RESEARCH

Locality and the Prevention of Early School Leaving: Supporting Youth Transitions to Upper Secondary School in a Highly Decentralised Education System

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The introduction programme (IP) intends to facilitate transition to upper secondary education among Swedish youth with incomplete compulsory education. This article aims to explore and understand how local preconditions interact with schools' support for the IP students. It looks at the local structural and institutional preconditions, and the strategies and work of head teachers, programme officers, teachers, and career counsellors, working in the IP in 90 municipalities of three categories: commuter municipalities close to big cities, rural municipalities, and small cities. The analysis builds on the responses from 139 school actors to a questionnaire, and on public statistics. On average, the commuter municipalities enjoy the most favourable structural and educational conditions, while the rural municipalities are the least resourceful, e.g. in terms of formal professional competence. Surprisingly however, the rural contexts on average perform better than the other municipalities regarding the level of graduation four years after starting the IP. There are few systematic local differences in the work with IP students. However, the IP in the rural municipalities on average enjoy higher support from school leaders, have a clearer division of responsibilities, and separate the students spatially to a lower degree compared to the commuter municipalities. Systematic handover between compulsory schools and the IP is less common in the commuter municipalities than in the other two groups. Whether these factors are relevant for explaining the higher success level in the rural schools and the lower success level in the schools in the commuter municipalities requires further investigation.

Keywords: youth transitions; upper secondary education; introduction programme; local context

Introduktionsprogrammet (IM) avser att underlätta övergången till gymnasieskolan bland ungdomar med låga eller ofullständiga grundskolebetyg. Syftet med artikeln är att undersöka och förstå hur lokala förutsättningar interagerar med skolornas stöd för IM-eleverna. Den analyserar de lokala strukturella och institutionella förutsättningarna, och strategierna och arbetet hos rektorer, programansvariga, lärare och karriärvägledare som arbetar med IM i 90 kommuner. Dessa tillhör kommunkategorierna pendlingskommuner nära storstäder, landsbygdskommuner och mindre städer. Analysen bygger på enkätsvar från 139 skolaktörer, och på offentlig statistik. Resultat: Pendlingskommunerna har i genomsnitt de mest fördelaktiga strukturella och utbildningsförhållandena, medan landsbygdskommunerna är minst resursstarka i dessa avseenden, t. ex. i termer av tillgänglig formell lärar- och vägledarkompetens. Därför är det förvånande att landsbygdskommunerna i genomsnitt presterar bättre än de andra kommunerna i termer av andelen elever som avlägger examen på ett nationellt gymnasieprogram fyra år efter starten på IM. Det syns få systematiska skillnader i arbetet med IM-eleverna. Emellertid har IM i landsbygds-kommunerna i högre grad stöd från skolledarna och en klar ansvarsfördelning, och separerar i mindre utsträckning IM-eleverna spatialt från övriga gymnasieelever än i pendlingskommunerna. Om dessa faktorer är relevanta för att förklara de bättre resultaten i landsbygdsskolorna och de sämre i pendlingskommunerna kräver dock ytterligare undersökning.

Background and Aim

Youth who do not complete compulsory education constitute a critical group because they run higher risks than youth who stay in school longer, having weak connections to the labour market, socioeconomic disadvantages, and reduced wellbeing (Albæk et al., 2015; Halvorsen & Hvinden, 2018).[1] Hence, supporting young people in starting and successfully completing an education at the upper secondary level has become a prioritised policy matter at the national and supranational levels, which *inter alia* has resulted in a large variety of programmes aimed at minimising early school leaving (ESL). Organised within the formal education system or outside of it, such programmes may be of preventative, intervening, or compensatory character. The measures range from universal to targeted and from temporary to more stable (Downes, 2014; European Commission, 2020; van der Graaf, Vroonhof, Roullis, & Velli, 2019). Previous studies on the effects of ESL programmes tend to produce disappointing results (e.g. Helgøy & Homme, 2013; Nielsen Arendt, Grevem, & Bergqvist, 2019). However, because ESL is a complex process that involves many factors and drivers at different levels, it is difficult to isolate and analyse the impact of such programmes and measures (van der Graaf et al., 2019).

   Many countries offer shorter programmes to promote completion of compulsory education and transition to upper secondary level within their formal education systems, but some countries – e.g. Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, and Finland – offer a full extra year at the end of compulsory school designed to prevent ESL (Jørgensen, Järvinen, & Lundahl, 2019; Nielsen Arendt et al., 2019). The Swedish introduction program (IP) focussed in this article is an example of longer institutionalised preparatory programmes aiming at bridging the gap between lower and upper secondary education (USE). However, we have found no direct equivalents to the Swedish programme at the upper secondary level (also see Olofsson, 2016). Paying attention to local conditions and variations is particularly important in highly decentralised societies such as Sweden, where municipalities and regions differ considerably with regard to local resources, policies, and concrete measures for preventing ESL (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). In addition, the IP constitutes the part of the Swedish education system that has the weakest national governance (see below). Under such conditions, we assume that school professionals (teachers, head teachers, career counsellors) have a particularly important role not only in enacting national goals related to ESL, but also in shaping the work of the IP, which is framed, delimited, and enabled by local preconditions.

