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Chapter

Enabling Meaningfulness with Young NEETs in the Nordic Region

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on diverse possibilities to engage in mobilizing young adults to meaningful activities within an ever larger and more varied group of marginalized youth in the Nordic countries. A pan Nordic study, commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers committee of officials for sustainable rural regional development in 2017–2019, was driven by the need to better understand the situation of these marginalized young adults. This chapter is based on this Nordic project and will present some local and regional processes with serious mismatch problems relating to youth education and validity in the local and regional labour market in the Nordic countries. We ask what characterizes the group of youth and rising number of young adults in the age 18–30 that seems to lose meaningfulness during their education and drop out, and who do not engage in training and have hard time becoming employed. What explanations do other studies on NEETs (not in education, employment, or training) provide? Which initiatives to mobilize young people have worked and in what context in the Nordic countries, so far?

Keywords: early school leaving, Nordic region, NEETs, youth, mobilizing, re-engagement, motivation

1. Introduction

The working title of the project, which this article is product of, is “A rural perspective on spatial disparities of education and employment outcomes” conducted within the Nordic Thematic Group on Sustainable Rural Regional Development. In this group of officials and representatives from individual Nordic countries, we were wondering what could explain rural youths’ situation in the local and regional labour market. Their engagement varied substantially from one region to another. How come there were mismatch problems, the skills needed in the regional labour market were not being met by their competences [1, 2]. There has been substantial national discussion in each of the Nordic countries on why dropouts from school vary so much in between regions. While we do not hold the ultimate evidence as to why, all research in the field points to the idea that early school leaving has significant societal and individual consequences. In each of the Nordic countries, there had been debates previously on why there were rising school dropouts from secondary school and why the regional variation was so significant. We have not come to terms with all the

combination of factors explaining why but many previous studies conclude that dropout rates are a mix of personal and societal factors. However, they are costly for the state and regional authorities, the society as a whole because they can lead to long-term negative consequences for numerous people. Staying a bit longer in school, even just a year longer, even without graduating can mean an income increase in lifetime earnings by 4–10% [3]. Negative implications for individual early school leavers may mean long-term unemployment, in the worst cases risk of poverty and social exclusion. Furthermore, many of the personal costs may not be immediately observable but gradually impoverish and deteriorate the mental health among the persons involved [2–4].

2. Early school leavers and NEETs (not in education, employment, or training), why and who are they?

A longitudinal study conducted in each of the Nordic countries for 15 years (1993–2008) on youth unemployment and inactivity concluded there were significant differences between countries. It focused on cross-country comparison of school-to-work transitions and labour market outcomes in four Nordic countries [5]. Many early school leavers were either in work or enrolled in a study programme when at the age of 21 [5]. This means that early school leavers do not necessarily end up unemployed. Dropouts from compulsory schools do follow different trajectories and these combined with family background and support may be strong predictors of where you end up in the labour market [5]. Demographic development consequences on youth often relate to disruption between school and community. Therefore, the likelihood of leaving school early increases, depending on vulnerabilities in social class, gender, and ethnicity [6–8]. They are intersectional and intertwined into broader social backgrounds like family and community where the school and persons are situated. They do not exclusively explain early dropout but may contribute to understand the social process dynamics that are generated by a mixture of structural conditions and individual decisions [2, 9, 10].

Some of the risks are directly linked to a weak social background. Also, young males seem to be at higher risk of getting disengaged. Furthermore, pupils with immigrant background are more exposed to drop out early [11]. Danish and Finnish studies also found that parents' income levels and educational background seem to affect aspirations and performance among youth in education [12, 13].

Many studies acknowledge that the social and economic status of youth has an impact on the propensity of dropping out from school [6, 7, 14]. However, it is important not to underestimate the spectrum of various social and economic conditions that can affect early school leaving. Employment situation, unstable housing conditions, bad health conditions, and residence stability vs. moving around are important stressors or enablers affecting young people's choices or no choices. Furthermore, it cannot be underestimated to have parents' backup to become educated. If parents have negative attitudes, and children lack supervision, and there is in general little interaction with children and youth in their daily lives, this may harm the schooling experience [11]. Finnish, Danish, and Swedish research point to the fact that there is a social inheritance factor among youth most exposed to social disadvantages. Children of parents in weak labour market positions, with low incomes and basic education, have higher probabilities of dropping out of education [15, 16].

The 18–24-year-old school dropouts, by sex, between 2012 and 2017 were mapped in the Nordic countries based on available statistics disaggregated onto a regional

level. In the map, you see the early school leaving rates and comparing the maps it turns out that the rates have dropped in this five-year period. More youth is staying in schools. However, in Denmark and S-Finland dropout rates among young males have been on the increase. In general, males are more prone to dropping out, even if the gender gap is narrow. Three regions in Norway (Hedmark, Oppland, and Trondelag) show most significant improvement in declining dropout rates. Young women in Sweden showcase increased tendency to drop out from school, seemingly due to various causes triggering mental health challenges (**Figure 1**) [2].

In Iceland, the gender gap is noticeable. Young males have 10 times higher risk of dropping out than females. Some of the explanations rest on grades, lifestyle priorities, and too loose requirements from the schools [17]. While females perform well, males underperform them in academic achievements demotivating their school curriculum ambitions. Many Icelandic schools are flexible in terms of students coming and going, but in effect it affects and causes lack of compulsion. While females' reasons for leaving school early may be caused by forming a family main reason, for males it is finding a good job. Overall, in Iceland, a country where unemployment rate is almost nonexistent, and lack of labour is almost constant, the attractiveness of the labour market influences motivation to stay for a long time in the schooling system. Thus, there is a significant economic incentive, which at first means for many combining work with studies, and eventually may lead to work ruling life, rather than educational choices [18, 19].

Other factors mentioned by various studies being the main trigger for students to leave school are lack of interest and boredom in school, experience of mocking, feeling low, or being broke [20].

