

Education in the Prevention of Social Exclusion
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Abstract: Social exclusion is a frequently used concept in different youth programs in the European Union. Schools have participated in projects for the prevention of social exclusion. However, the definition of social exclusion is still unclear and it could be used also as a stigmatising label. In this article, the nature of social exclusion as a social phenomena and the preventive, non-stigmatising potential of education will be discussed.

Key Words: social exclusion, prevention, special education

Introduction

Concern over the welfare of children and young people is frequently voiced both in expert forums and the media. Various programmes to foster their welfare are also being implemented by different sectors of the government in Finland. In these contexts, the concept of social exclusion is often used¹. The process of social exclusion should be seen as linked to the operating environment in which the individual exists or from which s/he is excluded. The risk of social exclusion exists for individuals whose life situation includes serious risk factors for the accumulation of disadvantage, whereas socially excluded individuals are the ones for which the risks have become a reality. In discussing, for instance, dropping out from education in the framework of exclusion one should specify that the concept dealt with is educational exclusion, not social exclusion per se, which is accompanied by an accumulation of many other elements of disadvantage (such as poverty, health problems, loneliness, drug problems) (Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001). Correspondingly, unemployment can be defined as exclusion from the labour market, which in itself is not a sufficient condition for social exclusion.

The prevention of the process of educational exclusion contains several levels. Certain measures are targeted for entire age groups and thus non-stigmatising. This article deals with these several levels and conceptually links the prevention of educational exclusion to the wider debate on social exclusion.

Exclusion from the Societal Context

According to Tuula Helne, "When speaking of [social] exclusion we always speak of society" (Helne, 2002). This is a simple but crucial observation: in social exclusion talk we² very often speak of social exclusion as a characteristic defining the individual, without paying more attention to the crucial role of the operating context in the definition. Community and its norms have a crucial role in producing social exclusion: without community and society there is no possibility of social exclusion. By definition, social exclusion is linked to interpersonal relationships, societal actor positions and the values and norms defined by those representing the dominant culture in society³.

Thus, as a concept, social exclusion is much more difficult than could be expected when looking at the word alone (see Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001). As it is, social exclusion – and the prevention (or even eradication) of exclusion – is a catchword employed particularly in projects targeted to the young, without a more precise definition of the precise nature of the concept itself and the causal relationships eventually linked to it. In everyday speech certain activities and expression belonging to youth culture – and consequently regarded as marginal and deviant by adults and proponents of middle-class lifestyle – are easily seen as characteristics linked to social exclusion on too flimsy grounds: for instance, tattoos and piercings, heavy black metal music and recreational drug use are matters of (life) style and cannot serve today as a basis for defining the risk of social exclusion. Stylistic trends may be outside the mainstream (compared with the arts and the development of

different styles) and challenge the more established concepts on values, norms or aesthetics, but they do not necessarily have any links with social exclusion in the short or the longer term. As is suggested by Tuula Helne, the marginal actor position, being at the edge, does not yet signify being outside (or in the excluded position); instead, "if someone is at the edge, they are inside, at the periphery of the centre" (Helne, 2002, 174). Deviation from the mainstream, or marginality, should actually be distinguished from the concept of social exclusion⁴, which is a process and leads to a societal actor position that is unsatisfactory from the viewpoints of both the individual and society (Jahnukainen, 2001e; Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001; Helne, 2002).

Educational System and the Process of Exclusion

Participation in, or exclusion (voluntary or involuntary) from, education is an exceptionally strong societal signal, especially in the Finnish culture: a high value is set on acquiring as high a level of education as possible— even as an end in itself⁵ – and, on the other hand, dropping out of a course of study or being pushed to less appreciated fields of education are taken as signs of failure (see, e.g., Markku Vanntaja's 2002 analyses of the "failures" of high achievers). It is the purpose of our educational system to provide, on the basis of equal opportunity, an education that is of as high a level as possible to as many citizens as possible. The youngest generation in particular has also been able to utilise this opportunity to an excellent degree⁶.

At the risk of overstating the case one can also say that, applied in their current target scope, the principles of educating the entire age group and providing them with lifelong learning, while admirable, may accelerate the birth of an educational lower class of individuals who have, for instance, severe learning difficulties or a culturally and socially deprived background. Moreover, the adult population with deficient basic education (as regards foreign languages, for instance) may be pushed to a secondary position in the labour market due to the lack of formal educational qualification. If participation in education was less frequent or less typical, being uneducated would not in itself become a stigmatising factor to the present degree.

On the other hand it is clear that, at least in the comprehensive school, an attempt is made to provide everyone with the opportunity to succeed: evaluation is no longer carried out⁷ in the tight format of normal distribution (based on the so-called bell curve), but every child has the opportunity of progress as compared to his or her previous level and as compared to the age group. Teaching suited to the "good ones" – or to the average at least – has been abandoned in favour of taking account of the learning capabilities of each individual pupil, thanks to individual study plans and, in special education, the Personal Plan Covering the Organisation of Education (commonly known by its Finnish acronym HOJKS).