The Swedish case

Formerly characterised by strong state governance, Swedish education was subject to decentralisation, deregulation, and marketisation reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Lundahl, 2002). In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded: *Sweden has embraced decentralisation to greater extent than most other OECD countries* (*ibid.,* p. 146). A major intention behind the far-reaching delegation of decisions to the local level was to increase the possibilities of adapting to local needs and conditions, and thereby enabling higher goal attainment. However, countless evaluations have shown that the reforms resulted in increased inequalities between municipalities and regions. This includes the local resources, policies, and concrete measures for preventing ESL (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). Under the impact of New Public Management, the education system has gradually delimited professional discretion, for example, by more frequent grading and other assessments, public outcome ranking, and documentation, but, as we explain below, this transformation has only to minor extent included the IP.

Aim and disposition of the article

This article is of explorative character and aims at understanding how local preconditions of a highly decentralised policy context frame and interact with local school actors' efforts to support transitions to education and work among youth who have incomplete lower secondary education. More specifically we wanted to know:

   – How the organisation and practices of the IP is designed in three kinds of local contexts
   – If and how varying local structural and institutional conditions are related to the IP students' transition and completion of an upper secondary program
   – How differences between local contexts in the above respects can be understood.

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In the following, we start by introducing the Swedish IP and then present a brief research overview, particularly of previous studies on IP, and the conceptual framework, methods and sources of the study. The rest of the article is devoted to our empirical findings, analysis, and conclusions. First, we summarise public statistical data on the structural and educational conditions of the three selected groups of municipalities, and this is followed by a presentation and analysis of the findings from a questionnaire study on the local preconditions and the design of the work with the IP. Finally, we present and discuss our major conclusions.

The IP: A Troublesome Bridge Over Troubled waters?

In Sweden, the majority of young people with insufficient grades from the 9-year compulsory education transition to the IP. In 2011, the IP replaced the previous individual program existing from 1994, designed to suit students who were not yet prepared to participate in one of the 3-year academic or vocational programmes of upper secondary school. The aim of the new IP was to better adapt the support to the individual needs of the students (Regeringens proposition 2009/10:165).

The IP consists of four (in 2011–19 five) different tracks, aiming at making the students eligible for a 3-year academic or vocational upper-secondary programme or preparing them for working life. **Table 1** summarizes the orientations and aims of the different tracks. Positioned at the upper secondary level, the Swedish IP has few, if any, direct international counterparts (Olofsson, 2016).

Table 1: Introductory programme tracks 2011–2019.

IP programme track		Aim
Preparatory programme	Replaced by program-oriented choice July 2019	Making students eligible for a 3-year national programme within a year
Program-oriented individual choice		Making students eligible for a 3-year national vocational programme within a shorter time (the only IP alternative with entry requirements)
Vocational introduction		Making students in need of a more extensive completion eligible for a vocational programme and prepared for work
Individual alternative		Preparing the student for other education, work introduction, or work
Language introduction		Making newly arrived migrant youths eligible for upper secondary education, focusing on the acquisition of the Swedish language

Source: Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE), 2012, 2014.

In contrast to the other USE programmes, the IP has no national syllabus, degree objectives, or a regulated duration. Instead, the municipality or the private school provider has to decide on an education plan and an individual study plan for each student (Skollag, 2010:800). However, state governance of the IP increased somewhat after a decision in May 2018, according to which the local education plans have to contain information about the purpose, main contents, and length of the programme. From 2019, IP students are also entitled to a minimum of 23 hours of teaching per week. Before that, no such time regulation existed. Furthermore, schools are obliged to assess newly arrived students' abilities when starting the language introduction (LI) (Regeringens proposition 2017/18:183). In 2019, the Swedish Government decided on financial support to municipal and private USE providers in order to increase the educational progression of IP students to a national programme or other education by appointing so-called IP developers (Swedish Government, 2019).

In 2018, when we conducted our questionnaire study, the changes mentioned above had not yet been realised, and the IP thus consisted of five tracks – the preparatory programme, programme-oriented individual choice, vocational introduction, individual alternative, and LI.

The LI expanded dramatically in 2015/2016 when Sweden had a large influx of refugees, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In 2015, approximately 70,000 refugee children and young people under the age of 18 arrived, half of them unaccompanied minors.[2] In 2016, the corresponding figure was 10,000 due to a sharp change in the refugee reception policy (Swedish Migration Agency, 2020). In 2017/18, more than half (54.5%) of all IP students attended the LI, and they constituted almost every tenth student in upper secondary education. Non-urban municipalities were over-represented as recipients of refugees and thus as providers of LI (SNAE, 2019a; **Figure 1**).

