Outreach youth work and employability in the ethos of vulnerability

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Abstract

There is general agreement overall about the desirability and importance of youth support systems as being crucial for young people 'at risk' to help them cultivate their subjectivities about employability. In this article, we take a closer look at these support systems and especially at outreach youth work in Finland. We focus on the construction of knowledge and subjectivities of young people related to it. We argue that among the good intentions in cultivating young people's subjectivities, outreach youth work tends to operate as a practice for enhancing the construction of psycho-emotional vulnerabilities and employability of young people while translating wider societal questions of austerity, poverty and inequality into questions of individualised deficiencies.

Introduction

In Finland, young people 'at risk' are at the centre of youth policies and their implementation. In developing Finnish youth policy, following the pathways paved by the EU, various initiatives designed to guide and support young people towards employability have been installed to mitigate the consequences of precarious work conditions (Council of European Union, 2013; COM, 2012, 2016; Brunila et al., 2017, Brunila, 2012). In this article,

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'at risk' means a wide group of young people from various backgrounds and life circumstances who are typically considered to have problems with employment, further education, the transition from education to work and societal engagement.

Thus, 'at risk' is used in general as a label referring to young people deviating in one way or another; a normative way of being, acting and living. Often represented as statistical categorisations, such as referring to young people 'at risk' as Not in Employment, Education or Training, 'at risk' forms a tool for youth support systems such as outreach youth work (OYW) to find and detect young people seen as in need of intervention (Mertanen, 2020; Brunila et al., 2020; Brown, 2014). Consequently, young people considered 'at risk' are seen as a threat to economic growth and future success of society, and must therefore be directed towards education, employment or another economically recognisable forms of activity (Kiilakoski, 2014).

To mitigate the consequences of young people 'at risk' to wider society, a range of investments have been made to develop youth support systems based on political initiatives from a range of national, transnational, local, educational and non-governmental bodies (Brunila et al., 2017, 2020). The outspoken aim of these support systems is to help young people to become more employable and involved in further education and work (European Commission, 2017; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). These investments include financial resources from the European Social Fund and from national ministries, governmental policies and private, public and third-sector bodies to develop and maintain youth support systems such as OYW, one-stop guidance centres and workshops (Mertanen, 2020; Määttä, 2018).

In this article, our focus is on one of the previously mentioned support systems – OYW. OYW, often also referred to as 'street youth work', is a specialised form of youth work aimed at helping those young people that 'traditional' forms of assistance have failed to serve. In practice, this means physically 'reaching out' to young people in shopping centres, streets and young people's homes (Laukkanen, 2014). We examine how young people are shaped in the practices of OYW in the context of neoliberal Nordic welfare states. We pay particular attention to the construction of knowledge and subjectivities of young people in OYW and, in particular, to ways in which OYW practices relate to the ideals of an employable citizen.

OYW in the neoliberal welfare state

In Finland, as in other European countries, the neoliberal ethos has been powerful in shaping policies and practices that are applied to young people (Brunila et al., 2019). By neoliberal ethos, we refer to a political rationality and desire to transform all aspects of life into the logic of 'free' markets and profit making (Kelly & Pike 2017; Ball and Youdell, 2009; Brown, 2015). In the neoliberal ethos, social problems such as youth unemployment and young people's social exclusion become problems of an individual's competitiveness and abilities (Brunila et al., 2019). One of the outcomes of the neoliberal ethos has been a vast amount of policy guidance and its individually-oriented implementations, which we have considered to be youth support systems (e.g. Brunila et al., 2019, 2020) targeted at young people providing psycho-emotional support and aiming to alter the behaviour of individual young people in their attitudes to employability. In the public debate in Finland, these aims and support targeted at young people tend to be considered with good intentions but rarely are they considered more critically.