In Norway [21], boys and girls are even in performance, so there was no statistical significance in probabilities of early school leaving [22].

There are minor gender differences in early school leaving in Sweden and Finland suggesting other factors at play. More recent longitudinal and qualitative study from Norway addresses the need to shift focus from socio-economic background and gender as a reason onto looking at dropping out as an interaction between the person and the system. Young people who are allowed to tell about the experience in their own words say that there was a long preceding time where this possibility was roaming in their minds, in some cases years before they ended up leaving school. Social interactions between the students and the teachers and other representatives of the structure have to be considered and taken into account as part of understanding why people end up leaving school [21]. From a gender point of view, it is necessary to move beyond the binary gender understanding, framing that the males are losing to the other gender, the female—but look to broader perspectives like impacts of student's social backgrounds on how they are tested, marked, and graded [23]. Swedish students with immigrant background leave school earlier at more than double rate than native Swedes [24]. Even if nonobservable in statistics, there is also tendency among younger and younger primary school pupils to stop attending school and become long-term school avoiders. However, much further research on that is needed. Seemingly segregation and inequality are on the rise in Sweden [25]. A debate on privatization of schools in Sweden and the marketization of premises of education has at times been loaded in Sweden, underpinned by supporting studies [26]. Increased competition with socially segregated schools as an effect is considered to be a negative development for many pupils. Schools compete internally to attract the best students and reject the weakest ones, with the aim of boosting their reputation and thus expanding their pool of customers. Additionally, students from advantaged backgrounds benefit

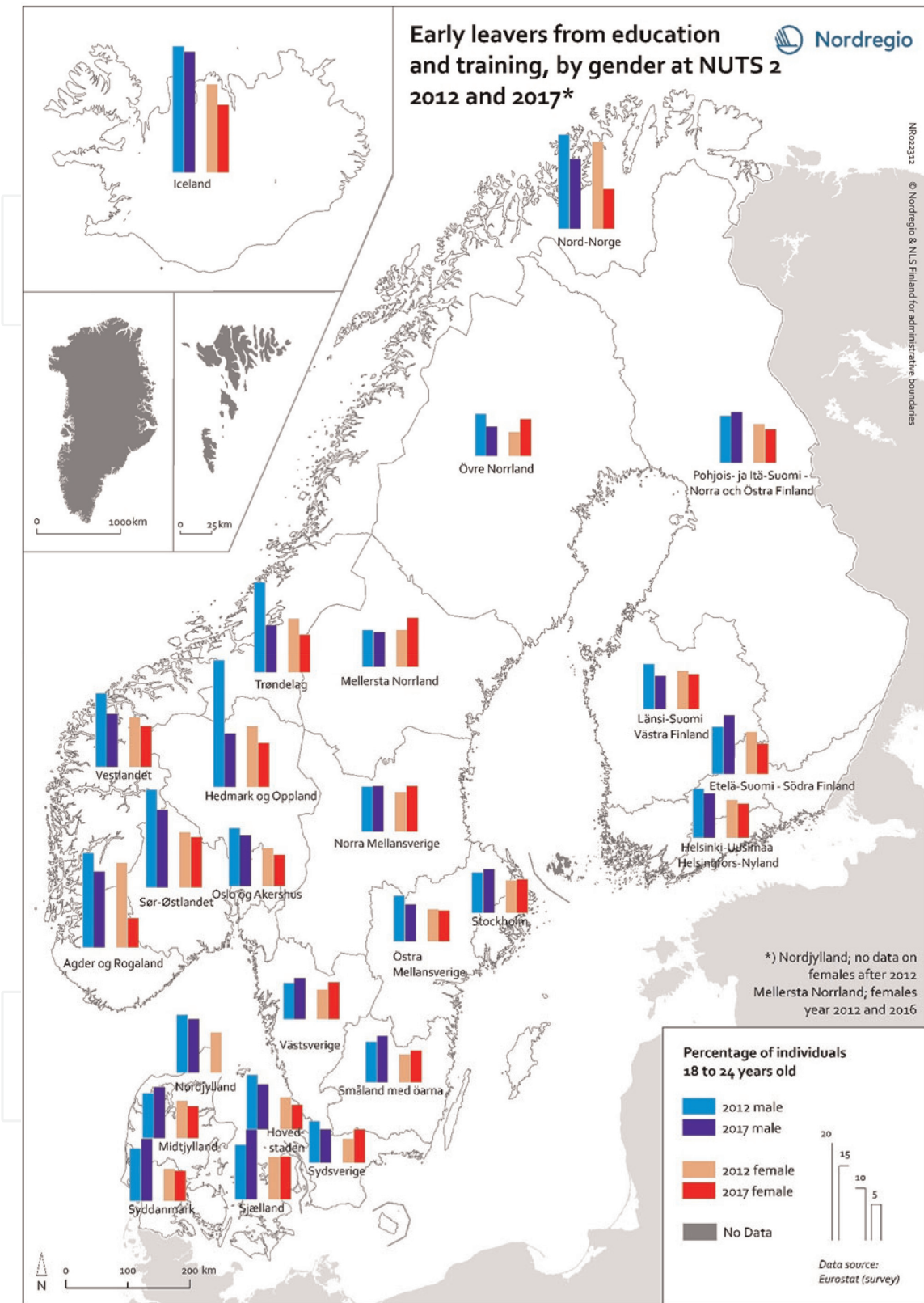


Figure 1. Dropouts from education and training, by sex, during 2012–2017.

from segregation because the best schools are found in their neighborhoods [26]. These priorities spur inequalities and have implications not only within urban areas but also between urban and rural areas. Rural youth experiences reduced educational opportunities because of competition. They find themselves in a dilemma of staying or

moving to big cities to continue their careers. This may challenge education possibilities for some young people. Affording the expenses of commuting besides covering living costs far away from family and home is not available to all pupils [26].