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[2] Statistics, Swedish Migration Agency. The absolute number of unaccompanied minors was greater in Sweden than in any other EU country.
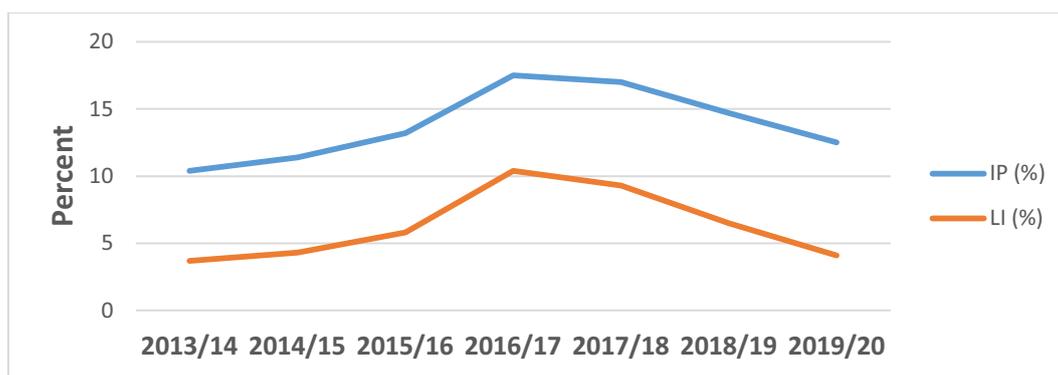
Figure 1: Students in all five IP tracks and in LI 2013/14–2019/20 as a proportion of all upper secondary school students (%). Calculations based on data from Statistics Sweden.

Considering the rapidly changing conditions, it came as no surprise when the Swedish Schools Inspectorate identified a number of problems in its evaluation of LI in 2017. The problems found related mostly to insufficient amounts of support and guidance and too little adaptation of the education to the individual needs of the highly heterogeneous groups of students (Schools Inspectorate, 2017).

The IP has had limited success if one considers the transition to a 3-year USE program. On average, 20% of the students who started an IP track in 2014 had received a degree from a 3-year upper secondary programme 5 years later. The proportion varied considerably between the different tracks; 35% of the students who had attended a programme-oriented IP and 29% from the preparatory IP graduated from USE, but only 14–16% of the students from the other three tracks had a degree (SNAE, 2020). However, these figures are misleading in a wider perspective. Because of an upper age limit of 20 years for starting studies at a national upper secondary programme, a high proportion of the IP students proceed to adult education instead. Of those beginning at an IP in 2011 and 2012, almost half had continued to adult education within 4 years (SNAE, 2018). The picture is also more positive when looking at former IP students' activities more broadly. A follow-up study of students 5 years after starting at an IP in 2012, but not including LI,[3] showed that a majority were working or studying 5 years later; the lowest proportion (65%) was students from the individual alternative, and the highest was students from the preparatory programme (83%) (SNAE, 2019b). Four years after starting at an IP in 2011/12, almost 85% were either studying (69%) or working (16%) (calculations based on SNAE, 2018).

Studies on Local Policies and Institutional Support to Youth Transitions

Place matters in young people's transitions, and both the historical legacy of local place and contemporary neighbourhood factors affect completion of education and dropout (Martinez & Sparks, 2018). The urban regions and neighbourhoods have primarily been in focus when researching youth transitions, while non-urban youth have received far less interest (Farrugia, 2014; Öhrn & Beach, 2019).

Young people's precariousness and marginalisation are often characterized as problems of the city areas, e.g. in terms of segregation, unemployment, abuse and criminality (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000). However, youth unemployment tends to be higher and the municipal resources to facilitate school-to-work transitions are lower in the smaller municipalities outside the urban regions (Lundahl & Olofsson 2014; Rosvall, Rönnlund & Johansson, 2018).

The majority of research on youth outside of the urban regions focuses on the aspirations and trajectories of young people (e.g. Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Evans, 2016; Rosvall et al., 2018), while research on local institutional and policy measures to facilitate youth transitions are less frequent (for examples of work with such approach, see e.g. Hansson & Lundahl 2004; Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014; Palumbo & Pandolfini, 2020; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). The theme of staying or leaving is predominant in research on youth careers and transition policies in rural areas. As we have found no international studies close to our own, in which researchers compare work and strategies to support youth transitions in different local contexts, our work adds to knowledge in the field.

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[3] It is often difficult or impossible to conduct these kinds of long-term follow-up studies on young asylum seekers because they lack a Swedish personal identification number.

Earlier studies of the Swedish IP and the design and implementation of local youth policies more broadly have identified somewhat different aspects of what constitutes structural resources and problems (Lidström, 2002). Local IP policies might also vary with the dominant political ideas in a municipality. In the 2011 project *Unsafe transitions. Youth without complete upper secondary education*, officials in 280 of the 290 Swedish municipalities responded to a questionnaire which explored strategies and measures to prevent and manage school dropout and non-completion of USE (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). Respondents in half of the municipalities regarded young people's attitudes and lack of motivation as a major obstacle to increasing the proportion of USE completers. Limited economic resources were the second most-frequently mentioned obstacle, and around a third of all municipalities, including nearly half of the smallest municipalities (<20,000 inhabitants) reported such limitations to be a considerable problem. Fewer than a third of the officials saw other factors, for example, lacking competence, political disagreement, few educational offerings, and lack of collaboration as major difficulties. Overall, the local governance of prevention and management of ESL was weak, and almost two thirds of the municipalities had action plans, but fewer than half had formulated concrete goals, for example, for school completion rates. Only a tenth of the municipalities allocated special resources and only one fifth evaluated the measures that were adopted. Smaller municipalities generally invested less in such steering activities than larger ones (ibid.).