In the Finnish context, OYW is regulated mainly by the Youth Act of Finland (2016). According to the Youth Act of Finland, the purpose of OYW is to reach out to young people 'at risk' and help them gain access to services, to participate more actively in societal matters (see also Pohl et al., 2020 and their suggestion that youth work has been replaced with an assertive, ends-focused 'activation' agenda based on extrinsic rather intrinsic motivations of young people) and to offer other kinds of individual support (Youth Act of Finland, 2016). This 'reaching out' through OYW includes contacting young people under 29 years of age, helping young people to reach services that will help their growth, independence, participation in society and strengthening their life management skills alongside further access to education and labour markets (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017; Youth Act of Finland, 2016). Responsibility for arranging OYW lies with municipalities but in practice OYW is outsourced to non-government organisations (NGOs) although it is publicly funded (Larja et al., 2016).

The official aims of OYW relate to providing companionship for young people, offering young people the opportunity to have safe and confidential contact and in building trust with adults and motivating them to cooperate with authorities (Juvonen, 2014; Vilen, 2018). The activities in OYW include several types of emotional work, rehabilitative work and forms of training and psychiatric/psychological or other behavioural assessment (Vilen, 2018). These activities also help young people to access social benefits, minimum wages or unemployment benefits (Regional State Administrative Agency of Finland, 2017; see also globally Pitts et al., 2002; Yum, 2006).

The OYW brings multiple actors together, such as State Ministries, NGOs, private sector actors and a wide range of actors from the state's social, health and education sectors. Hence, OYW can be analysed from the viewpoint of both new governance and governmentality. As a form of new governance, OYW creates a network of a range of interests between different stakeholders: young people, youth workers and other professionals, public organisations, third-sector actors, private companies, officials and the state (Ball, 2008; Foucault, 2008; Mertanen et al., 2020a). In other words, in a Finnish policy context, the aim of OYW is to solve the problems of welfare politics by arranging itself according to market logics (Brunila et al., 2019).

As a form of governmentality, OYW enables young people's conduct to be managed. Thus, it represents a form of governmentality, or conduct of conduct which means:

> any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes. (Dean, 2010: 18; see also Foucault, 1991, 1980)

In practice, governmentality, or conduct of conduct, in OYW means both shaping and enabling the conditions of possibility for young people 'at risk'. 'And it does so, in part, through the introduction/imposition of discourses such as employability through which young people will take themselves up as the newly appropriate and appropriated subjects of the new social order' (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 248).

Towards individualised interventions in the ethos of vulnerability

In the Nordic welfare state context, youth support systems such as youth training and education, counselling and guidance, preparatory programmes, short-term youth projects and other behavioural interventions have not always been able to suit the interests and meet the demands of young people at the margins, despite the government's financial support, good intentions and concern (e.g. Brunila et al., 2017; Mertanen, 2020; Brown, 2017; Lundahl, 2011; Bottrell 2009). This phenomenon is not restricted to Nordic welfare states but is also visible in other countries. For example, in Australian youth policy, which relates well with the Finnish situation, Peter Kelly has described how young people have been a systematic target of various authorities who develop individuals into a particular form of personhood and towards them being responsible for conducting themselves in a self-responsible way (Kelly, 2006). Julie McLeod has also shown how the subjectivities of young people are guided towards self-monitoring, being self-responsible and self-improving. She has said that the process of self-formation, action and struggle are constructed with discourses of citizenship and vulnerability, and through which the neoliberal ethos works as an overarching rationality (McLeod, 2012).

According to the examples mentioned previously, one persistent label describing young people in support systems is of being psycho-emotionally vulnerable (Brunila et al., 2019; Brown and Patrick, 2012). According to Kate Brown (2014, 2012), the concept of vulnerability has served as a mechanism to evaluate the 'deservingness' of young people in the welfare services of the UK. In practice, this means that young people considered to be 'deviant' or 'defiant' are directed to support systems such as OYW (Brown, 2014; Mertanen et al., 2020b). Brown (2017) also reminds us that the concept of vulnerability is ambiguous and multi-faceted in its use: sometimes the concept of vulnerability can support directing aid and help to some young people in their challenging life circumstances. To 'cure' the perceived vulnerability of young people, a range of techniques and interventions derived from psychological and therapeutic approaches and other behavioural management interventions are a common feature in youth support systems including formal and informal education (Brunila, 2013; Ecclestone et al., 2005; Rose, 1998).