Although early school leaving rates in the Nordic countries are not strikingly high from a European perspective, the issue remains a concern. Not least because formal education is fundamental to accessing the labour market. The link between early school leaving and NEETs is thus clear. In fact, research highlights the higher probability for school leavers to become NEETs [27, 28].

3. Who are the NEETs?

An emerging group of young people who fall out of the established systems is the so-called NEETs, an abbreviation of not in education, employment, or training. The NEET rate means it is the share of youth population not enrolled or involved in education, employment, or training (NEET) [2, 29]. This group has existed for decades and is in danger of social marginalization.

The literature on NEETs is extensive in both defining the term conceptually [30–32] and identifying what are the relevant factors causing the situation of being NEET [33–35]. Although they are different groups, NEETs have in some cases been included in the category of early school leavers [36]. The relationship between these two groups is evident because, usually, leaving school without a qualification may address significant barriers for young people to join the labour market and, thus, they may risk becoming NEET [27]. Because of the continuity of that process, there are similar underlying factors that help to explain why young people become marginalized even in affluent societies.

One key methodological issue encountered when researching the group of young NEETs pertains to the definitions of the concepts of young and NEETs. Being aware of the heterogeneity of a diverse group, even if categorized as NEETs in the statistics, is essential. Despite how the system perceives or categorizes them, they are a diverse group of human beings. These young people may have little in common other than the trauma of not being accepted which interrupted their straight transition into adulthood [32, 37, 38]. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of NEETs in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway) by age and degree of urbanization and regions domestically. The overview showcases that Sweden and Norway have less NEET ratio than their neighboring countries Denmark and Finland. We can identify two trends. The first is that NEET rates tend to remain low for the 15–19 age group. Most likely because major part of young people are still enrolled in education. However, NEET rates increase steadily for every age group, so that those aged 25–29 years are the most affected. The second trend is that cities systematically show lower NEET rates than towns and suburbs, and rural areas in the Nordic region (**Figure 3**).

4. Different types of challenges characterized

Why is it important to understand that there are different underlying causes for why young people face marginalization in school, hence drop out and possibly deal with reduced functionality for a time or even rest of their life? Our approach is socio-geographical, in that we want to understand the distribution of young people who are not thriving in the Nordic welfare societies. Our point of departure was to investigate

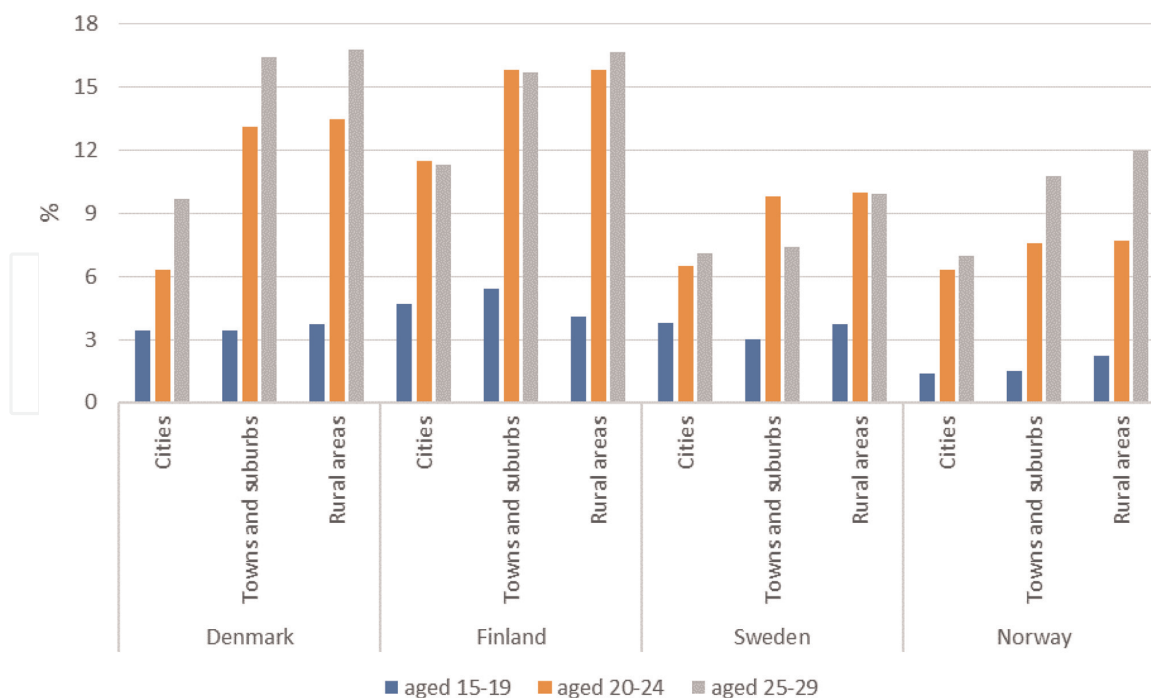


Figure 2. Percentage of NEETs in Nordic countries by age and degree of urbanization, 2017. Source: [2, 29].

regional spatial differences of match making as many of the regions where NEETs have been on the increase are also facing shortage of labour in certain sectors. The focus and evidence of an emerging rise in declining mental well-being among young people has furthermore been most investigated in urban areas, but we also have evidence that this situation has been growing in the rural areas. Spurring this research therefore fills a gap in research knowledge otherwise dominated by focus on urban youth. The study would merely be topographic if not for wanting also to understand and find some socio-psychological explanatory frameworks asking why. We have thus sought to enhance our understanding beyond the conventional disciplinary focus of spatial regional variations. Numerous studies have tried to figure out how NEETs are, but fewer have given meaningful explanations that prove useful as tool to develop measures helpful for the group(s) in focus. Since part of our task was to explore initiatives taken to mobilize and re-engage young people. In our approach, we rest ontologically on an understanding that humans and the young involved are equipped with several qualities and talents that may best be described as multiple intelligences which indicate that there are many ways of learning and knowing [39], but that there are conditions in their environment that may prohibit them from becoming thriving citizens.