The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE, 2014) concluded from a survey of head teachers that schools in metropolitan areas seemed to have more problems adapting the IP education to individual needs than other municipalities. The municipalities differed most concerning collaboration with compulsory schools and adult education and differed less in the contacts with other upper secondary schools. The authors of the report assumed that schools in smaller municipalities had more favourable preconditions regarding collaboration and communication on students' backgrounds and needs than schools in larger municipalities (SNAE, 2014).

Henning Loeb and Lumsden Wass (2015) studied the organisation and implementation of IP in 16 municipalities of different types and sizes. They found extensive but unsystematic local differences in, for example, funding of the different tracks and the distribution of students, and they argued that these variations primarily related to problems of understanding and 'translating' the national legislation and the practical possibilities of merging groups and classes.

Even if youth-related measures do not seem to be a matter of political conflict (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014), dominant local ideologies may shape the design of IP differently. Dovemark and Erixon Arreman (2017) conducted interviews with teachers and head teachers in six geographically spread municipalities and concluded that the organisation of IP was related to the size, traditions, and policies of the local authority. For example, a policy in one of the municipalities to offer an IP in most of their upper secondary schools reflected a political desire to avoid segregating students, and it was argued by the chair of the local school board that having all IP students in one or a few schools would lead to stigmatisation. In contrast, politicians in another municipality decided to gather all IP students in one separate school for efficiency reasons.

Conceptual Framework of the Present Study

What stands out in the Swedish context is the high discretion given to the local actors in the case of the IP. We regard the school actors in this article – head teachers, program officers, teachers, and career counsellors – as *street-level bureaucrats* (Lipsky, 2010). According to Lipsky, civil servants in the public sector face dilemmas related to the fact that their clients' needs will always exceed available resources. They have to manage this demanding situation, which is often characterised by complexity, ambiguity, and a multitude of sometimes conflicting objectives, by using their discretion in creative ways *(ibid.)*. Lipsky (2010) speaks of actors' *pragmatic micro choices* that shape the work of schools and other public organisations.

Focussing on the varying local preconditions and designs of the IP learning environments, we use a model from Lidström (2002) that presupposes that municipal and school actors make conscious choices and decisions concerning education under the influence of local structural preconditions (incentives) in terms of local problems and local resources. General structural problems of the neighbourhood might, for example, include low average incomes, depopulation, and low levels of education. Structural problems and/or resources more specifically related to youth transitions and IP consist, for example, of distance/closeness to adult education and higher education and the supply of 'entry-level jobs' for young people lacking occupational skills. Local resources might also include other 'softer' aspects such as social cohesion, openness, and safety.

We thus assume that the varying structural and institutional – here primarily educational – preconditions delimit and guide local actors' problem perceptions, strategies, and concrete measures of facilitating the transitions from compulsory education into further studies and work. In other words, their possibilities as well as their responsibilities to make their own pragmatic micro choices vary with the problems encountered, resources available, and the degree to which local authorities govern the IP practices.

Methods and Sources

This article builds on a questionnaire answered in 2018 by 139 career counsellors and head teachers working in IP in local contexts situated outside the larger cities but at varying distances from them. We approached all schools providing the IP in three groups of municipalities representing different socioeconomic and demographic conditions:[4] (a) commuting municipalities close to big cities (≥40% of the working population commutes to a nearby big city); (b) small city municipalities (15,000–40,000 inhabitants in the largest city/town); and (c) rural municipalities (<15,000 inhabitants in the largest town) – altogether 103 municipalities offering all or several upper secondary programmes, or, in a few cases, only the IP. The responses covered 90 (87%) of the addressed municipalities. The questionnaire was distributed by mail in printed form based on our experience this tends to generate higher response rates than web-based questionnaires. The questionnaire mainly consisted of multi-item scales (agreement – disagreement with statements) but also contained some open-ended questions. As the number of respondents was rather small and the study was of exploratory character rather than aiming at formal testing of hypotheses, we chose to conduct a descriptive analysis of the responses on the item scales. The answers to the open questions were analysed thematically. As a complement to the survey data, we used national and municipal statistics from Statistics Sweden, Swedish National Agency for Education, and the KOLADA database[5] of Swedish Municipalities and Regions.

Results

Structural and educational characteristics of the municipalities

We find that the three groups of municipalities differ systematically across a number of structural characteristics (**Table 2**).[6] In general, the conditions are most favourable in the commuter municipalities close to the big cities and least favourable in the rural municipalities. This is true for the levels of working population and unemployment, average incomes, educational level, and age dependency ratios.[7] The cluster of small cities/towns comes close to the national average in all the mentioned respects. While the populations of both the commuter municipalities and smaller cities/towns grew in the 5-year period preceding the data collection in 2018, the rural municipalities witnessed a negative population trend.