OYW is not purely supportive work but entails also reaching out for young people in the wide range of forms of coordination and guidance. The relation between OYW and education is such that OYW aims to coordinate young people to education rather than simply educating youth, as it were, by themselves. The Handbook of OYW delineates the mission of OYW in the following way:

> Outreach youth work is special youth work in which the aim is to reach young people under 29 years of age who are outside of education or working life or require support to reach the services they need. Outreach youth work offers young people early support if they want it. Outreach youth work strengthens young people's abilities to move forward in life. Outreach youth work is voluntary for the young people (Vilen, 2018: 4).

One of the goals of outreach youthwork is enhancing and promoting young people's employability (Mertanen, 2020; Vilen, 2018). By employability, we refer to the ability to move in and within labour markets, often described as a set of individual properties and skills that enable this movement (Belt and Richardson, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Garsten and Jacobson, 2004). What is noteworthy in the context of OYW is that employability refers

not only to academic or vocational skills but also to more vague attributes, such as likability, good attitude, emotional and thinking skills (Mertanen and Brunila, 2018).

Data and analysis

This research was conducted as part of a research project (name anonymised) funded by the Academy of Finland and led by Brunila, through which Màkelà and Mertanen undertook their PhD research. In the project, we have asked how cross-sectoral and educational policies and practices in the ethos of vulnerability shape the interests and agency of young people from various backgrounds (e.g. Brunila et al., 2016, 2017, 2019). For this article, we have analysed data produced on OYW by Màkelà, consisting of ethnographic field observations and interviews with young people (18–29 years old). Màkelà interviewed 20 people, including young people ($N = 10$) and youth workers ($N = 10$).

Màkelà conducted ethnographic observations and interviews between 2016 and 2017 in a medium-sized city called Cloudrock in Finland. Màkelà observed youth workers from the OYW office in the homes of young people and guidance sessions with youth workers, social workers, psychiatric nurses and Public Employment Service officers. During the 10-month period, Màkelà spent two days a week undertaking OYW and becoming immersed in everyday life, work, practices and discussions.

In the article, we suggest that OYW is a governing practice taking place through discursive practices (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014; Brunila et al., 2016) that enable particular types of knowledge and subjectivities to be developed for and by young people. We understand discursive practice as a circulation of 'truths' that legitimise OYW in youth policies and their implementations, and which both youth workers and other professionals among young people can use in their self-conduct aiming towards building young people's employability. Hence, we analysed the discourse of employability in the practices of the OYW. We believe this kind of analysis makes it possible to see different power relationships in OYW practices and to analyse the effects of such power relations in young people's subjectivities.

Our position, that is, where we stand in relation to OYW, is seeing ourselves constructing and producing data in a way in which we are already positioned and involved in the processes and discursive practices of OYW. We can thus be seen as participating researcher-subjects involved in the messy everyday-practices of the OYW field. There are no places outside of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980) which circulate within and through a range of institutional arrangements such as OYW. As academic researchers, we are, by definition, part of an asymmetrical and hierarchical position of power towards both workers and young people involved in OYW. This arrangement produces and reproduces flows of power/knowledge in the ethnographic field of study, as well as having capability to question, criticise and deconstruct such relations. In the Foucauldian sense, we believe our research does both of these things simultaneously (Foucault, 1978).

We started our analysis by collecting and jointly analysing ethnographic field notes, transcribing interviews according to how notions of employability occurred in the interviews and everyday practices in the OYW. From the interviews and field diary, we selected quotes that expressed most clearly the practices of OYW in connection to employability. Through discursive analysis, we analysed how the cultivation of employability of young people was deployed and how this cultivation worked within the ethos of vulnerability.