Despite the procedures described above, some of our schoolchildren still do poorly in the comprehensive school (Jakku-Sihvonen & Kuusela, 2002). Actually, gaps in basic knowledge and skills may be among the primary reasons⁸ for dropping out of further education or not entering post-comprehensive education. The crucial division into educational achievers and educational losers happens at the transition stage between basic and secondary education, even though the roots of the choices actualised at this stage can be tracked further back, to success during the first years of comprehensive school and also to the pupils' family background (Kuusinen, 1986; Kuusela, 2002). The children of educated parents do better in school than those of uneducated parents, which continues to be seen in the students' skills levels and their confidence in their own abilities in secondary education (Hautamäki et al., 2002).

Thus, stressing the importance of education is a double-edged sword: when success in school is linked to family background, it strengthens the cultural capital of the pupils who are capable of benefiting from education. For a part of the age group, education forms one (more) link in the process of social exclusion. However, it is to be noted that even though a statistical connection exists

between such factors as education and employment prospects, there are individual exceptions from the statistical norm both in the positive and the negative direction (e.g., Jahnukainen, 1997, 2004; Kivirauma & Jahnukainen, 2001). Whether dropping out from school leads into deeper social exclusion depends on the demands and support provided by the individual's (close) community and on the compensating factors in the individual's life. Thus, what we are dealing with is the goodness or poorness of fit between the individual's potential for action and the action expected by the community and the support available (for more detail, see Thomas & Chess, 1980).

It is also obvious that school alone cannot influence all factors that affect the process of exclusion. Nevertheless, school is without doubt in a key position for offering activity that can provide compensatory experiences to an individual who has landed on an unfavourable track. In preventing the exclusion process, school has the crucial task of preventing educational dropping out by ensuring that everyone receives instruction suitable to their level, and of ensuring the acquisition of essential basic skills and knowledge in particular. These also form the foundation for the students' subsequent ability to utilise the channels for further education offered by society (and considered as the default option, at least latently).

Potential of School to Prevent Exclusion

With the economic depression of the early 1990s, as the social exclusion of the young began to receive particular attention, the typical means of prevention that emerged were various activity projects targeted to young people. To begin with, these projects were organised outside the school, then gradually linked with the educational world, and the target group consisted of what were called "young people at risk of social exclusion." The exact definition of the "risk of social exclusion" at any given instance has remained very vague in practice: what is certain, however, is that the life situation of some participants has been burdened by a great number of risk factors for a considerable time, while others have had the good or bad luck of being involved in the project (and being labelled as being "at risk") with no more than slight grounds. From the viewpoint of prevention, this mode of operation is located in the middle ground between what is called secondary and tertiary prevention: the members of the target group are affected by some risk factor at least, on the basis of which so-called remedial activity is considered necessary (secondary) and, in addition, the difficulties of some are of such a degree or number that a particular mode of operation is applied to reach a state where the individual could not harm him/herself or others any more than is already the case (tertiary).

In fact, prevention is always a relative concept and requires a definition of the thing to be prevented. Speaking of the prevention of exclusion, development processes need to be looked at in longer perspective than simply within the comprehensive school. As was stated above, during the most lively period of youth projects the operating modes in relation to exclusion were located in the framework of remedial action and even action to minimise the damage. In the context of traditional school teaching this task has been handled by special education, even though this has only rarely been defined as prevention (see, however, Ruoho, 1992; Kauffman, 1999). In addition to these operating models, targeted at individuals already at risk – and perhaps, in part, instead of them – special weight should be laid on actual, primary prevention, i.e., on measures affecting the entire age group. From the point of view of education, primary prevention of exclusion consists particularly of concentrating on good basic instruction: teachers should make sure that every pupil in the teaching group acquires the basic knowledge and skills that form the basis of further study. Thus, in the prevention of exclusion the school should aim to work in the primary field that is its natural domain: to ensure that the task of educating the entire age group is accomplished for each individual. The following table lists educational measures to prevent exclusion at different stages of education and different levels of prevention.

Thus, the primary-level services concern the entire age group, while the secondary and, where

needed, tertiary services involve a significantly smaller group. In fact, prevention is often described as a funnel where the primary services are located on the rim and the tertiary services at the narrow tip of the funnel (e.g., Nuorten huumeiden käytön ehkäisymikunnan mietintö, 2000).

At the primary level exclusion is prevented by arranging the most optimal conditions for growth for each child, and by investing in good early education and basic education. Afternoon activities arranged at school can also be included in this category (see Siitari, 2000). Primary-level activity by individual teachers includes the positions as elected municipal officials held by many professional educators, through which it is possible to promote operating models targeted to improving the situation of entire age groups by influencing municipal family, social and educational policy.