Ontologically we rest on the understanding that humans nondependent of age need to feel that what they do is meaningful. We relate to studies done among young Greenlanders whose suicidal rate is uncomfortably high [40] in global comparison. It bases its theoretical framework on the work from Yalom [41], where he describes the four major ultimate concerns that resonate with us. These are death, meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom. These are an inescapable part of being human and in young people's lives a crucial part of the formation towards adulthood [41]. Losing meaning deserves more attention in a society that changes rapidly and moves from being manageable to being experienced as opaque. Intricate structures are often

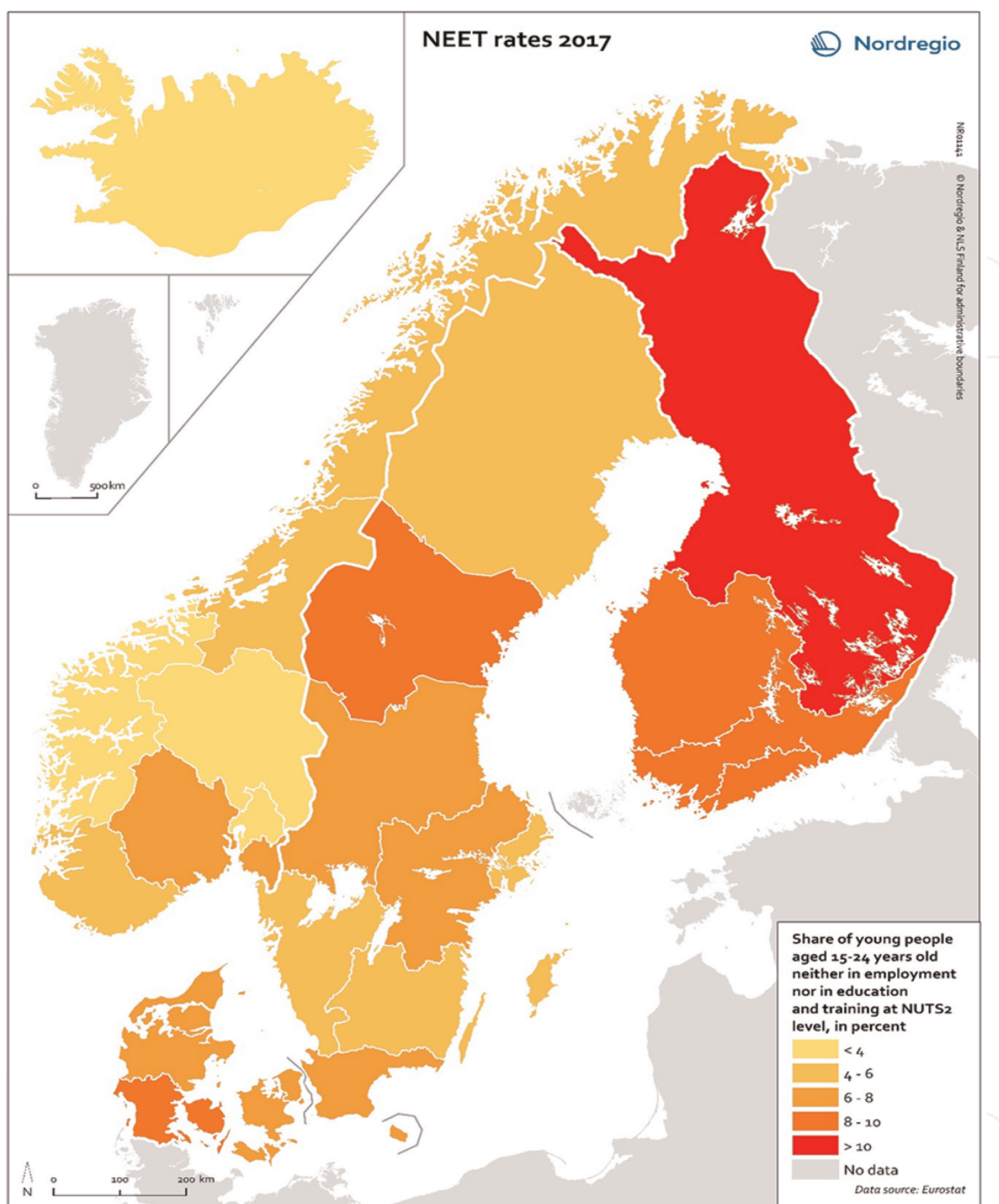


Figure 3.
NEET rates in Nordic countries, 2017.

characterized by this basic condition [40]. We as humans seek a meaning when some insurmountable, incomprehensible, unjust, senseless things happen in our lives [40].

Aaltonen, Berg, and Ikäheimo suggested a framework we have found useful [2, 42]. They identified three groups of NEETs according to young people's education, work experience, and general situation in life and life history, which provide our explanation framework to underlying causes of becoming a NEET [37, 42].

Education has long been considered a bulwark in hard times, but during recessions even young people with good educational merit may lose out and their income possibilities be hollowed out, making their progression in the labour market more difficult leading to more youth unemployment in general. This resonates well with the

definition of the first group called ‘victims of recession’. They have merits but where they live the jobs available do not fit them or are simply elsewhere. They are hit by living in a rust belt or where crisis has hit, and they become stuck without enablers to help them reskill or make a living. Thus, they become entangled into a negative spiral that transforms into a feeling of being useless. Many may lose perspective of meaning over time if no measures are taken to improve their situation [37].