'A Will to Know' in the ethos of vulnerability in OYW

Youth workers in our data stressed the importance of long-term relationships with young people to ensure 'closer' and 'more intimate' connections to get to know young people better. We call this approach the 'will to know', meaning a range of proliferating practices that render the subject knowable (enough) for professional helpers to do their work of guiding, helping, coordinating and empowering young people. Knowledge of young people is also essential for the process of cultivation of employability within the ethos of vulnerability. In our data, these processes include sometimes long and intimate client relationships. Cultivation of employability may also be understood as searching for and excavating knowledge and reasons from within the subject, or otherwise pursuing the 'positivity imperative', a concept we shall consider at the end of this section. Below is a typical example from the data in which the process is described in more detail by a youth worker:

> *Over time, the relationship with the customer becomes very close, intimate (...) workers always have to start from the beginning with young people who can become rather numb while trying to explain their stories over and over again. They can feel that they don't get them. It's understandable that you don't open up immediately to a stranger (...) you can't help them either if you don't know them well. Our young people want us to accompany them because we can speak for them. (Youth worker interview)*

Youth workers, such as the one above, addressed the importance of longer relationships with the 'customer' to ensure 'closer' and 'more intimate' relationships. These relationships were understood as having been established between a youth worker professional and their customer. Language concerning the word 'customer' was fairly typical and derives from the private sector. The importance of 'longer relationship' draws on the significance of the 'closeness and intimacy' between a professional and their 'customer'. The importance of long, close and intimate relationships with young people was evident in the conversations in the office of OYW. This was because young people were seen by the youth worker as not being able to 'open up immediately to a stranger' such as other youth, employment and social workers who all strive to coordinate and guide young people to work training, rehabilitative work, workshops or part-time work periods, all of which belong typically to the process of cultivating young people's employability. Nevertheless, we do not claim that youth and social workers define themselves by practices aimed solely at employability.

According to the data, young people were sometimes described as not willing or unable to accept help or to reveal their life stories to professionals. Rather than being viewed as indicative of young people's rights or their agency, refusal was understood to be a part of a process of the cultivation of employability. It was taken as read that deep down young people wanted OYW workers to accompany them when visiting other professionals:

> *The question is what that young person is ready for and capable of doing and screams for help, and how they are ready to receive that help. It's challenging to explain all that to them, to make things clear to them. They are in such chaotic situations right now, and most often they are not ready or willing to accept any help, even though they would want assistance and help. (Youth worker interview)*

> *When starting to work with a young person, it's difficult to map and diagnose what their problem is. It may require a couple of meetings to get to that because they don't necessarily recognise their own*

thoughts and feelings. They need help to search and get motivated to search for that problem from within. Only after that we can start finding a solution to their problem. I usually ask, 'why do you think it's useful for you to come here to talk with me?' And usually, they answer that they don't know. And then we try to dig up that reason for it together. (Youth worker interview)

I keep on shooting questions and to get answers I can dig into...I have to show that more active side in the conversation with them. (Youth worker interview)

On several occasions, professionals seemed to believe they knew better than young people what their state of readiness and their capacity to act was; hence OYW was also built on helping young people to be aware of their problematic situations. From this awareness, they could then accept help and reach towards employability. The extracts above demonstrate what we describe as the 'will to know' as a part of cultivation by the OYW professionals. 'Will to know' works by classifying and rendering the subject 'knowable' through careful mapping, digging, searching, diagnosing, following closely, interviewing and with various measurements alongside assumptions about emotional and psychological 'legacies' from the past.

This type of cultivation is typical in the data and it shows how professionals address problems related to young people's lives. A professional must take care in this mapping because young people are not necessarily considered capable of recognising their feelings and thoughts in the 'right way', in accordance with psy-knowledge (psychology, psychiatry and wide range of psy-therapies, see Rose, 1998) that professionals have access to. Accordingly, the solution to the problems of young people can be found from within and only if this within has been 'dug out', that is, known, properly. In our data, these problems are typically related to young people considered to have too few traits (like positivity, independency and responsibility) of being employable. Youth workers have the task of being experts capable of addressing fundamental questions such as 'who we are' and 'how we should live our life in the right way' (e.g. McLeod and Wright, 2016; Rose, 1989, 1999; Brunila, 2012).

