more socially diverse than urban neighborhood schools since there might be few (or only one) schools available within the municipality. Further, in rural areas, educational attainment levels are typically lower. In terms of educational opportunities, both of the rural municipalities offered general upper secondary education and no higher education. One municipality provided a limited range of vocational opportunities, whereas the other provided only agriculture-related vocational education. To contextualize youth mobility, out of the 23 interviewees in these two rural schools, half considered moving elsewhere for upper secondary education as their first option.

### 3.3 Visiting the schools

The visits to the schools took place during an intensive period in the spring of 2019, from January to May. The timing of the visits allows light to be shed on the spatialities at play in young people's educational negotiations (Kettunen 2023) as well as on the entwined emotionalities that manifest during this particular moment at the end of compulsory schooling (Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San in press). The timing of the visits was purposeful: The spring term is a time when 9th grade students apply for study places in post-compulsory upper secondary education through the national application procedure, which most of the upper secondary institutions use in selecting their new

14 Some lower and upper secondary schools in Finland have special educational tasks granted by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Specialized classes are provided in fields such as music, sports or languages. Although this study does not focus on the spatialized, classed and racialized differences within cities or between neighborhoods, it is worth mentioning here that in Finland applying for classes with a special education is considered a key mechanism for increasing urban segregation of schools via increased parental choice and has led to selectiveness based on socio-economic and ethnic background (Berisha & Seppänen 2016; Kosunen 2016).

students. The applications are submitted through an online form that is open for a period of one month from mid-February until mid-March. This means that during the time of the visits to the schools, some young people had already finalized their decisions while others had not. It is worth highlighting that when I conducted the fieldwork in 2019, it was not obligatory for young people to apply to upper secondary education (a later reform raised the school leaving age from 16 to 18 in 2021). Nevertheless, there was a strong social and political pressure steering young people to continue their studies (Kettunen & Prokkola 2022). This is also reflected in the fact that a vast majority of the young people in the schools I visited applied for a study place in the national application procedure, even though it was not compulsory.

When embracing a relational notion of space, wherein spatiality and temporality are considered co-constituting, the timing of the fieldwork is important. The timing of the fieldwork is therefore given slightly different emphasis compared to a study that would be interested in, for example, an individual young person's educational choices or experiences and not the particular spaces constituting and being constituted by those choices or experiences. As such, the timing of the fieldwork, and whether the interviewees had finalized their decision or not, is not treated as a decisive 'factor' in itself but rather as something that is intertwined with a range of spatialities. Therefore, the material generated during the school visits and the interviews are not taken as if they would "*offer an authentic depiction of reality*" (Cairns 2011: 58), but rather as simultaneously constituting and making visible particular spaces and spatialities.

As I spent time in the field, I began to think that my 'being there' might also generate another kind of research material, namely through participatory observation. The initial idea of only conducting interviews shifted towards a more ethnographically attuned presence, and thus towards acknowledging research as an encounter (e.g. Hitchings & Latham 2020; Probyn 2021). My visits and presence in the municipalities and schools could therefore be characterized as ethnography, "*deploying variations on participation and observation*" (Pile 2010: 11) with an interest in "*how social life unfolds in particular places and settings*" (Hitchings & Latham 2020: 972). I spent between two and four weeks in each of the schools, visiting the school either daily or more sporadically. During my time in the schools, I presented my research to the 9th graders and participated in some of their guidance counselling or other classes. I also spent time elsewhere in the school premises, for instance in teachers' coffee rooms, engaging in informal discussions with the teachers and school staff about my research and current issues at their schools. The knowledge gained also helped me to situate the interviews into the cultural and social context wherein they were generated. Furthermore, my presence in the schools and participatory observation also served as a means of gaining trust and promoting an open relationship with the participants. It also helped me to organize the interview practicalities and to get to meet the teachers and other school staff, whose help as 'gatekeepers' (Horton et al. 2021) I had to rely on in recruiting the research participants.

I wrote a reflective diary about what had happened during the school days as well as about my experiences during the school visits (more on the diary notes discussed below). I also took photos during the visits. The photos and much of the diary notes were not utilized as research materials in the original dissertation manuscripts. Yet, they were drawn upon in the research process as material that helps to recall the experiences and events that took place during the school visits and that reflects researcher positionality.

### 3.4 Interview encounters

The interview material was generated through interview encounters with young people during the fieldwork period. In using the word 'generating' rather than 'collecting' research material, I espouse the view that interview methods "*oblige researchers to 'center' the subject*" in qualitative inquiry (Jackson & Mazzei 2013: 262). As I encountered young people and interacted with them during the fieldwork, I invited them to voice their experiences and opinions in the interviews. Thus, I acknowledge that I invited the participants to be selective, for example, in what they tell, how they interpret their experience and represent themselves during the interviews (see Jackson & Mazzei 2013, 2023). Furthermore, in using the word 'interview encounters' rather than 'interviews' I wish to emphasize that I view the interview encounter itself as a specific site through which knowledge is generated together with the researcher and the participants. As articulated by Elspet Probyn, "*research, especially in geographical and cultural studies, is always an encounter*" (Probyn 2021: 67).

Considering research an encounter also highlights the need to acknowledge the spatialities of the interview encounter and how the participants are situated within the power dynamics of the interview site, influencing the material that is produced (e.g. Anderson & Jones 2009; Elwood & Martin 2000; Sin 2003). In this study, the school premises were the most practical sites to organize the interviews: especially in the rural municipalities, many pupils lived far away from the school and were dependent on school transportation schedules after school. The timing of the interviews was decided together with the research participants, with help from the teachers, who knew the schedules of the young people and helped find suitable times. The interviews were organized either during or after school. With an aim to create a safe and confidential environment, most of the interviews were organized in empty classrooms and some in the guidance counsellors' offices, where neither the interviewees' peers nor school staff could overhear the conversations. Nevertheless, organizing the interviews on the school premises potentially both informed young people's accounts and enriched my understanding of their accounts concerning school and teachers. In contrast, it did not allow me to observe and situate young people's accounts in other places such as their homes and family lives for example (see Elwood & Martin 2000).