Table 2: Employment, income, demographic data, and education in the three municipal groups (2018).

Structural aspect	Commuter municipalities	Small cities/ towns	Rural municipalities	All Sweden
Working population 20–64 years (%)	83	81.2	79.9	80.6
Unemployment 18–64 years, prop. of pop. (%)	4	6.4	7.3	6.1
Unemployment 16–24 years, prop. of pop. (%)	3.0	6.0	7.2	4.7
Average taxable income, 1000 SEK/inhabitant	231	197	180	194
Age dependency ratio	0.8	0.85	0.94	0.87
Change in population during the last 5 years (%)	8.5	4	–0.3	4.2
Inhabitants 25–64 years with a tertiary education degree (%)	45.5	35.6	25.9	33.3

Compilation based on searches in the KOLADA database.

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[4] We use the categorisation by the Swedish Association of Municipalities and Regions (SKL, 2017).

[5] Aiming at enabling comparisons and analyses by regions and municipalities, KOLADA collects statistical data from Statistics Sweden and other public databases, and from recurrent surveys (https://www.kolada.se).

[6] However, the within-group differences are often larger than those between the groups of municipalities.

[7] The ratio measures the population of working age (20–64 years) in relation to those of younger and older ages. Low ratios are preferable.

Preconditions for transiting to the upper secondary level in the three municipality groups

The educational preconditions look somewhat different in the three groups of municipalities. On average they are most favourable in the commuter municipalities, and least so in the rural municipalities. The commuter municipalities have the highest average proportions of grade 9 students who meet the requirements of being accepted to a 3-year USE program, whether academic or vocational, and they have the lowest levels of newly arrived students in grade 9. Conversely, the rural municipalities have the highest proportion of newly arrived students in grade 9 (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Proportion of students eligible for national upper secondary education in the three municipal groups and the proportion of newly arrived grade 9 students in 2018 (%).

	Commuter	Small city	Rural
Grade 9 students eligible for an academic upper secondary programme	86	80	78
Grade 9 students eligible for a vocational upper secondary programme	89	83	81
Grade 9 students eligible for a vocational upper secondary programme (newly immigrated students excluded)	92	87	86
Newly arrived students in grade 9 (%)	5	8	12

Compilation based on searches in the KOLADA database.

As **Figure 2** shows, the differences between the three groups were especially large with regard to the proportions of students in the IP around 2016–2017, reflecting the wave of newly arrived asylum seekers.

To conclude, the available structural and educational resources vary between the three groups of municipalities, generally meaning larger structural problems and educational challenges in the rural municipalities, while the preconditions on average are most favourable in the commuter municipalities close to the big cities.
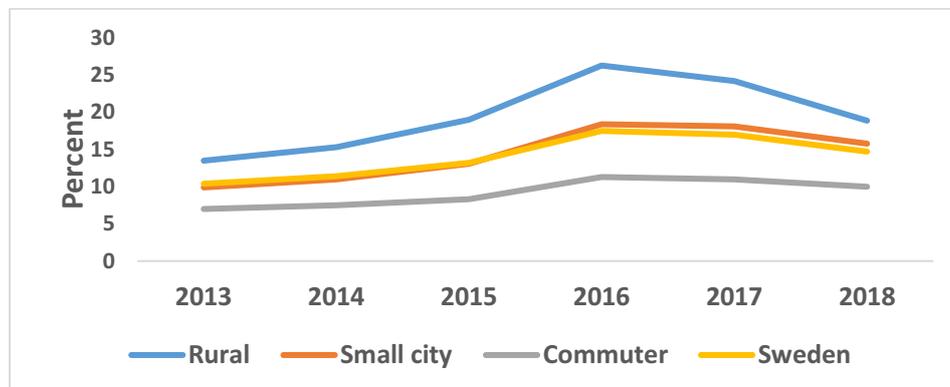

Figure 2: Students in the IP from 2013/14 to 2018/19 in Sweden as a proportion of all upper secondary school students (%) in the three categories of municipalities.
Source: KOLADA.

IP students' outcomes – a paradox?

Considering the overall worse structural and educational conditions in the rural municipalities, the average outcome of the IP in this group is intriguing. Here, and contrary to what we expected, in 2017 to 2019 *a higher proportion* earned a degree or study certificate[8] from a three-year national upper secondary programme within 4 years of starting at an IP compared to the small cities/towns and the commuter municipalities (**Figure 3**). In addition, the success rates rose over time in the rural municipalities; in 2019 they were higher than before, even though the number of IP students and particularly those attending the LI had started to rise considerably in the rural municipalities 4 years earlier (cf. **Figure 2**). The situation in the other two groups was more stable, even though a small improvement was visible.