The other group is named ‘worker-citizens in the making’. They are minor deviations, in that they are fully functional but have abrupt educational or vocational experience. Some of their bad relationships with schooling may be caused by minor neurotic deviations on a spectrum from dyslexia, dyscalculia to attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or mild end of the autism spectrum. Due to these deviations, they may have experienced bullying in school or being mocked at. Their self-esteem towards formal educational pathways is at a low, and also in social relations. Many among this group have changed from one school to another without succeeding in graduation but reasons for leaving school or vocation may be varied. The most likely reasons given are difficult relationships with peers in class or mental health issues like anxiety. We have qualitative evidence from our informants that they desired to turn back on track but felt they did not have what it takes, due to former traumatic experiences. They wondered if they should just have pulled themselves together. However, they were not able to [37].

The last and third group is described as ‘troubled’. This group has dealt with different types of mental health challenges. The mental health issues vary on a spectrum from debilitating depression to affective paranoia and in worst case schizophrenia. The length of time experiencing difficulties varies. Some have from an early age been dealing with not really functioning within the school structure or in life in general, others became sick when they reached adulthood. In some cases, the reason for being so troubled is caused by deprivation of parental protection while growing up [37]. The majority of people who are in this situation have been faced with a life of uncertainty where homelessness, physical abuse, or unstructured families dominate daily life. Therefore, schooling or training, or just exercising hobbies come second to other more pressing issues. Their rehabilitation will at first have to focus on adapting to normal life and carrying out something that may spur interest but maybe it is not full occupation, which may set them back if too strict requirements are set too fast. It may be a huge challenge for these individuals to understand how to help themselves to various needed services to enable their rehabilitation. Therefore, they need long-term stability. Incidences like shifting personnel in the mental health care or the consultant helping with how to get by—may set this group back to ground zero. Their instability is not dealt with promisingly if building up trust is not part of the process in the client-advisor relations [2, 37].

5. Methodology

The methodology in our study is of mixed methods combining statistical spatial data (regional and local statistics harmonized to a Nordic or European scale) and qualitative methods in the form of semistructured interviews and field visits.

Following the literature on the causes for marginalization of young people, we mapped the areas in the Nordic countries where youth unemployment and NEET rates were the highest. Hence, we extracted the statistical spatial data out of national statistical agencies in each of the Nordic countries. On a cross-national level, we

examined a range of statistics and maps with overview of the Nordic region to get a better idea of regional variations in share of youth unemployment, of early leavers from education and training, of young people neither in employment nor in education, regional variation in lower secondary educational attainment level, and foreign born youth with low education, unaccompanied minors, of recipients of social transfers among 20–29 years, and regional variations in share of the population at risk of poverty (income below 60% of the national median disposable income after social transfer). For most statistical data, we looked at changes between 2014, 2016, and 2017 (the work was ongoing in 2018 and 2019). We focused on spatial disparities between urban, small towns and rural areas and whether they could be detected clearly in the statistical data. Thus, we were seeking answers and indicators on where there were regional or spatial variations in smaller towns, communities, and rural areas across the Nordic region. To identify areas where youth unemployment was high, we used Eurostat's indicator that expresses the number of unemployed persons aged 15–24 as a share of the labour force of the same age at the Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics – Level 2 (NUTS 2 level) (yth_empl_030) [29]. To identify areas with high NEET rates, we used Eurostat's indicator corresponding to 'the percentage of the population of a given age group and sex who is not employed and not involved in further education or training' (edat_lfse_22) [29]. Eurostat's definition of 'not employed' includes unemployed or inactive persons, and the definition of 'not involved in further education' refers to persons who have not received any education in the 4 weeks preceding the survey [43].

Once we identified these areas, we could make a socio-geographical analysis of the state of the Nordic region in relation to the NEETs in the beforementioned age group. One important question in our study was what is being done and seemingly working in re-engaging this group of citizens. By plowing through programmes offered by regional and local authorities across the Nordic countries and gaining information from various officials involved in regional development work in their respective countries, we found several projects that had been, or were being, carried out. We contacted their managers to learn how the projects worked and about their aims. In some cases, we visited informants and project leaders, social workers or teachers or mentors and saw the facilities and some of their activities in action. Others we had to interview on the distance. We did formally over 25 interviews with responsible managers of initiatives for young people fitting the NEET criteria. Interviews were conducted in English, and four of the national languages in each of the Nordic countries; Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Icelandic. We did not master Finnish, Sami languages or Faroese or Greenlandic and in these cases, we spoke Danish or English. The interviews were semistructured, following a list of topics we wanted to get answers to. We also made field visits to 12 initiatives in five of the Nordic countries. Our aim was to scope all possible measures that work regardless of whether they are initiated by state, regional, or labour market actors, or by public–private partnerships.

Even if our study represents a contribution to the literature on attempting to include a group of varied marginalized youth, there are limitations to our study. We have not chosen to focus specifically on ethnic minorities or specific groups within the group of NEETS, which may prevent a more detailed insight into specific challenges and possibilities of mobilization. We chose to focus on the whole array of varied groups of NEETs including people in highly differing life circumstances. Another of the limitations of our research is that few of the projects had been evaluated from internal or external sources. Only four out of 30 initiatives in all the Nordic region (including Greenland, Faroe Islands, and Åland). Some of the projects were more

systemic, in that they were part of a long-term nationwide programme. Others were supported by the European Social Fund and thus short in their time span, allowing for a maximum of 3 years. With more short time frame to perform the risk is that the endeavors and the learning processes involved get lost in too narrow focus on initiating rather than securing achievements in re-engagement for the long term. Therefore, the re-engagement approaches sketched in this article should not be taken as absolutely successful ways to work with marginalized young people.

With this combination of methodologies, we intended to show a range of projects that have been initiated in the Nordic countries that are working or have worked and especially projects that had grown from regional or municipal authorities. Our point of departure was that good lessons learned in few places would have the option of inspiring other regions with some identical or similar challenges in part of their youth population.

These re-engagement approaches can be seen as examples of initiatives aimed at addressing the issue of marginalized young people. We reckon that the people we are focusing on are diverse and vary in what motivates them as evident from Aaltonen, Berg, and Ikäheimo's attempt to articulate three distinct groups of NEETs. What sparks us as human beings is different and thus our ontology rests on multiple talents of human beings [44]. We simply cannot see any evidence that there should be any one model to fit all. Therefore, we identify three types of re-engagement initiatives.