Altogether 48 interviews were organized in the four different schools. These could be characterized as semi-structured individual interviews, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. All interviews were conducted in Finnish, the mother tongue of the participants as well as me.[15] The interviews included a diverse set of themes related to family and family background, lifestyle, educational aspirations, and future visions, with an emphasis on the role of place. During the interviews, I focused on covering the themes while expressing interest in what the participants wanted to share and talk about with me. Sometimes the participants would also ask me questions such as "*how many years does it take to earn a university degree*" or whether it is possible to study some specific vocational field in a specific city, for example. As I did not know the answers to all of their questions, oftentimes we just pondered such questions together, for example the

15 Although in all of the schools I visited there were also students with immigrant background, youth whose first language was not Finnish are underrepresented in this study. This is not to say that migration background or ethnicity does not entwine with youth educational paths in northern Finland but that it falls outside of the scope of this study.

study options available in nearby areas. I made sure to tell the young people that they had the possibility to withdraw from discussion at any point if there were topics they did not want to discuss. I feel that being open and respecting of young people's views (and silences) helped me to understand the often complex spatialities entwined with the interviewees' negotiations of life, school and (possible) upper secondary education.

The research followed the ethical principles issued by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK 2019) throughout the research process. For this reason, I have not disclosed details about the research sites such as names of the schools and municipalities. I also gained institutional research permissions from the municipalities and school principals as well as informed consent from the young people and their guardians. I have given all interviewees pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the research participants. Prior to the interviews, I told the young people that participation in the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any point. I also asked for permission to tape-record the interviews. This notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that it can be challenging for research participants to withdraw from research once they have committed to it, especially when the research is conducted in an institutional context such as a school (for in-depth discussions, see e.g. Horton et al. 2021). For example, one interviewee did not return a written consent form, and I interpreted this as a sign that they did not want to be involved in the study. Their interview is therefore not included in the study material.

### 3.5 Relational ethics in research with young people

What is often emphasized in studies involving children and young people is that the issue of ethics in research goes beyond institutional and formal matters: it is also about ethical ways of working with and encountering the people included in the research (e.g. Hopkins 2008; Rutanen & Vehkalahti 2021). Questions concerning relational ethics cannot always be foreseen but "*involve moment-by-moment alertness to ethical challenges, and an ongoing sensitivity to emergent or shifting situations*" (Horton et al. 2021: 190) throughout the research process. By providing an example of an event in the field (see below), I discuss relational ethics in practice and highlight how relational ethics played out when doing research in a school setting.

In this study, issues regarding relational ethics emerged specifically during the fieldwork through various encounters with the young people and others involved in the research process. For example, for many of the guidance counsellors, whom I contacted in my desire to introduce my research to the young people and conduct interviews with them, I seemed to appear as a suitable 'real life example' of what kind of educational paths and opportunities are available to young people after compulsory school. Often, after I had presented my doctoral research in front of the class and explained the topic of the study, the guidance counsellors began asking me questions about my own educational path and background, positioning me as someone from outside the community, having made certain educational choices that led to a university degree and doctoral studies. In my field diary, I reflected on being positioned in such a manner during my visits at the schools:

> "*I feel like at the same time I am being used as a 'real life example' of higher education. I don't feel comfortable when the guidance counsellors begin asking me questions about my own educational path in front of the class. Then again, I think that explaining what a doctoral thesis is and what my research is about is part of research ethics; I have an obligation to explain it as they*

> [young people] *have the right to know what they are participating in. And still, when guidance counsellors ask me these questions, I try to emphasize that this is my path, there are other options too. I hope those who are planning to choose vocational education also want to take part in the interviews.*" Excerpt, field diary

As noted above, during the school visits I was constantly being mapped onto complex, multiple *positions* in my encounters with the research participants, for example when young people asked me questions during the interviews or when the guidance counsellors addressed me as 'a real life example' in front of the class (see also Rose 1997; Gallagher 2008, for discussions on multiple positions and positionalities).

Events such as these occurred more than once, always forcing me to react to these positionings 'on the go' and to construct myself as a scholar in the field and in relation to it. To me it was, and continues to be, an ethical commitment that I be open with the participants and explain the reason of my school visits and interviews. As most of the 9th graders I presented my research to were not familiar with doctoral dissertation or doctoral research, I drew on my own educational path as an example and, albeit somewhat unwillingly, answered the guidance counsellors' unexpected personal questions. Especially since I had begun to think that participatory observation in the schools might help me to promote a more open and safe relationship with the participants, I thought it was appropriate and ethical to assume that such a sincere relationship goes both ways (see Dowler 2001, for similar reflections). Furthermore, as a means to 'counter' being positioned like this, I voiced my own aims about recruiting a diverse spread of participants with different educational aspirations and genders into the interviews. I also highlighted that there were no prerequisites to take part in the interviews and that they could take part even though they had not finalized their decisions about post-compulsory education.

In the excerpt above, I also express my concern over the fact that the way in which the school staff and young people positioned me would have an effect on who wants to take part in the research and how they would answer my questions in the interviews.[16] While reflections concerning researcher positionality such as these are important, I acknowledge that this is a challenge that every scholarly inquiry must face: by going into the field and conducting interviews, the researcher always influences how the interview encounter unfolds and thus has an effect on the material generated (Jackson & Mazzei 2013; for more on positionality and situatedness of research in this study, see subchapter 5.2).

16 What we can also see from the excerpt is that the researcher's feelings, emotions, and experiences are intertwined with the creation of the 'field' and the materials generated. I maintain that such experiences and feelings as emerged during the fieldwork were potentially important in steering my attention in the research process. Going more deeply into the topic is out of the scope and remit of this study (for in-depth discussions on researchers' emotions, see e.g. Bondi 2005b; Lanas 2016; Waters 2023).