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[8] Students who have not passed a majority of the courses (2,250 course points out of a total of 2,500 points) and/or have failed in the courses that are mandatory for getting a USE degree get a study certificate.
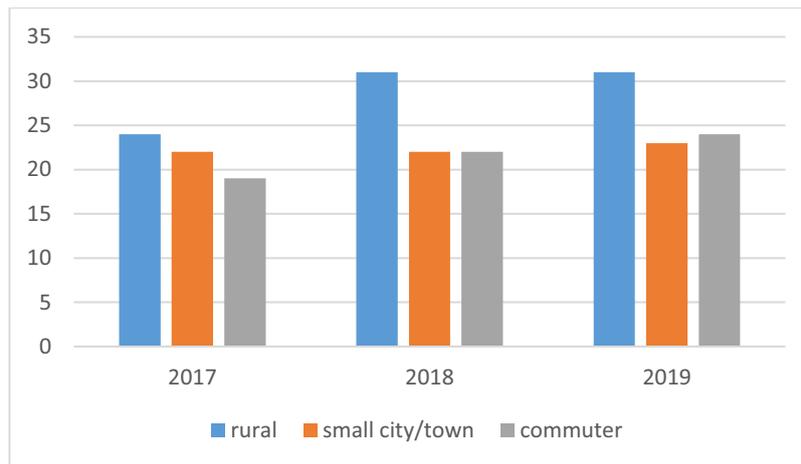
Figure 3: USE students from public schools with a degree or study certificate within 4 years from starting at an IP (%).
Source: KOLADA.

Building on the questionnaire answers, we next look into the work of the IP and its preconditions in the three municipal contexts.

Working with IP

On average, the head teachers and career counsellors in the rural and commuting municipalities are each responsible for and/or work with slightly more than 100 IP students, while in the small cities/towns they usually work with about 150 IP students. However, the variations are large, in particular within the group of rural municipalities. The LI, alone or together with one other IP track, constitutes a dominant task for 58% of the respondents, while 42% work with one or several of the other four tracks to a large extent. LI dominates least in the smaller cities/towns – and here about half of the respondents work mainly with LI alone or together with another IP track, while in the other local contexts the figure is slightly more than 60%.

Access to organisational resources

The respondents working with IP students in the three groups of municipalities report their schools as having different access to qualified teachers and career counsellors and to competence development (**Table 4**). On average, the commuter municipalities and small cities/towns have good supplies of qualified teachers. Schools offering IP in the small cities/towns have by far the best access to trained career counsellors, and it is more common to offer competence development here. Similar to what we described above, the rural municipalities are the ones with the least favourable conditions regarding access to qualified teachers and career counsellors, with the exception of special education competence. Considering the high proportion of newly arrived students in the rural municipalities since the peak of asylum seekers in 2015/16, the shortage of staff with language skills is serious. Fewer than 60% of the respondents in the rural municipalities report having good availability of such competence compared to approximately 70% in commuter municipalities and small cities (**Table 4**).

Table 4: Access to qualified staff and competence development opportunities (N = 139).

Proportion of respondents who fully or partially agree with the statement (%)	Commuter	Small city	Rural
Most of the teachers have a teacher education degree	94	93	86
Most of the teachers have a degree in the subjects they are teaching	91	91	79
The availability of staff speaking several languages is good	71	71	57
The availability of special education competence is good	67	77	73
The availability of trained study and vocational counsellors (career counsellors) is good	79	92	73
Teachers and other IP staff are continuously offered opportunities for competence development	60	77	64

Source: Questionnaire to head teachers and career counsellors 2018.

Local IP strategies

Only a third of the respondents answer that their municipality has an explicit strategy for raising the level of compulsory school completion, but a slightly higher proportion (40%) report having one for completion of USE. In both cases, the most frequent answer is that they do not know (44% of all respondents). There are no major differences between the municipality groups in this respect. Forty per cent of the respondents from commuter and rural municipalities report that their own schools has a strategy to increase the proportion of students who continue to a 3-year national programme, but there is a somewhat higher proportion in the smaller cities/towns (49%). One fourth of all informants are uncertain about this, and this proportion is as high as 40% in the rural municipalities. Thus, with little national and local steering, a majority of the schools providing IP seem to have a large amount of discretion *and* responsibility to shape strategies and measures to help students take the next step.

Fifty-eight respondents, primarily head teachers, answered an open-ended question about their school's strategies to support the transition to a national USE programme. We cannot tell to what extent these descriptions refer to formalised school strategies or rather to informal strategies and measures successively developed by the staff. The informants emphasise student support, including work with individual study plans, individualising and adapting the instruction to the individual student, and strengthening pedagogical support and counselling, including instruction in the mother tongue of newly arrived students. Offering a broad range of compulsory school subjects, small study groups, and high teacher ratios are other frequently mentioned components.

> *Almost all compulsory school subjects. Many study tutorials. Continuous study conversations with mentors and career counsellors based on individual study plans. Formative assessments. Validation of knowledge in students' mother tongue* (assistant head teacher, commuter municipality).

> *Large flexibility in creating the student's individual study plan in order to get the eligibility that is missing. Staff density to create safe relationships that facilitate studies* (head teacher, smaller city/town).

> *Students in the IP work together in small groups with lots of extra support from teachers, special teachers, counsellors, and tutors to get the best possible preconditions to continue their studies* (teacher, rural municipality).

We do not see any marked differences between the groups of municipalities in terms of strategies for supporting student transitions to work and/or higher education.