6. Findings on how to engage young people meaningfully: types of project initiatives

In the Nordic countries, many policy interventions have addressed and supported NEETs in the last decade. There are local, regional, and national projects to bring this group of young people into education and employment. Our findings in this subchapter are based on interviews with over 30 supervisors or social workers engaged in re-engaging unemployed youth, dropouts, or youth with mental problems. It helped understand the varieties of approaches to re-engaging NEETs.

In Denmark, both national and regional authorities have gone in recent years to great lengths to address ways to re-engage marginalized young people. Guidance centres are an example of public authorities' efforts. They are obliged to contact up to 25-year-old early school leavers because of a reform in the unemployed youth benefit system from 2004. The aim of the guidance centres is to guide youths through different offers of education programmes and, to begin with, find the best suited education programme, training place, or employment for every student [45]. The main types of challenges for young people who drop out in Danish rural areas are lack of role models. They grow up in socially deprived small towns where the unemployment rate is high but there is a need for upskilling. Also, there are groups of people with mental problems and diagnosis or radicalized youth who are on a trajectory towards criminality. Two different examples of measures in Denmark were repeatedly mentioned by informants as being successful in their goal of re-engaging youth.

A project manager in East Denmark in region Sjælland with high unemployment explained how they worked with marginalized young people. In their project Educational Track to Work, early school leavers, unemployed, or young people with poor mental health were the focus group. Marginalized young people have in many cases faced lack of guidance in their lives, because they come from broken families, and/or they have not integrated well at school.

A lot of these young people start and stop their education many times, but they do not finish any education, which is a problem. (Project manager, Denmark).

The project attempted to provide guidance to complete education and apprenticeship through different approaches to motivate the involved. This could be activities like exercising physically, just relaxing, talking, or playing games. In this way, encounters between the guides and people could feel more relaxed, they gained mutual trust, but first and foremost they were based on the individual needs expressed by the youth involved. The young people felt heard.

The other project operates six centres around Denmark (four of six in rural parts of the country). It is built on the ideology of consequence pedagogics and practises its ideology, which can be shortened to: We go to action, we take responsibility, we look ahead. This way of addressing re-engagement of young people has proved effective in reaching out to and engaging the most vulnerable part of the youth. The director claims that the young people they take care of are the people who in all other instances have given up on engaging them in training. In TAMU (as it is called), those who engage in the programme are individually consulted and given real work opportunities in training positions, provided with housing and food three times a day and almost military discipline. TAMU enables young people in the age 18–30 with little prior formal education to become considered valid citizens in training. Some of the people who have had social mobility experience through TAMU were being sacked by all other instances of the system because they had criminal background or history of substance abuse. Some have been marginalized due to social or mental illness diagnosis, but TAMU has decided to believe in their abilities. The headmaster who is among our informants said that they train the young people's social skills simultaneously parallel to giving them hands-on work experience in 18 different sectors of work life. It is important to equip TAMU youth with skills of self-determination, self-help, accountability, credibility, respect, cooperativeness, and receptiveness. One of the students with a Hells Angels background, an earlier inmate in prison convicted of both violence and drug trade, told that it rescued his life that the programme managers of TAMU saw him as a person beyond his tattooed body. Staying in the programme has helped him achieve a feeling of accomplishment in his life for the first time, as kind of the last wakeup call, as he expresses it. Many of the companies that are engaged in recruiting young people from the programme express positive experiences. Trade unions are also part of the programme, and an important incentive is that municipalities remunerate companies involved in this important pathway of re-engagement and rehabilitation [46]. In both projects, the municipalities are important funders because they provide part of the trainee salaries.

The first and second approach, even if different, makes young people feel more comfortable and helps them feel active and feel they accomplish something when they are in an informal environment.

Both programmes' ways of dealing with marginalized young people could be termed as 'activating or empowering approach' not only because they rely on physical activity to re-engage young people but they also place a certain degree of responsibility upon them. Most of the examined project initiatives we have encountered are within this approach (see **Figure 2**).

In Sweden, various governments have been involved in attempting to reduce youth unemployment with special focus on NEETs at least since the year 2000. Also, few regional initiatives have evolved more recently in the last 10–15 years. To combat high youth unemployment, three regions got extra financial support from the

European Union's (EU's) Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and European Social Fund between 2014 and 2020. The regions favored were Southern Sweden, Central Norrland, and North Central Sweden. Focusing on NEETs they provided assessment of training traineeships and apprenticeships and enabled start-up support for young entrepreneurs as well as offering them qualitative vocational education and training.

As per the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) that conducted a survey among 6000 young Swedes, the findings revealed in general a need to increase inclusion and boost a sense of belonging to society. Furthermore, the study showed that over one-sixth of respondents had been bullied or frozen out, and one-third remarked that they had experienced abuse or felt they had been treated unfairly. This affects confidence in other people. Over 14% of respondents seldom or never confide in others, boys to higher degree than girls. However, girls marked they were more often bullied and had been ostracized [2, 46].

One of our informants in a visit to one of the youth centres in a small Swedish town told many young people felt marginalized and therefore dropped out, even if only dealing with minor learning challenges in the school. He claimed that the way schools were run and managed left no capacity to teachers or supervisors to care for the students at times when they were vulnerable. In many cases, they felt left out, hence dropping out of school education. It seems like they do not bother and cannot cope with students who are in anyway different, he said.

This resonates with other findings from the interviews with several social workers. Schools often lack resources to prevent early school leaving. The system thus omits pupils at risk of leaving school because they become invisible in the crowd. One of the social workers felt they lack strategies to follow up and detect earlier groups at risk of staying away from schooling. She told about a boy she was seeking solutions with because he was not functioning in the school. A solution was found in engaging him in apprenticeship in a company, but it did not work out there either. He stayed home for 3 weeks without the school even registering he was missing. There is a lack of strategies and follow up on how to discover these problems early (Social worker, Sweden).