# 4 Findings: Spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths

This chapter discusses the original publications with an emphasis on their contribution to the dissertation. In presenting the articles and discussing the findings, the focus is therefore on what can be said about the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths from different entry points – namely, education policy, everyday life and emotion – and how these are entwined.

## 4.1 Article I: Differential inclusion through education policy

Article I investigates youth educational paths from the viewpoint of state education policy in Finland from 1989 to 2019 and engages in an analysis of the changing spatial rationalizations of educational reforms. In so doing, it provides a historical contextualization of the way in which youth educational paths, and specifically the transition from lower to upper secondary education, have been rationalized and sought to be changed in Finland. Engaging with theories of spatial justice and a particular focus on a range of spatial scales, the analysis of the article focuses on equality in Finnish state education across different scales. In Finland, equality has long been a central tenet of the nation's Nordic welfare state policies, but has over the past decades become the object of increasing concerns (see Rinne 2000; Tervasmäki et al. 2020). The article's analysis of the changing spatial rationalizations of education is situated in the context of the transformation of state spatialities since the late 1980's. In so doing, the study provides insights into the ways in which a gradual global transition towards a global knowledge-based economy has entwined with Finnish state education policies, consequently shaping the spatialities of upper secondary education and youth educational paths. The key argument of the article is that Finnish education policy creates differential inclusions for citizen-subjects and spaces, specifically in terms of how they are perceived to contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy in Finland.

The article findings demonstrate how, propelled by the global economic recession in the early 1990s, young people and education began to be positioned as key constituents of national competitiveness and national survival. Accordingly, to adjust to rapid changes in working life, upper secondary education was established 'a minimum requirement' (Development plan 2000: 30), a target, at the turn of the millennium.[17] At the same time, increasing concern arose over those young people who did not meet the newly set minimum requirement of acquiring an upper secondary education degree. With this line of thought, more attention was paid to those young people who were considered at risk of becoming *marginalized*, referring to those outside the labor market or the education and training system of the state.

The article's analysis of education policy demonstrates that increased economic rationalities in education policy are also reflected in the ways in which upper secondary education reforms have been implemented in and across state space. During the period under scrutiny, the network of educational institutions, originally rooted in redistributive Keynesianism but now considered too scattered and in need of restructuring, was cut down in the name of efficiency. Thus, although education and the acquisition of skills and knowledge are increasingly considered important from the viewpoint of

17 Although the legislative changes concerning the raise of the school leaving age were made only in the year 2021, what we can see here is that there has for long been a political pressure to continue to upper secondary education right after lower secondary (see Kettunen & Prokkola 2022).

individual and national 'success' and wellbeing, the means of acquiring education have been spatially differentiating. This differentiation of educational opportunities dates back to the challenges posed by economic recession, which lead to increasing needs for cutbacks in the welfare state in the early 1990s. The efficiency of the educational system was to be increased by the centralization of educational institutions, merging or closing them down altogether. These ideals were further strengthened after Finland joined the EU in 1995, notably by the need to harmonize the education system with its European counterparts and by the austerity politics of the 2000's. The study highlights how policy measures such as these contributed to decreasing accessibility of education, especially in the sparsely populated and rural northern and eastern parts of the country. Decreased accessibility, in turn, underlined the ending of compulsory schooling as a 'consequential juncture' (Kettunen & Prokkola 2022: 51) in the educational path of an individual.

Furthermore, the article discusses how the gradual shift toward the knowledge-based economy has brought youth educational paths into closer alignment with the development of the state economy and competitiveness in particular. Accordingly, education policy produces spatial and scalar differences through the ways in which the two main tracks of upper secondary education and embedded citizen-subjects are harnessed as differential constituents of state-building processes. Throughout the period under scrutiny, vocational education has been construed more in terms of its regional significance and in relation to the regional economy, and in terms of the vocational institutions' capability to provide it with a skilled workforce that would also benefit the needs of the state. General upper secondary education, on the other hand, has come to be construed as the academic track, and is perceived as providing general education and a path to higher education, and thus linked to rising education levels and increased human capital for the needs of the state. The importance of general upper secondary education is understood more in terms of its perceived effects on individual wellbeing and the prospering knowledge-based economy. The article concludes by arguing that

> "[…] *by constructing narrow and exclusive imaginaries of economically driven rationalizations, the current hegemonic Finnish education policy discourse fails to recognize and value the diversity and difference of citizen-subjects and alternative economic rationalities.*" (Kettunen & Prokkola 2022: 65)

This argument could also be extended to touch the question of space: Finnish education policy constructs spaces characterized by spatial disparities and exclusive imaginaries of economically driven rationalizations in a way that renders particular educational paths desirable and others undesirable, if not impossible.

### 4.2 Article II: Young people's educational negotiations in everyday life

Article II further complicates the spatialities at play in the constitution of youth educational paths by investigating the topic from the perspective of young people who find themselves at the end of compulsory schooling. Drawing on interview material generated in rural and urban northern Finland, the article zooms in on the moment when young people in a specific national and regional context negotiate their educational paths and make educational choices in the face of two intertwined imperatives. On the one hand is the imperative to enroll in upper secondary education directly after compulsory school, and on the other is the imperative to be mobile, provoked by the

scattered school network. The key contribution to the dissertation is that this article provides insights into the spaces of youth educational paths with respect to the *multiple spatialities* at play at the site of the everyday life of young people in a regionally and nationally specific context.

The article addresses spatial differences in the ways in which the two main tracks of upper secondary education are constructed by investigating how young people speak of their educational choices. There are significant differences in the availability of vocational and general upper secondary education in the regions where the young people of this study live, and in a similar spirit, these two tracks are also constructed along spatial differences through the young people's accounts. In the young people's accounts, vocational education is understood more in terms of opportunities in and around the local area and local labor markets. In contradistinction, the general track is constructed as a path that would require living in the urban areas, specifically because the general track is considered a path to tertiary education. In general, due to the lack of such opportunities and experienced possibilities in rural areas, taking up the general path in rural areas is considered, as Michael Corbett (2013: 277) writes, "*an investment that made sense if one were to leave the community*". However, in some of the young people's accounts an attempt to stay in the 'rural here' is also constructed as an option that requires temporary mobility before being able to resettle in the rural area (see also O'Shea et al. 2019).