One could say that this type of cultivation is smart because it appears to provide a legitimate basis for those activities in the form of 'interventions', and because they are able to provide certain measurable outcomes (Ecclestone (ed) 2013; Ecclestone et al., 2005). By measurable outcomes, we mean their involvement, among others, ways by which young people can be engaged in training, rehabilitative work or workshops and how this results in reductions in the number of young people unemployed. This tends to serve the neoliberal ethos in which societal and structural inequalities turn into individuated, measurable problems (e.g. Miller and Rose, 2008; Bendix & Millei, 2016; Mills, 2015, 2017).

"Social exclusion" are terrible words; I don't use them. I would turn social exclusion into positivity, into positive affirmation that we all need. With empowering I mean that young people could take more responsibility for their own lives and take better care of themselves. That's actually our main mission in OYW when we educate and guide young people. We provide them with social strengthening and wellbeing. (Youth worker interview)

In the quote above, youth professionals do not want to use the words 'social exclusion' but turn those words into positivity, 'positive affirmation that we all need'. Self-responsibility is addressed here when professionals empower young people to 'take better care of themselves'

and in discussions, it was considered to be one of the main missions in OYW. This type of social strengthening could be interpreted as an invitation to social and political participatory action (see also Pohl et al., 2020 where Pohl wants to draw attention to the problematic shift away from engagement with structural causes). However, social strengthening could be interpreted as another way of dismissing structural issues (related to social exclusion) by turning them into positive, individually-oriented affirmations. In addition, when Mäkelä discussed matters concerning young people with OYW workers, they typically addressed the importance of positive affirmation, guidance and wellbeing of young people as ways to become more employable. Here is one example of a typical positivity imperative in youth activities:

> We have built a new project for getting youngsters into work, training, study, workshops or reha-bilitative work and this project works through positivity by which we mean occasional opportunities for picnics, camps and journeys to youth events or to an amusement park. In the positive atmo-sphere we offer our helping hand for those floating young people. (OYW worker, Extract from a field diary)

The picnics, camps and amusement parks are considered as a part of supportive atmosphere for young people. The two extracts above relating to turning 'exclusion into positivity' are examples of what has been called 'the positivity imperative' in youth programmes (Ehrenreich, 2010; Silbereisen and Lerner, 2007; Sukarieh and Tannonck, 2011, see also next section). The positivity imperative is a part of a wider turn of positive psychology, strength-based education, character building and positive pedagogies for empathy, confi-dence, self-esteem, resilience and a positive learning identity as key features of various educational and training settings (e.g. Ahmed, 2010; Damon, 2004; Petersen and Millei, 2016; Priestley and Biesta, 2013; Brunila, 2012).

Hence, this cultivation of subjectivities of young people framed in terms of a positivity imperative is also a part of the neoliberal ethos: aiming to transform the failures of its unequal and unjust political machinery into personal failures of individuals (Griffin, 1993; Rose, 1998, 1999). Based on our findings, it seems difficult to acknowledge important societal and structural aspects. It seems much easier to focus on individuals and the imper-ative to cultivate self-responsibility and employability in a way that is considered positive. It is important to note that the positivity imperative does not ignore the agency of young people but shapes it in a certain way. By this, we mean how these circumstances both define and make possible the agency of young people in a certain way. Next, we turn to the rehabilitative work of young people which we consider to be an important element of the dynamics of working of OYW. In addition, rehabilitative work is an essential element in cultivating employability of young people.

Learning to labour – Rehabilitative work in cultivating employability of young people

Rehabilitative work focused on young people in Finland forms a substantial economic activity. In 2013, there were 24,200 young people involved in rehabilitative work and 41,700 in 2016. People under the age of 25 years totalled 5200 and 7500 in 2013 and 2016 respectively (Statistical Report of Rehabilitative Work in Finland, 2017). It is also common

for OYW to be connected to various types of 'rehabilitative work' systems that are considered to strengthen young people's subjectivity towards employability.