After 3 weeks had gone by, he called the school to speak to his teacher, but the teacher had left for another job in a different school. He had been totally forgotten. He was devastated and felt nobody missed him or cared about him (Social worker, Sweden).

Among the critiques on school reforms in Sweden is that streamlining has been prioritized so highly that individual differences and needs in learning or engaging or spurring good relations with students with minor learning challenges are not practised to the needed extent. Furthermore, the critique against school reforms implications is that the system has become far too rigid to respond to cases like the ones described above. The social workers know that teachers' 'time is very limited' and thus the responsibility is transferred to individual student, with whom some of these with biggest challenges have no ability to react and improve their situation. That's the big problem too, the one who does not make a sound. If students start a fight they will get noticed, but the quiet ones just slip under the radar all the time. (Social worker, Young in Gävleborg, Sweden).

One of the exceptions of programmes dealing with this is the project Young in Gävleborg (a county in East Sweden). The whole county and municipalities coordinate efforts with local schools and each school's affiliated mentors have been specifically trained and are informed about what is going on in each of the classes. This means they can act when needed so they will without weeks passing by contact students who have stopped showing up. They initiate contact, meet up, and talk, and

assign a coach who will work with the young person in solving issues needed. They create a relaxed atmosphere in this contact to prevent a sense of stress or that things need to be speeded up while evaluating the young person's more pressing issues. After that, the coaching session will focus on improvement in health, family, finances, friends, and at work depending on what is needed in each individual's case. These five areas tend to have deteriorated at the point when the young person is about to give up after a long history of continued failure. In many cases, the focus is on improving health. Health is generally a big concern among the young. "They come to us and express they have bad health. Our approach is to sit down with them on a blank sheet and write down with them different health concerns. These may be about sleep disorder, eating, lack of exercise, etc." (Social worker, Young in Gävleborg, Sweden). The solution lies in laying out an action plan drafted together with them individually and it must rhyme with the young person's desires and goals. The action plan consists of a development plan for activities where each youth's strengths and weaknesses are also identified. Mentors work with an action plan, drafted in accordance with the youngsters' desires and goals, consisting of the development of activities directed at identifying youngsters' strengths and weaknesses.

The way this project worked could be termed not only as an 'empowering' approach but also as the 'caring approach' because of the two approaches emphasized. Showing the person genuine care and attention and making plans with them that enable them to break out of the bad cycle are important. In first place, the project acknowledged some cracks within the education system, whereby vulnerable young people could fall and in most cases the pupil is derailed because of minor unfortunate incidences in the beginning that have escalated.

Many of the re-engagement initiatives we encountered in other parts of the Nordic region had a similar way of approaching their youth—by engaging in identifying the problem with the individual by listening and then finding solutions in order to boost the self-worth and self-confidence in a direction so the person would be better equipped to be re-introduced to the education system, training, or work and with multiple activities attempting to minimize thresholds and anxieties involved. We identify it as a caring approach.

Finland is the only Nordic country that had in 2019 a national legislation (*Nuorisolaki 1285/2016*) that requires municipalities to employ social workers who are proactive in seeking up marginalized young people. While Finland has relatively high completion rates in school, many young people go from education into unemployment [47] and therefore part of the NEETs may belong to the group 'victims of recession'. Finland has good experience with the proactive outreach work with youth that falls out of the system [48]. One-stop guidance centres, or low-threshold services, have been developed in Finland to address young people out of work, training, and education—and support them in re-engaging. The guidance centres offer a diversified support to young people. Young people are offered general guidance services and specific education, social care, health care, and employment services to advance emotionally, socially, and professionally—all in one place and without the burdens of bureaucracy.

In one of the centres, located in an old railway garage and workshop, the Jyväskylä Rock Academy is located. Developing the creative talents of vulnerable young people is as they see it an effective way to foster their hard and soft skills. The academy provides all the required resources to start and develop music careers and they are also running a broader arts academy where young people can perform other art-related activities, such as theater acting, dancing, circus, or poetry, to name a few. Regarding a low-threshold approach, the managers explained that the centre is open to all

youngsters who are interested. They offer an open to all free space in the cultural house. Youth may start their encounters by playing billiards or listening to a concert. They can come and talk, ask for help on anything, and they will be met with understanding and staff who attempt to solve things with them. Providing these services and activities they have the responsibility of engaging in their own activity, hence their own self-development. Also, this approach helps them to engage in social practices they are motivated to engage in.

One important aspect of the work overall is dialog circles. They meet regularly with the headspace principle and act as peer support groups (i.e., the NEET discussion group that meets once a week). The only ban is zero tolerance on substance use (alcohol or other drugs).

Regarding proactive outreach work, the centre has two strategies. The first is to keep a close cooperation with schools. When a student has not been attending school for few days, social workers call student's home and go to see what is happening. The other strategy is going patrolling the streets in search of marginalized youngsters who might need social workers' help, which has its perks:

Sometimes they think those workers are police and sometimes they run from them (Project manager, Finland).

Inspiring and mobilizing through arts is the distinctive component of this centre, which in fact works as a cultural centre. The main way the centre works with marginalized young people is through, i.e., composing music and creating video clips:

Mainly the creativity work is what we do in order to engage young people (...)
It's basically we are helping young bands to edit their first music video, but also young musicians come here and tell them mostly what not to do in their musical career. (Project manager, Finland).

The managers stress that by engaging in creative activities youngsters realize their potential and that helps them to re-engage in social life. In addition, because of the open attitude of social workers and the sharing of experiences with other youngsters in similar circumstances as them, their social trust is boosted (Table 1).