Furthermore, in attending to a specific region in which there are both rural and urban areas, the study complicates the ways in which young people consider their educational paths and post-compulsory education in relation to space. In young people's accounts, it is not only the rural regions that are considered 'small' and 'lacking' educational opportunities, as has been suggested in previous studies (e.g. Farrugia 2016; Ollila 2008; Sørensen & Pless 2017; Valentine 1997), but northern urban areas are also construed as 'lacking' and 'not urban enough' in relation to the southern urban areas and the capital city region, specifically. To some extent, such imaginaries of different places can be seen as reflecting the wider processes of urbanization and centralization of population and services in southern Finland as well as the culturally compelling discourses of youth outmigration to urban and southern areas (e.g. Adams & Komu 2022). Imaginaries of life and education in different places thus map onto social and economic differences that are at once material and 'imagined' (see Eriksson 2008), consequently constructing the spatialities of youth educational paths.

Investigating spatialities from the viewpoint of young people also enables a discussion of how educational paths are constructed and simultaneously shaped in and through social and spatial relations. Through young people's accounts, youth educational paths were constructed in relation to various connections both 'here' and 'there'. Specifically, social relations both in their place of residence and in other places appeared important when speaking about their educational paths and mobility. The role of family and relatives, for example, which often surfaced in the young people's accounts, are here considered not only as social relations that enable or hinder geographic mobility, but importantly as the spatial relations that contribute to constructing the spaces of youth educational paths in a relational manner. In similar spirit, in the young people's accounts educational paths are also constructed with respect to various spatial relations with places 'home' and 'away'. While in some youth's accounts, staying in one's hometown is constructed as a safe and good option for upper secondary education, in other accounts places and opportunities elsewhere are constructed as more desirable – even as a necessity in the face of a pull towards places elsewhere or a push away from the

hometown, for example. These relations between people and places therefore also gesture to the spatial dimensions of emotional (dis)attachment at play in young people's negotiations and decision-making processes.

To conclude, the article's contribution lies in its insights into the complexity of youth educational decision-making as it relates to space and mobility, highlighting especially the multiple spatialities at play. From the perspective of this study, these spatialities might be perceived as constituting youth educational paths at the site of everyday life. The findings also hint at the multi-scalar nature of such everyday negotiations and spatialities. Navigating national policies in particular urban and the rural northern areas entwines with the ways in which these areas are positioned and imagined as differential constituents of state space, which itself is constituted in relation to increasing globalization and internationalization.

### 4.3 Article III: Emotional geographies of youth educational paths

While article II already noted the feelings that mobilize at the end of compulsory schooling and related questions of (im)mobility, article III sets out to investigate the emotional geographies of rural youth educational mobilities. It investigates the transitional stage between lower and upper secondary school with an interest in interrogating the feelings mobilizing toward this particular stage young people find themselves in. The analysis draws on research material generated through ethnographic fieldwork and interview material generated in the two rural research sites. Delving into discourses, policies and practices regarding youth, education and rurality itself, the key contribution of the article to the dissertation is that it allows an investigation of the intersecting and entwining spatialities and emotionalities of youth educational paths in a particular rural and regional context.

With a focus on studying socially, culturally and geographically specific emotions that might be perceived as operating across a range of sites, the article discusses how education policy and related social and cultural norms in rural northern Finland contribute to the formation of particular 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1979, 2012). These feeling rules steer both the ways in which young people are expected to feel, that is, how they 'should' feel, and the emotional orientations they should have toward during this particular stage. In Finnish state policy, young people figure as members of a knowledge-based society who should envision their futures and have particular kinds of educational aspirations for their adult lives. Although applying for a study place in upper secondary school was not obligatory at the time the fieldwork was conducted, the moment of applying was entwined with a social pressure not only to have aspirations but to have particular kinds of aspirations concerning one's educational futures. This expectation to have aspirations often rendered applying for a study place as self evident, while the choice to not apply or continue one's studies was rendered an unimaginable, undesirable option. At the site of the school, feeling rules further intersected and entwined with teachers' and guidance counsellors' pedagogical efforts, for example with respect to preparing their students for the application process and what might be faced while waiting for the results.

Moreover, in the two rural municipalities with scant opportunities for upper secondary education, the ending of compulsory schooling was not only a moment when young people were anticipated – and themselves anticipated – to continue in post-compulsory education, but also a moment when some of the young people were anticipated to leave the rural areas. In these areas, the ending of compulsory schooling thus entailed

additional questions of moving out and moving away. While for some young people ending school represented an opportunity to move away from rural areas considered 'lacking' and 'dull', for other young people the rural hometown appeared as a 'safe' and 'familiar' option. Feeling rules were thus further complicated by the ways in young people felt the rules, and the ways in which life and education are envisioned and where.

The findings of the article indicate how youth educational paths are constructed in relation to particular spatially and emotionally oriented notions of futurity. Moreover, by investigating emotionality from the viewpoint of socially, culturally and geographically specific feeling rules and how they may be felt by young people, the article suggests not only that feeling rules are formed in relation to particular spaces but that such rules also constitute the spaces in which young people navigate their educational paths. From the viewpoint of this dissertation, these feelings and feeling rules might thus be perceived as constituting the spaces of youth educational paths.