A smaller proportion of the responses to the open-ended questions, mainly from rural municipalities, concerned the development of programme plans, routines, and schedules. A few responses mention support for the transition from compulsory school to the IP and collaboration with adult education. Finally, another small group of responses relate to strategies for competence development and other measures involving IP staff.

> *The organisation has developed a lot in the last years, including study plans, schedules, and routines, [and we have] individualised the instruction – the students study what they need. We have also received state funding for developing the IP; this has contributed considerably to the development of the programme* (assistant head teacher, rural municipality).

The inner workings of IP

Almost all municipalities conduct early mapping and assessment of the students' knowledge (**Table 5**). A majority of the respondents report that the design of *the individual study plan* is primarily in line with the student's needs and interests, but at the same time almost as large a proportion states that the study plan is rather standardised. When the question concerns individualisation of *education,* the answers differ between the rural municipalities and small cities/towns on the one hand and the commuter municipalities on the other. More than 80% of the former reported adapting the education to the individual student to a high extent, but fewer than 70% of the latter report doing so. A small majority of all informants answer that the education is relatively standardised. Two thirds of the schools in commuter municipalities and small cities/towns tutor students in their mother tongue, but only somewhat more than half of the schools in rural municipalities do so. A majority of all schools offer a broad variety of courses at the compulsory level, ranging from slightly below 80% in the commuter municipalities to more than 90% in the rural municipalities.

Table 5: Design and work of IP.

Proportion who fully or partially agree to the statement (%)	Commuter	Small city	Rural
Students' previous knowledge is mapped and assessed at an early stage	79	86	80
The individual study plan is primarily designed in line with the student's needs and interests	71	79	82
The individual study plan is relatively standardised	60	72	64
There is a broad supply of compulsory school subjects	79	86	93
Students are tutored in their mother tongue	67	67	56
The education is adapted to the individual student's needs to high extent	64	88	82
The education is relatively standardised	57	51	56

Source: Questionnaire to head teachers and career counsellors in 2018.

Research overviews indicate that having access to career education and high-quality counselling may be crucial, both from learning, social, and economic points of view (Hughes, Mann, Barnes, Baldauf, & McKeown, 2016). Considering their risky situation (see the introduction section above), this is probably even more true for the IP students. However, only three quarters of all respondents fully or partly agree that the IP students learn about different educational alternatives through recurring activities, and even fewer – two thirds of all respondents – fully or partly agree that the students learn about the labour market through such activities. A clear majority (83 to 95%) of the respondents in the three groups of municipalities agree partially or fully that the IP students have good possibilities to discuss future educational and vocational choices with a career counsellor. Also, a majority (77%) reports that career counsellors, teachers, and other staff collaborate in giving the IP students career education and counselling (**Table 6**).

Table 6: Career counselling as part of the IP.

Proportion who fully or partially agree with the statement (%)	Commuter	Small city	Rural
The student learns about educational alternatives through recurrent activities	67	83	73
The student learns about the labour market through recurrent activities	67	64	61
There are good opportunities to discuss future educational and vocational choices with a career counsellor	83	95	86
Career counsellors, teachers, and other staff collaborate in matters concerning students' educational and vocational choices	71	85	77

Source: Questionnaire to head teachers and career counsellors in 2018.

Overall, we do not find any considerable differences between the three groups of municipalities when it comes to learning about careers and career counselling, but there is a tendency that commuter municipalities rank lower in the above aspects than the other groups. Learning about the labour market through recurrent activities, however, constitutes an exception.

Organisation of work, leadership support, and collaboration

There are notable differences in the answers from the three groups of municipalities concerning the integration or separation of IP students in relation to other USE students, the division of responsibilities between the actors involved, and the perceived support from school leadership – and here the commuter municipalities stand out more negatively than the other groups of municipalities (**Table 7**).

Only two thirds of the respondents from commuter municipalities feel supported by the leaders of the school, but almost nine out of ten respondents in the other local contexts report feeling supported. Nine out of ten schools in the rural municipalities report having a clear division of responsibilities between the actors involved in the IP, but fewer than seven out of ten in the commuter municipalities tell about such clear divisions. Finally, the schools in the rural municipalities clearly differ from the others by having a lower degree of spatial separation of the IP – 13% report this as compared to 21% in the small cities/towns and

Table 7: Organisation, support, and collaboration.

Proportion who fully or partially agree with the statement (%)	Commuter	Small city	Rural
IP education and its students are geographically separated from the rest of the school	27	21	13
IP education and its students are highly integrated in my school's work	44	63	58
The work with the IP is actively supported by the leaders of my school	67	88	87
There is a clear division of responsibilities between the different actors working with the IP	68	81	89

27% in the commuter municipalities. One should, however, keep in mind that a majority in all three groups did not report such a separation.