> *A young person must do whatever work is available, even if that work doesn't match with their education or training. They do it for their survival. The role of society is not to give social benefits to those who are picky and healthy. Here we have a chance to give them emotional motivation for work since they often have such a low self-confidence. (Extract from the conversation with an outreach youth worker; ethnographic diary written in the office of OYW)*

The quote above was taken from the conversation where an outreach youth worker explained their view about rehabilitative work concerning young people. This extract demonstrates how rehabilitative work works towards cultivating the employability of young people and it could be interpreted as functioning through their capacity to survive economically. In our data, this tends to mean that they are willing to take whatever work is available even if that work does not match with the young person's interests, education or training. Young people must perform if they are able to do so and so become willing to accept whatever work is available for their economic survival.

The extract above also reminds us of the shift from a Nordic welfare society to a workfare society (Anttila et al., 2016) in which 'the role of society is not to give social benefits to those who are picky and healthy'. Another feature of this shift is the obligation to 'do whatever work is available'. The cultivation of employability is a process through which young people are considered to lack the confidence for work and where the remedy is 'emotional motivation' and 'knowing them better', as discussed in the previous section. It is possible to interpret this as eschewing the undeniable structural fact of high unemployment of young people due to a lack of jobs and, instead, projecting such awareness upon the frailties, vulnerabilities and personal deficiencies of young people. Resistance also exists in these discursive practices (Bacchi 2000; Bacchi and Bonham, 2014) of OYW when one young person asked Màkelà; 'Is this country becoming a dwelling place only for rich and poor people?' The next extract follows the lines of discursive practice through which the cultivation of employability works. Màkelà asked in one occasion why there was so much emphasis on rehabilitative work being available to young people:

> *Rehabilitative work offers our youngsters a positive way to have work experience and they get official unemployment money plus an additional nine Euros per day. And then they are not in the "unemployed" statistics anymore and that work can then be marked up in their CV which in turn helps them forward in the labour market. (Quote from the interview with OYW worker, in the office of OYW)*

In this quote, the previously handled positivity imperative meets all the evaluated positive effects of rehabilitative work, as 'a positive way to have work experience', to 'get official unemployment money plus an additional nine euros per day' and not being 'in the "unemployed statistics anymore"'. This kind of positivity could be understood as a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). The 'rehabilitative work' can mean assembling cardboard boxes and electric barbeques on a conveyer belt. The young people are expected to take part in this work while they are paid for their labour with unemployment or social benefits. Private companies, in which much of the rehabilitative work is done, and which are involved with OYW, are then able to sell the products from such work for profit. If a young person

refuses this kind of work they face sanctions such as the loss or reduction of their unemployment benefits.

Overall, the cultivation we analysed worked by enabling young people to feel psycho-emotionally capable by the cultivation work provided by the OYW so that they were able to move on to rehabilitative activities that adjusted subjectivities to monotonous and underpaid labour by enhancing positivity. On several occasions, young people were expected to be grateful because not being grateful could mean losing social benefits.

The young people in our data experienced various difficult and challenging life situations such as poverty and social exclusion, inequality, marginalisation and difficulties in securing voice and being heard. We consider such problems to be structural and societal in ways that affect and shape young people's options throughout their life course. In the discursive practices of OYW, structural problems turned into problems solved by individuals and self-responsibility and by cultivating psycho-emotional vulnerabilities, positivity and self-responsibility. It was therefore no surprise that this cultivation was present in the discussions with young people. Mäkelä asked young people how much OYW has helped them:

> I have only myself to blame for my failures, nobody else. I will soon be able to live on my own and I feel quite good about it. In OYW they have helped me to achieve this. (...) When I feel better, I get motivated and then I get over all the bad stuff and then I can do everything. (Youth interview)