### 4.4 Spaces and spatialities at the nexus of policy, everyday life and emotion

Discussing the key findings of each original publication, I have attended to different spatialities that are at play with respect to the constitution of spaces of youth educational paths, with a specific focus on a particular regional setting, that is, rural and urban northern Finland. Rather than providing an exhaustive or conclusive list, the focus has been on investigating spatialities at the nexus of policy, everyday life and emotion. Bringing the different viewpoints and study materials together with a relational theorization of space has allowed me to look at spatialities across a range of sites and scales. These sites and scales range from spatialities of national education policy to those at the intersection of policy and various practices of schooling in a particular regional and local context, and include those related to young people's navigations and feelings mobilizing at the end compulsory education.

The findings highlight how state policy in Finland has helped forge spaces of youth educational paths that are characterized by spatial disparities in terms of possibilities to enroll in post-compulsory education. At the same time, the spaces constituted through policy foster expectations of smooth and efficient educational transitions from one educational stage to another. Studying spaces from the viewpoint of young people negotiating post-compulsory education in northern Finland extends the notion of spatialities from issues concerning the educational network to questions of relations with and between places: when envisioning their educational paths and futures, young people negotiate multiple spatialities ranging from rural-urban relations to North-South relations as well as relations and feelings toward particular places. Thus, from the perspective of young people, the spatialities that entwine and intersect with their complex relations with places – both 'here' and 'elsewhere' – are central to constituting youth educational paths in a multi-sited and multi-scalar manner.

Furthermore, investigating spaces from the viewpoint of emotions and emotionality has enabled an examination of how spaces of youth educational paths involve a range of feelings and feeling rules. Feeling rules concerning how one is expected to feel and orient oneself toward ending compulsory school are mobilized by Finnish education policies that stipulate when young people should apply and what is available – and importantly, *where* those options are available. Policy, however, entwines and intersects with social and cultural norms concerning schooling and growing up in particular places. In my reading, it is not only that disparities in educational accessibility mobilize a range of different feelings amongst young people who are expected to make educational

choices, but also that the entwined emotionalities and spatialities of youth educational paths contribute to constituting a space that is fraught with feelings. Thus, in attending to spatiality and emotionality, I highlight the complexity inherent in the ways in which spatial disparities and regional inequality intersect with feelings and feeling rules in a particular regional and rural space.

In each of the articles, mobility is a central theme around which a range of spatialities can be conceived to revolve and thus central in the formation of spaces of youth educational paths. Finnish education policy increasingly fosters youth mobility by centralizing the educational network to urban areas and provincial centers and by steering young people to enroll in upper secondary education immediately after compulsory school. In areas where educational opportunities are scant, responding to the policy aim of promoting social mobility also entails the additional dimension of geographic mobility. Furthermore, echoing previous studies highlighting how youth mobility has become a compelling cultural expectation (see e.g. Adams & Komu 2022; Juvonen & Romakkaniemi 2018; Kiilakoski 2016, for studies in the Finnish context), the young people in the rural and sparsely populated areas of this study face 'the mobility imperative' (Farrugia 2016) at the relatively young age of 15 to 16 when negotiating their post-compulsory education. Furthermore, this study also brings to the fore how the northern urban areas might not be conceived as 'urban enough' by young people. This is not to say that all the young people considered leaving, but that the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths intersect and entwine with public discourses wherein northern and sparsely populated areas are positioned disadvantageously compared to the capital city region and southern parts of the country (see Lanas 2011; Moisio & Sirviö 2021 for further discussions on disadvantageous positioning of northern Finland). Despite the state's interests in fostering global-minded citizens (see Kettunen & Prokkola 2022), mobility in terms of upper secondary education abroad was not a topic that often surfaced in the interviews with young people. However, some youths, especially in the urban schools, considered studying abroad later as an option.

Thus, to make educational decisions in these spaces is therefore to negotiate and navigate the complexities of the restructuring of the state and its educational policies. Such navigations manifested both in terms of the imperative of enrolling in education within the regionally and locally uneven and unequal network of educational opportunities as well as in terms of the entwined social and cultural norms concerning what one should do when compulsory schooling ends – and importantly where one is expected to be or go.

# 5 Discussion: Rethinking spaces of education

## 5.1 Rethinking youth educational paths and spaces

The aim of this study has been to investigate youth educational paths in rural and urban northern Finland as spaces of education. I have done this by engaging with a relational theorization of space and Massey's work in particular. Bringing together the focus on youth educational paths, on the one hand, and the relational theorization of space on the other, the study makes two key contributions. First, whereas previous studies drawing on Massey's work within and between the fields of geography and youth studies have, among other contributions, produced important insights into the study of young people's spatial lives and subjectivities and how they are imbued with power relations (e.g. Farrugia 2016; Holt 2024; Ravn 2022), in this study I have directed attention toward spaces and spatialities. Such a spatially attuned approach has enabled going beyond studies and approaches wherein space, or rather place, is reduced to local variation or treated as the backdrop for youth educational paths or an individual young person's educational choice. Second, in concord with studies that have suggested to widen the scope of analytical approaches beyond those of young people's 'voice' or 'agency' (see Gawlicz & Millei 2021; Kraftl 2013a), this study widens the analytical focus onto the constitution of spaces. The policy texts and materials generated with young people are thus drawn upon in terms of what can be said about spaces and their constitution. In so doing, this study provides a way of investigating youth educational paths from a perspective that goes beyond looking at an individual young person's educational choices or decision-making processes and beyond treating space as a backdrop for youth educational choices. Thus, I have investigated the spaces and spatialities that are simultaneously constructing and making those educational paths, choices and agencies possible.

In engaging with the relational theorization of space and investigating how youth educational paths constitute spaces of education, this study also engages with and contributes to previous literature and analyses concerning spaces of education. I have done so in response to the call to widen the scope of what 'count' as spaces of education (see Holloway et al. 2010: 595). Compared to studies that have focused on spaces of education as sites where teaching and learning take place – that is, via focusing on topics such as particular school subjects (Cairns 2013b; Pykett 2009), policies and curricula (Gulson 2015; Pyyry & Sirviö 2023; Thiem 2009) or the space of the classroom (Ang & Ho 2019) or urban space (Pyyry 2017) – I have shifted the focus onto youth educational paths as spaces in which young people become educational subjects via navigating educational paths and the imperative of *becoming educated*. Focusing on the moment at the end of compulsory school when young people negotiate their post-compulsory paths and are expected to apply and enroll in upper secondary education thus enables looking at how youth educational paths constitute spaces of education.