Collaboration with other actors

In an evaluation of the IP, the Swedish National Authority for Education (SNAE, 2014) related the varying possibilities of adjusting IP to the individual students' needs to the extent to which schools received information about the students from their compulsory schools, The SNAE (2014) concluded that schools in the metropolitan areas had fewer opportunities for getting such information than schools outside of the big city areas. We find a similar trend in our study. In the commuter municipalities close to big cities, two thirds of the respondents (67%) agree fully or partially with the statement, '*There is a systematic handover between the compulsory schools and the IP'*. The corresponding proportion is considerably higher in the other two groups (82% and 83%). The average proportion of schools that collaborate with adult education is on average reported to be even lower, at between 55% and 60%, but with little difference between the groups of municipalities. On average, only half of the respondents report a well-developed collaboration with the local labour market – the highest proportion (59%) being in the small cities/towns.

Conclusions and Final Discussion

How is the organisation and inner work of the IP shaped in three groups of local contexts?

A majority of those working with the IP seem to have considerable discretion *and* responsibility to shape support strategies and the measures they use to assess this support, as they report receiving little steering or direction from the state and municipalities. The institutional conditions vary between the three local groups; in general, the rural municipalities tend to have lower proportions of qualified teachers and career counsellors than the other two groups. Notably, the access to teachers who can assist students in the language introduction in their mother tongue is markedly lower in the rural municipalities. This poses challenges as they are also the municipalities who received most newly arrived migrants. On the whole, however, we find no marked or systematic differences in how the schools in the three local contexts work to support the students in teaching, counselling and other activities.

Are varying local structural and institutional conditions related to the IP students' transition and completion of an upper secondary program?

We expected that worse structural and institutional preconditions would result in more difficulties and less successful work with the IP in the rural municipalities than in the other municipalities. However, this expectation was not confirmed. According to statistical data on levels of graduation or getting a study certificate from USE 4 years after starting an IP, the rural contexts perform better than the commuter municipalities and smaller cities/towns, and this tendency has grown stronger over the last few years.

How can we understand such relationships?

We can neither explain our findings from the present explorative study nor dismiss structural and educational preconditions as being nonessential for the work and success of IP at the local level. Rather, this study raises questions about possible additional factors, some of which we discuss below, that may constitute the basis for further investigations. Hence, we would like to expand the number of municipality types and municipalities in a second survey. We also want to complement these data with interviews targeting leading officials at the school and municipal levels. Such an interview study has started.

Discussion

Do the rural municipalities' relatively greater success and the relatively larger failure of the commuter municipalities result from factors that do not primarily relate to the quality of education and schools? We can think of at least two such 'sources of error': local differences in grading and different availabilities of alternatives to participating in and completing USE. In Sweden, the teachers are responsible for grading and examinations, not external institutions as in many other countries. In this study, one hypothesis which calls for future exploration could be that grading differences exist between rural and commuter/urban schools. Potentially, this hypothesis may explain our findings if future research finds that rural schools tend to give higher grades than municipalities close to larger cities. There is little evidence to support such a hypothesis, as the results of several research studies are showing that the tendency for grade inflation is by far highest in situations where many schools are competing over students (e.g. Vlachos 2010; Wennström 2019). This is not the case in the rural regions. A second factor could be the differing local availability of unskilled employment. Such employment opportunities may present a possibility for youth to start working earlier. Previous research has shown that this is an attractive option for many young people who are tired of school (e.g. Lundahl, Lovén, Holm, Lindblad, & Rolfsman, 2020). Because the urban regions offer more jobs to low-educated youth than rural regions, this could be one plausible explanation to why fewer IP students complete upper secondary studies in the commuter municipalities than in the other two local clusters studied here.

As was noted above, we found few systematic differences between the three groups of municipalities in how school professionals work with the IP students. However, there were some variations with regard to the organisation and support of IP that work in favour of the rural municipalities and/or speak in the negative for the commuter municipalities. The lower reported support from school leadership in the commuter municipalities is thus notable. Further, the division of responsibilities is clearer and the separation of IP from other upper secondary programmes is less frequent in the rural municipalities. Furthermore, it is more common to have a systematic handover from compulsory schools to the IP in the rural municipalities and small cities/towns than in the commuter municipalities. These factors could be relevant for explaining the lower success level in the commuter municipalities and conversely the higher success rates in the rural schools. However, the reason behind these local differences still needs to be explained. One such possible explanation goes back to Lidström's (2002) model of local resources and local problems and the notion of 'soft structural conditions'. One hypothesis for a future study would be that municipalities in rural and sparsely populated regions, characterised among other things by ageing and depopulation, are more dependent on educating, supporting, and retaining young people, including the ones who initially are failing school and the newcomers from other countries, than in the urban commuting municipalities. In other words, these young people constitute local resources rather than mere problems in the rural contexts. In an ongoing study based on interviews among 'street-level bureaucrats' who are working with IP in six municipalities of the same kinds as were addressed in the questionnaire study, we explore how teachers and counsellors perceive the challenging situation of giving support to the IP students that is adapted to their highly varying needs under highly varying institutional and structural conditions. Here we hope to find some answers to the questions raised above, including the possible perception of students as resources and/or problems and related micro-choices of the involved school actors.

Ethics and Consent

This research followed the standards of *Good research practice* (Swedish Research Council, 2017). The regional research ethical board approved the project in May 2018 (ref. no 2018/173-31).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

All the listed authors meet the ICMJE criteria for authorship.

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