> I can phone XX (youth worker) and ask 'What should I eat today?'. If there's any kind of question, I phone them. That's why I like this place so much; they are always nice and smiling. They are interested in your wellbeing for real. It's not just that professional, "how-are-you" fake smile on their face. They really care. (Youth interview)

Positivity and gratitude were typical expressions from young people, as in the extracts above. Similarly, in the extract we find a tendency towards being self-responsible which in support systems forms an alliance with positivity (e.g. Brunila et al., 2016, 2017; see also Ahmed, 2010). We do not want to diminish the value and meaning of the support for individuals, nor deny that some young people experience various forms of distress and anxiety. We are also aware that when individuals are targeted by the activities act and behave as expected, yet otherwise remain unable to enter formal education or labour markets, the problem can easily be reflected back on them.

In general, youth workers and young people try to handle these situations within the discursive practices available. In OYW, young people are repeatedly expected to learn to position themselves as psycho-emotionally vulnerable. Taking up this subjectivity involves recognising and then casting away psychic and emotional chains and vulnerabilities and becoming self-responsible and employable. In this way, these support systems offer a compelling form of recognition for young people and their employability.

Considering Stephen Ball's claim that we do not just speak a discourse, it speaks to us (Ball, 2008), the extract above also illuminates how psycho-emotional vulnerability speaks through language and social relations and how one learns to act within the support systems offered, as well as utilise them. Discursively speaking, the ideal subjectivity means accepting OYW support, as well as being willing and ready to shape oneself towards the aims (mentioned earlier in the text) offered by OYW (Foucault, 1991, 1977). This labour of

coming to know oneself can be seen in the following conversation between a young person and an OYW worker in the OYW office:

> *Young person (YP): Anxiety has increased despite my medication.*
> *OYW worker (OW): How is it with your restaurant school?*
> *YP: It didn't motivate me*
> *OW: I see from your records that you have done only six months of study during the past two years*
> *YP: I want to go into logistics (driving the truck)*
> *OW: Well, if the soup stuff doesn't interest you, let's put you into the logistics*
>
> *After the young person leaves, the youth worker explains how this client has mental disorders and is finding it difficult to find suitable work or training to become employed. (Field notes, the office of OYW)*

In the quote above, the young person's difficulties are seen as part of their mental disorders. This is also confirmed by the young adult's own comment 'anxiety has increased despite my medication'. Instead of questioning the impact of societal and structural issues like increased youth unemployment and diminishing resources in youth professional education, training and schooling sectors, the discussion below concentrates on the individual, the psychologised, vulnerable young person and *their* problem of becoming employable.

Through psy-knowledge-based practices, young people have access to a self that becomes something to be worked on, a product of one's own labour (see also Bansel and Keltie, 2016). Through experts' use of psy-knowledge, young people are examined for signs of psycho-emotional vulnerability, deficiencies and abnormal behaviour. Comments like 'Now I can make it' or 'It's up to me now' which appear in our data can be interpreted as part of the current neoliberal malaise: that teaches young people to learn to make one's own choices and so carry one's own responsibilities, to learn to become developmental, employable and trainable.

One interesting notion was the apparent silences related to questioning or challenging this type of cultivation. The extracts from interviews held in the office of OYW below show some examples of the critical comments given by young people that broke those silences:

> *There's a lot of almost slave work offered.*
>
> *If I got so called psychological problems, so what, many of my friends have them also. I have the same rights and obligations as my fellow citizens. Nobody is going to tell me what to do with my life and I don't trust authorities in general.*

The first quote here expresses the resistance against rehabilitative work, training for work, workshops and all the precarious work that is available for young people. The second quote illuminates the critical stance against psychological diagnoses of 'psychological problems'. There was also a strong stance for equality and equal citizenship for having 'the same rights and obligations as my fellow citizens'. And finally, there was an almost anarchist attitude expressed in the comment, 'I don't trust authorities in general'.