Rethinking youth educational paths as spaces of education and investigating of how and where young people are to become educated also provides novel insights into young people's educational citizen-subject and subjectivity formation. I argue that the transformation towards the global knowledge-based economy in Finland has had a significant impact on youth educational paths and how they are sought to be developed already at the upper secondary level, and that this has contributed to the emotional landscape of education in northern Finland in particular. In emphasizing the role of education and the acquisition of skills, knowledge and degrees, this gradual

yet rapid transformation has shaped the spatialities of Finnish state education. State schooling has been developed in line with national and EU-level policies that emphasize the need to raise young people's educational aspirations in order to avoid marginalization and produce a skilled labor force. Furthermore, along with the transformation towards a knowledge-based economy, educational reforms instilling neoliberal ideals of efficiency and individualism have helped create spatial disparities in terms of the availability of upper secondary education and have created spatially differential inclusions for the vocational and general paths. The study has shown that the spaces of youth educational paths have become increasingly characterized by spatial disparities and narrow economically driven rationalizations that create differential inclusions within the state space, which itself is increasingly oriented to secure economic competitiveness in the global markets. Such spatial disparities entwine with the imperative to aspire for particular educational futures, constituting an emotional space that steers how young people are expected to feel and orient themselves during this particular stage.

The interplay between and across different scales – global, national, regional and personal – also indicates the contribution that thinking space relationally brings to the rethinking spaces of education via multiple sites and scales. Thus, spaces of youth educational paths are not approached through a single site, such as the site of the classroom or the site of the policy, but rather are viewed as a 'constellation of processes' (Massey 2005) wherein different spatialities and emotionalities are at play across a range of sites and scales. Such an approach complements previous studies on spaces of education that have looked at very concrete spaces such as the space of the classroom (Ang & Ho 2019; Kraftl 2016) or architectural spaces (Birkett et al. 2022) by looking at the constitution of spaces of youth educational paths across multiple sites and scales. In this study, spaces of youth educational paths are considered as constituting at the site of state policy, which itself is both entwined with global relations and influences and is applied in particular regional and local contexts. Spaces constituted through state policies also further entwine with particular regional and local discourses and practices and emotionally imbued norms and expectations concerning schooling and growing up. These spaces are further complicated by the multiple spatialities at play when young people negotiate their educational paths in their everyday life contexts. Such an approach therefore provides a multidimensional perspective into the study of spaces, and takes forward spatial theoretical understanding and the constitution of spaces at the nexus of policy, emotion and everyday life.

In emphasizing spaces as "*open, multiple and relational*" (Massey 2005: 59), thinking space relationally necessitates acknowledging how the spatial is entwined with the temporal. This study brings complexity to the ways in which spatiality and temporality figure in the constitution of youth educational paths not only in terms of historical change and specificity but also in terms of notions of futurity, in particular. In Finland, the acquisition of formal education is a societal contract (one often taken for granted), as it is expected to benefit not only the individual but the state as well. I argue that policy and social norms together contribute to constituting youth educational paths as emotional spaces that steer what kind of emotional orientations young people are expected to have toward their educational futures and envisioned future spatialities. In my reading, the spaces of youth educational paths are thus considered particular emotional spaces which young people negotiate and navigate. The ending of compulsory schooling in particular is a moment marked by a range of expectations concerning education and mobility – that is, what one is expected to do – but also limitations related to spatially uneven opportunities – that is, where one can do so.

This is not to say that youth educational paths are to be thought of as particular developmental phases or that young people matter only in terms of their futures, but rather to show that the entwined emotionalities and spatialities of youth educational paths entail a strong orientation toward futures – and that these futures pertain to imaginations about the state, northern regions as well as young people. By highlighting the notion of futurity as a temporality that entwines with spatiality, this study also contributes to debates concerning the spatialities and temporalities of youth and education (Farrugia 2018; O'Connor & McLeod 2023; Wood 2017) by showing that spatialities and spaces themselves might involve temporalities that shape and are shaped by the young people navigating these spaces.

To conclude, although I have chosen to use the term educational 'path', what I have demonstrated here in investigating paths via relational theories of space is that youth educational paths are not merely linear transitions from one educational stage to another. Nor is the negotiation of one's educational path only about choosing between the educational tracks such as general and vocational education, although the Finnish state policies often assume as much. Having attended to youth educational paths from the viewpoints of policy, emotion and everyday life, I have highlighted the different spatialities and spatial issues that intersect and entwine with youth educational paths. Bringing these viewpoints together has allowed me to highlight the complexity involved in the constitution of youth educational paths as spaces of education in a way that also produces novel insights into the study youth educational paths and spaces alike. Although multiplicity and complexity undoubtedly exist in terms of the different trajectories and futurities, from the perspective of the young people navigating and negotiating these spaces, which are characterized by spatial inequality, there seems to be less and less room for doing things differently.

## 5.2 On the spaces and spatialities produced by the inquiry

Thinking space relationally, insisting on openness and multiplicity ultimately means that one cannot grasp space in all their complexity and diversity. Consequently, the knowledge produced is inevitably situated and partial since it is produced from a particular standpoint. That is to say, attempts to study spaces are always partial (see Massey 2005; Rose 1993). I want to make use of this subchapter to write about and bring to the fore the issues of positionality, partiality and situatedness, however partial or uncertain my attempt may be. I do this with a mind on issues related to knowledge production and ethics that very well might escape the analytical power of the researcher or be, at minimum, "*extraordinary difficult to answer*" (Rose 1997: 311) – and yet too important to be left out completely.