		Creative approach	Activating/Empowering approach	Caring approach
W-Sjælland	DK			
Sjælland Lolland	DK			
Jammerbugt	DK			
Hjørring	DK			
TAMU	DK			
Laukaa, Äänekoski, Konnevesi	FI			
Jyväskylä Rock	FI			
Veturallit Jyväskylä	FI			
South Savonia	FI			
UngResurs Åland Nordland	NO			

		Creative approach	Activating/Empowering approach	Caring approach
Mosjøen	NO	Yellow		
Oppland & Hedmark	NO		Red	
Trysil	NO		Red	
Hedmarken	NO		Red	
Hordaland	NO		Red	
Alta, Finnmark	NO		Red	
Ung Gävleborg	SE			
Plug In Gävleborg	SE		Red	
Hornsudden, Strängnäs	SE		Red	Green
Motala	SE		Red	
Motala	SE			Green
Haparanda-Tornio	SE			Green
Majoriaq Kujalleq	GL		Red	Green
Sapiik - Ilulissat & Nuuk, Qaqortoq	GL		Red	Green
Sandavágur	FO	Yellow	Red	
Fuglafjordur	FO	Yellow		Green
FabLab Westman Isl Virkið	IS	Yellow		
NW-Iceland	IS		Red	
VIRK	IS		Red	Green

Source: Karlsdóttir et al. [2].

Color yellow signifies creative approach, color red signifies activating/empowering approach, color green signifies caring approach.

Table 1.

Three approaches to re-engagement of marginalized youth in Nordic projects in different Nordic countries.

7. Discussion and conclusion

As we anticipated in the Methodology section, the aim of this article was not to find the ultimate successful ways to re-engage marginalized young people but rather explore a variety of the initiatives taken in some Nordic countries to mitigate exclusion and marginalization of youth.

Through the description of the activating/empowering, caring, and creative approaches to re-engage young people, we aimed to pinpoint the relevant causes behind young people's marginalization and ways to mobilize. Some of the interviewees mentioned socio-economic disadvantage, gender, mental health, or substance abuse as factors pushing young people off the edge. This reflects the research findings across the Nordic countries on the matter.

Several possible structural factors may contribute to early school leaving and later push youngsters to end up as NEETs. As described, they are caused by various factors or combinations thereof. Socio-economic conditions, gender culture, unintended

outcomes of school reforms, and school closures play a role as well as mental health problems that seem to be on the increase. Also, school reforms in educational systems that prioritize marketization as a management model have had segregation effects, even if unintended. Poor youth, boys, and immigrants are at greater risk than their advantaged counterparts, girls, even if girls in increased number show signs of anxiety. In any case, both socio-cultural and structural factors influence the performance possibilities of different youth groups in this case.

We have in this chapter focused on young people not in employment, education, or training—NEETs. All the Nordic countries are faced with marginalized or ostracized youngsters, or a hidden youth or an inactive youth group for various reasons. While being a heterogenic group with various characteristics that we hardly manage to grasp entirely, we divided them for analytical reasons into three types of challenged youth: victims of recession, workers in the making, and the troubled. This analytical framework was helpful because we have evidence-based reasons that each of these different groups needs different approaches in supporting them.

We have witnessed that while some of the challenges among young people are minor challenges to begin with, there are often responses that either do not respond to the problems or it takes too long time. By the time help is at hand, the initial problems would have grown to become much more complicated to solve. That means an increased risk for every young person facing unnecessarily long-term social exclusion. If not dealt with it may, in future to come, give rise to several social and health-related problems that could have been avoided and can extend far into adulthood. Therefore, early intervention is important. Also, interventions that focus on the user, thereby placing the person involved at centre [2].

The relevance of our study does not limit itself to the period we studied NEETs in the Nordic countries. Implications of COVID-19 in challenging well-being of young people around the world are well acknowledged. Poor mental health in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic has been well documented in adolescents; however, less is known about the longer-term effect of the pandemic [49].

There is a saying that it does take a village to raise a child. It could not be more true when it comes to the needed coordination and cooperation between state actors, labour markets, regional authorities, the unions, and private actors. However, the picture we provide is not complete and merely highlights good examples of some of the actions initiated and practised. As previous studies point out, there is still limited knowledge on what types of measures work and are most effective for different groups with different needs. This also counts for effects of tools and measures attempting to include the most vulnerable youth. Furthermore, there is also a need for further comparative and cross-national studies [50].

The criteria for success in re-engaging young people are not carved in stone. Several perspectives are crucial for motivation—not any one model. Low-threshold services and the provision of a range of support expertise appear vital. Individual placement and support also. Orienting the actions towards identified needs with the user in place is also crucial. The projects we have researched are various. Some of them build on individual consultations focusing on listening to individual needs. We have seen this approach highly prioritized in many Finnish initiatives. This approach also seems to spread as an emerging trend in many of the other countries and regions we have focused on. It underpins the importance of finding motivations that always rest with the individuals [38]. Therefore, efforts should be aimed at the individual. After all, young people are heading towards adulthood so they are unbecoming youth because they are in transition. Because the group of NEETs has for various reasons had challenges in the transition towards adulthood.

While we have studied various multifaceted initiatives, we have also been acquainted with the idea that this is about investing in young people [2]. We should be careful in not overestimating the investment aspect of socially rehabilitating this vulnerable group, while this investment idea for the future transfers focus from future social burden to something more promising. We should also focus on the preventive potentials for a group that with some help can become more well-functioning in employment, education, and training. Young people are diverse. The most important vision is they can constitute an important part of society and that they should be enabled to pursue their life goals individually and collectively. By giving them meaningful options to re-enter and be reincluded in pathways of employment, education, or training, an important goal is met with. Helping them become valid citizens. Therefore, it should be of high priority to motivate their engagement in ways that mobilize them and enable them to flourish. Whether it is about approaching them with engagement that is empowering, creative, or caring or a combination is a question of what they need to find meaningfulness in their lives.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the Authors.

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