Despite the willingness to know young people and the cultivation of employability of young people in OYW, some young people do not master their psycho-emotional vulnerabilities 'in the right way' (see for example, Michael Apple's (2006) critique of 'educating the

right way'). We have previously shown that if a young person starts to challenge the script by displaying the wrong reaction, they tend not to get heard, or even face sanctions (e.g. Brunila, 2012; see also Tuck and Yang, 2011). In other words, speaking otherwise is not necessarily easy or expected. Discursively speaking, if critical utterances such as the ones above were more common in the data, how could this form of cultivation of young people as OYW exist, if one takes seriously Foucault's statement (Foucault, 1978) that in certain discourses, only certain kinds of utterances are included and expressed and other kinds are not. The support systems therefore tend to create a sense of seemingly voluntary action while underneath the reality is that if one refuses to act according to expectations there will be sanctions.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how OYW is filled with good intentions, strives for positivity and aims to empower and enhance the knowledge of young people, cultivating their employability. And while doing that, it is possible to see that in the process of discursive practices of OYW young people's complex and challenging life situations are curiously transformed into individual psycho-emotional vulnerabilities which then call for specific types of expertise and interventions. We argue that psy-knowledge and the ethos of vulnerability work in alliance with employability and the politics of neoliberalism precisely because they link political rhetoric and regulatory programmes to the so-called 'self-managing' capacities of their subjects.

Overall, psy-knowledge, vulnerability, employability and the neoliberal ethos provide a cultural landscape that cultivates a certain type of sense-making about young people and their subjectivities, their problems and reactions to life events. Young people can find opportunities to act otherwise, that is, taking a critical stance against policies and practices that have neoliberal tendencies. These tendencies include becoming able to transform oneself to be more attractive to the labour market and hence more employable. At the same time, young people may feel that, on the one hand, they are more self-responsible, entrepreneurial and competitive but paradoxically, on the other, also vulnerable seeking to identify failure using a psychological vocabulary.

The cultivation offered by support systems relies on a simple idea of youth subjectivity and how this subjectivity can easily be improved with enough support of certain types. This type of work might be seductive for those who consider it to have the potential to narrow gaps between the more and less privileged since it reifies the gap as part of the individual's deficiency to be solved through the application of suitable psy-knowledge and expertise. Moreover, psy-oriented cultivation popularises the idea that there is such a thing as a healthy, stable and coherent personhood that youth workers and other professionals can assess and properly enable.

It is problematic that young people's sometimes complex and challenging life situations tend to be viewed as individual deficiencies and pathologies requiring interventions promoted by psy-knowledge. This is an outcome of the neoliberal malaise which transforms subject-citizens into suitably vulnerable, employable and competitive subjects. The effects of the politics of neoliberalism are felt not only in and through the politico-economic domains of large multinational companies and organisations but also in sectors of society such as healthcare, education, and social security, as well as in intimate human relations (Beck, 2009; Brown, 2015).

It is also worth noting that as a form of neoliberal governance, OYW and other activities targeting young people have proliferated an industry of psy-knowledge as multi-professional teams of educators, experts, trainers and psy-professionals, including psychotherapists, counsellors, psychologists, special pedagogues, trainers, life skill coaches, social workers and project workers. Psy-knowledge is arguably a device for social control, turning the gaze from unequal social structures to the realm of the inner self and so neutralising initiatives for change in response to the seemingly ubiquitous impact of neoliberalism (Parker, 2007).

From the vantage point of neoliberalism, it is not necessarily a failure to produce interventions that do not work. More simply, any 'failure' relates to the quantity of such interventions so that the solution is to increase this quantity. This keeps the focus away from examination of the reasons for the existence of a vast number of support systems. What is thus considered improper, or in some cases even disturbing, is the idea of young people as capable, political or otherwise active subjects entitled to question and challenge these practices. It seems that instead of authentic education, young people are offered performatively driven short-term support, training, low-paid and low-skilled rehabilitation work. What we mean by authentic education is provision for awareness and enhanced understanding of the impact of prevailing social structures and inequalities in ways that allow young people to adopt a more critical stance against the malign effects of neoliberalism.

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