In much of the feminist and post-structural oriented scholarship within and between the disciplines of geography (e.g. Cairns 2013a, 2013b; Hyndman 2001a; Katz 1994; Sharp & Dowler 2011) and education (e.g. Mietola 2014; St. Pierre 1997; Youdell 2010), wherein the researcher herself is considered an active 'instrument' in how the research unfolds, reflecting on the role of the researcher and her positionality is an important step in addressing the issues of situatedness and partiality of knowledge. I acknowledge that being a white, female scholar/adult coming from outside the fieldwork sites has influenced not only how I was met in the schools but also how I conducted my research and analyzed the research material. This pertains especially to the ethnographic fieldwork and materials generated in and through the different encounters described above (for similar approach see Cairns 2013a; Gallagher 2008; Probyn 2021) but it is

also good to bear in mind that other traditional qualitative methods that draw upon already existing materials concerning young people, like policy texts, also involve a researcher who decides what material will be included, what is the theoretical orientation and analytical focus, and thus what kind of knowledge is produced in the study based on those materials (see Kallio 2010).

Consequently, considering the role of the researcher also calls for reflecting on the ways in which the researcher's experiences of doing the research inform the inquiry, including the research material and its analysis. Besides the theoretical approach that has contributed to informing my study and analyses, I acknowledge the potential influence of my own experiences and so-called 'hunches' regarding what it is in the generated material that merits further attention (see also Sharp & Dowler 2011). These hunches might be conceived as that something that 'falls away' (Youdell 2010) or escapes language and representation, yet nonetheless informs the inquiry through memories and feelings, for example (see also St. Pierre 1997; Probyn 2021). Although the analysis presented in this dissertation draws on textual data, I nevertheless consider various 'events' that happened in the field, including my own experiences of them, for example, as being important for the research process. In this sense, then, the researcher's experiences and how they influence the analysis are not fully apparent in the research material that has been brought forward as textual or documented material, despite their clear impact on the research process (see also Mietola 2014: 32). Thus, reading education policy, reviewing previous studies and analyses, taking trains and buses to visit the schools, spending time in the teachers' coffee room, unplanned encounters and conversations with school staff and young people, all of this has contributed to informing my analyses. Although questions such as these have not been the key foci of this study or the original articles, in Chapter 3 I have sought to reflect on my own experiences during the fieldwork with the aim to provide the reader with some examples of how I think that such 'hunches' played out in how the inquiry unfolded.

Considering the researcher herself as a central 'instrument' in the inquiry has repercussions on what one can assume about the space of the research and the 'field' of the fieldwork in particular. Drawing inspiration from discussions that have sought to problematize the traditional understanding of "*the field as something fixed and bounded and separate space from that of the researcher*" (Sharp & Dowler 2011: 148), the field is here considered not only a physical location that exists 'there and then' when the research material was generated (Hyndman 2001a; see also Allen et al. 1998); the field is also understood to be actively produced by inquiry and the researcher herself. Thus, rather than being "*a coherent place to be examined and captured in print*" (Sharp & Dowler 2011: 152), the field of this study is characterized by a particular regional context – long distances, sparse habitation, unique set of education policies and educational discourses – as well as by my practices in and outside the geographical site of the fieldwork (see also Katz 1994; Probyn 2021). All of this has contributed to constructing the spatialities of the 'field' in this study.

Although I have emphasized the role of the researcher, this is not to say that the research or spaces and spatialities produced by it would be constituted by an individual only.[18] As mentioned, various 'events' that happened during and after the fieldwork and

18 For efforts to acknowledge how thinking and writing are collective processes, see for example the work of geographers such as J.K. Gibson-Graham who have sought to make visible and challenge the idea of an individual researcher by adopting a joint pen name (Gibson-Graham 2006: xli–xliii, see also Cook et al. 2005).

during the writing process have had an influence on what kind of research has been produced in this study. This includes texts, things and people I have been working and thinking with: previous literature, theories and theorists, supervisors and/as co-authors, colleagues, seminars, as well as all the academic encounters and sources of inspiration in their serendipity – all that makes up the academic space wherein this research has been conducted (see also Anon 2002; Walker & Boamah 2019). Thus, in acknowledging that research is rarely an individual endeavor, I acknowledge research itself as a relational process (Cook et al. 2005).

To conclude, in response to Katz's (1994) invitation to be "*aware of the partiality of all our stories*" (Katz 1994: 67), I have here highlighted the role that the research has in producing spatialities throughout the inquiry. I suggest that acknowledging the spatialities that the inquiry produces has the potential to provide novel insights into the complexities of space and spatiality, and thus to further contribute to rethinking spaces in general and spaces of education in particular.

## 5.3 Limitations and further research

Although the previous subchapters already hinted at the evaluation of the study process and even some proposals for further research, it is also necessary to discuss the consequences and potential limitations that the choices concerning the research context, method, material and theory might have had with respect to what kind of spaces were rendered visible in and through the inquiry – and importantly, what kind of spaces remain invisible and might merit further attention.

As has been highlighted throughout the study, the focus has been on youth educational paths in a particular national and regional context of northern Finland. Although I have sought to acknowledge the interrelations between global relations and youth educational paths in northern Finland regarding the production of different spatialities, a particular national context is emphasized in the study. Such an emphasis is reflected in how the spaces of education under scrutiny entwine with a particular Nordic welfare state context that has historically been important for the development of Finnish education policy (see also Buchardt et al. 2013). As highlighted in the study, recent decades have witnessed a shift in Finland toward more neoliberal and market-oriented policies that have, in their emphasis on efficiency and individual choice, exacerbated spatial and regional disparities. Development trajectories such as these can be witnessed in other Nordic countries too, although they manifest in different ways and might have different spatial implications. Therefore, studying youth educational paths with a more explicit focus on global and transnational spatialities and scales, and in other national and regional contexts too – and with a view of their interplay, as illustrated in the work of Cindy Katz (2004) – would provide fruitful starting points for future studies. For example, considering spaces and spatialities across scalar connections via investigating issues such as global environmental crises and state schooling might provide fruitful and societally relevant avenues for further research regarding spaces of education.