At the secondary level, special support is arranged for the children and young people who exhibit difficulties related to learning, development and/or behaviour. The measures aim at circumventing or eliminating difficulties detected at an early stage so that later stages of development are not jeopardised. The secondary stage consists of various short-term interventions such as part-time special education, improved study counselling and transition planning (see Jahnukainen, 2001b and 2001c). Especially at the transition between comprehensive school and secondary education, anticipating the transition of individuals at risk has been found effective (e.g., Benz et al., 1997).

At the tertiary level, the activity is targeted to individuals whose development is clearly endangered. Longer-term, holistic rehabilitation, eventually in co-operation with other authorities, aims at reaching the development targets of the age group by using individual means. Several operating models employed at this level require instruction in small groups or even individually, at least at the beginning or for part of the time; this is in the interests of both the child or young person and their immediate vicinity. Nevertheless, the permanent goal is to find an operating model that best avoids any stigmatisation and thus helps to prevent isolation or exclusion from the rest of the age group.

From Theory to Practice

As was stated above, a lot is talked about social exclusion and young people threatened by social exclusion. Since, however, social exclusion is difficult to define on the individual level, it would make more sense to approach the prevention of social exclusion only as a general principle, but especially when talking about children and young people, we should focus on the strengths and development needs in the individual life situation. Thus, I do not consider it appropriate to set up particular instruction groups for young people “threatened by social exclusion”; instead, I would welcome discourse that prevents social exclusion also in practical teaching in the general primary-level activity of the school. Creating a learning climate in which everyone has the opportunity of studying individually, yet striving to attain the general basic goals, without unnecessary competition or comparison, is one of the most important starting-points of primary-level prevention. Even if learning and adaptation problems are undeniably also linked to the process of social exclusion, schools must primarily target rehabilitative action to whatever problem area is topical, whether this is dyslexia or unauthorised absences. If the teacher takes the trouble to learn to know the pupils in his/her class or group as early as possible, s/he can better identify eventual deviations in learning and behaviour, enabling a rapid intervention and preventing the accumulation of problems. In my opinion, the true prevention of social exclusion consists in the development of the basic task of education, that is, the provision of education for the entire age group, into an entity which is as functional as possible at the level of individual schools and of the municipality. This work has been badly neglected, with projects funded by special arrangements overtaking the “exclusion market.” Markku Jahnukainen holds an Ed.D. and academic docentship in special education (University of Helsinki) and has worked as a special teacher at a comprehensive school, as a researcher and lecturer at different universities, and as a team leader of vocational special teacher and career counsellor programs at Häme Polytechnic. Currently he holds an Academy research fellow post (Academy of

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(Footnotes)

1 The Finnish word used to translate the concept social exclusion does not contain the dimension 'social', which is why it can, and often is, linked to any and all kinds of exclusion. In the most typical case it is used without defining the particular nature of exclusion.

2 I include myself in the discussion here, for in my job I deal almost daily with this area, and according to my observation I must all too frequently remind myself and my discussion partners of the complex nature of the definition of social exclusion. It is easy to talk about "the socially excluded young people in our school..." or "operating models targeted to young people at risk of social exclusion..." etc. This means that social exclusion is already being constructed in speech, often with too simplistic grounds.

3 At a minimum I should say that social exclusion needs three actors. This makes it possible for two actors to form a core on a majority principle, leaving the third one outside the core, in the margin.

4 It is, however, obvious that the phenomena behind the concepts also have a shared interface; when, for instance, marginality as an individual choice involves the most essential areas of life or covers a sufficient number of less essential social activities, we are coming closer to the definition of social exclusion (for more detail, see Jahnukainen, 2001e, Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001, 138 – 144).

5 Also among young people (see Nuorisobarometri, 1999). This presents an interesting paradox, for it has nevertheless been noted that school is often experienced as a highly unattractive environment (see Kauppila, 1995; Jahnukainen, 1998; 2001a and 2001d): one is thus forced to go through education, even if with gritted teeth.

6 In 2000, the proportion of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 that participated in post-comprehensive education was higher in Finland than in the other EU Member States (Järvinen, 2001).

7 At least this should not be the case, see Opetushallitus (1999) *Perusopetuksen päättöarvioinnin kriteerit*. The criteria for the grade Good (8) in shared subjects.

8 On the secondary level – or as the "explanations" noted on the student level – the causes may naturally consist of "frequent absences", "behavioural" and "motivational problems", when, in fact, the student may not be capable of following challenging instruction even when the field is to his or her liking, though on the other hand, teachers may also not be capable of recognising gaps in basic skills.

9 For more detail on the levels of prevention, see, e.g., *Nuorten huumeiden käytönehkäisytoimikunnan mietintö* (2000), and in the context of learning difficulties, Ruoho (1992).