Furthermore, in this study I have studied spaces and spatialities by drawing on particular research methods that might be characterized as rather traditional qualitative methods. The choice of methods also developed during the study: my initial plan was only to conduct interviews, until I began thinking that my presence in the schools might offer additional insights. Scholars working in the multidisciplinary fields of youth studies and geographies of young people have taken up and developed a range of novel approaches to do fieldwork and generate material with young people, including

focus groups (e.g. Cairns 2013a), hanging out (e.g. Pyyry 2015) and participatory visual methods such as youth-created maps (e.g. Kaisto & Wells 2022; Kallio 2017), qualitative GIS methods (e.g. Steger et al. 2021) and photography (e.g. Bartos 2013; Wood 2013). Conjoining different methodological approaches such as these with activities within school spaces as well as beyond school premises might have provided fruitful insights into a range of other spaces and spatialities that were not possible to grasp with the chosen methodological approach and the utilization of more conventional representational methods.

Like the choice of study methods, in a similar spirit my interest in the study of emotions also developed during the research process. Here, alternative approaches to doing research and generating material might also have proven to be fruitful for the study of space and emotions and entwined emotionalities and spatialities. Having research material that is in written form or is verbally communicated and transcribed into written form certainly has its advantages – not least since academic publishing heavily relies on written format (see Hitchings & Latham 2023 for further discussion on 'spoken word' in geographical research). This fact notwithstanding, with respect to the study of emotions, scholars have developed ways of conducting research that do not necessarily rely on textual material and/or verbally communicated emotions so as to be more attentive to the fleeting nature of atmosphere, feeling and embodiment, for example (e.g. Harris & Whiting 2024; Youdell & Armstrong 2011). Considering these insights already before visiting the school and integrating them into the methodological approach might have yielded crucial insights into the researcher's emotions as part of the entwined emotionalities, spatialities and space of the research (see Burman & Chantler 2004); this especially if more careful notes on the researcher's feelings and reflections had been available, for example (see for example Lanas 2016 on innovative use of field trip narrations concerning researcher emotions).

As another note concerning the research material and its limitations, I wish to acknowledge here that the focus of this study has not been on analyzing spaces from the perspective of gendered, classed, or racialized differences or on how they relate to youth educational paths. This does not mean that aspects such as gender, class or migration background would not be part of the spaces of youth educational paths in northern Finland. On the contrary, previous studies in the context of sparsely habited and rural Finland have provided important insights into gender, femininities and masculinities in terms of how they relate to youth, their future trajectories and mobilities (e.g. Pöysä 2022; Ristaniemi 2023; Tolonen 2005). Similarly, previous studies in the context of large Finnish cities have disclosed increasing segregation based on class and ethnic background as well as the implications of such segregation for young people's trajectories (Bernelius & Vaattovaara 2016; Holmberg et al. 2018; Kosunen 2016; Peltola 2020; Seppänen 2023; Tolonen 2005). Although segregation of schools in Finland is often discussed in relation to larger cities in southern Finland, it is fair to assume that similar dynamics are at play in northern cities too. Although northern cities are smaller in size compared to their southern counterparts, they are heterogenous. Attending to the spaces and spatialities of youth educational paths from the viewpoint of such intersecting differences might provide fruitful avenues for further research regarding spaces of education.

Lastly, and importantly in this study, I have drawn inspiration from post-qualitatively oriented scholarship wherein theory is taken as a 'tool' to think with (see Jackson & Mazzei 2023). Hence it must also be acknowledged that having different theories to think with would have enabled light to be shed on different spaces and spatialities.

For example, thinking space with non-representational, more-than-human and new materialist perspectives (e.g. Farrugia 2016; Ivinson & Reynold 2013; Puutio et al. 2024) and/or from a viewpoint of affects and affectivity (e.g. Youdell & Armstrong 2011; Kraftl 2013a) might also provide fruitful avenues for researchers interested in investigating how spaces and spatialities are entwined with the constitution of educational issues and phenomena such as youth educational paths.

## 6 Conclusion, and some loose ends

"*Loose ends and ongoing stories are real challenges to cartography.*" (Massey 2005: 107)

An ongoing source of both inspiration and bewilderment in thinking spaces with Massey has been her insistence on the liveliness, openness and multiplicity of space. Theorizing spaces as products of interrelations rather than as pre-existing categories entails treating them as constantly changing since those relations also change in time, implying that "*there will always be loose ends, always relations with the beyond*" (Massey 2005: 95). Approaching space in such a manner renders it "*unamenable to a single totalizing project*" (Massey 2005: 100). It is thus an impossible task to render visible all the loose ends and relations yet to come as if it were a cartography of a static Euclidean space that can be mapped in detail.

In similar spirit, Gillian Rose (1993) has argued that one can never achieve an all-encompassing view of the world, the result of which is that spaces are at once both "*knowable and unknowable, representable and unrepresentable*" (Kitchin 2020: 324). This poses challenges for a scholar who sets out to study spaces. In the study at hand, to make such a messy relational space researchable, my solution was to focus on investigating different spatialities that I consider as constituting and being constituted by these spaces. In so doing, I have been able to provide insights into the complexity of youth educational paths as spaces of education, whilst attending to the spatialities that the researcher and the inquiry itself produce.

What Massey emphasizes in her writings is that this radical openness and ongoingness of spaces entails a possibility of politics and change. Those loose ends, although they might leave the scholar puzzled, offer a potential and possibility for change. Herein lies the societal implication of thinking spaces of education with Massey: if we keep thinking and treating spaces of education as open and ever changing, then there is always a possibility to transform them for more equitable and just worlds. Studying spaces and spatialities as dynamic processes highlights how sociospatial phenomena such as spatial inequality are not given and fixed but can be changed.

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