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The Cultivation of Subjectivity of Young People in Youth Support Systems

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Abstract

In recent years Finland has witnessed a substantial amount of public debate and concern about vulnerability, wellbeing, mental-health problems and anxiety among young people from various backgrounds. In accordance with the ethos of vulnerability and neoliberalism, people are supposed to become employable, resilient and entrepreneurial, choosing education based on their expected individual needs and what they wish eventually to achieve in life. The focus in this article is on the ethos of vulnerability, and particularly on the cultivation of a vulnerable subjectivity through therapeutically and psychologically oriented knowledge in the neoliberal politics. It is based on individually and jointly produced data from various youth support systems in Finland, and on discussions with young people considered to be vulnerable or 'at risk' who are involved in these systems. We argue that both the therapeutic culture and neoliberal politics legitimise and accelerate cultivation of vulnerability while dismissing social expectations and pressure targeted on young people. Vulnerable subjectivity is strengthened by various types of specialists who claim that the self can achieve a better and more satisfying life through the application of psychologically and therapeutically engineered knowledge and professional skills.

Introduction

‘Young people generally are among the most vulnerable groups in society, and this is especially true in the current crisis.’ (EU Youth Report, 2012.)

The problem of unemployment, a lack of education and social exclusion among young people has been a major concern in EU- and national-level cross-sectoral policies. There also seems to be an increase in anxiety, stress and mental-health problems among the young. In attempts to tackle these persistent problems, the European Union and national governmental bodies have responded with various kinds of support systems for young people, in which vulnerability is used as an entry point for interventions addressing diverse concerns. EU-level and national level initiatives have been launched to address the causes of vulnerability and to prevent social problems such as unemployment and a lack of education, with the provision of support systems holding specific types of knowledge derived from psychological and therapeutic discourse. In other words, the notion that young people’s mobility and trajectories should be shaped and managed more closely has fostered a vast amount of vulnerability mediators. In this chapter, such mediators refer to various kinds of youth education and training, counselling and rehabilitation programmes and projects, outreach youth work, workshops, psychosocial support, peer support and functional activities (such as art therapy, physical activity and music).

We do not set out to criticise these mediators per se, nor do we deny their potentially meaningful nature in individual lives. We acknowledge that there is still rather persistent agreement about the importance of support systems in doing good and helping young people to cultivate their wellbeing, coping capacity, resilience, mental health and employability. Our argument is rather that such measures deny governmental responsibility for creating vulnerability as a social condition by drawing attention from the social to the individual, thus forming a vulnerable subjectivity. In this

chapter we argue, that therapeutic culture and neoliberal politics have helped to produce an *ethos of vulnerability* focusing on young people's mental health and psycho-emotional wellbeing.

This chapter takes a closer look at these youth-support systems in the current ethos of vulnerability. The joint interest is especially in the knowledge and subjectivity cultivated within these systems, and in how they tend to translate societal problems such as unemployment, a lack of education, social disadvantage, austerity and poverty into individualised questions of personal problems and deficiencies. In other words, we seek to understand how this cultivation holds identity, selfhood, autonomy and individuality in place (Rose 1998). In doing so, we first present the turn to vulnerability, well-being and young people's mental health as logical consequence of both the therapeutic culture and neoliberal politics. We suggest that neoliberal subjectivity is accompanied with vulnerable subjectivity in the current ethos. We then move on to illustrate the paradoxes of governmental youth support interventions by using Finland as a case. Finland is one of the well-known Nordic welfare states and declared by the UN (2018) to be the happiest country in the world. However, over a short period of time Finland has gone through a dramatic shift in terms of restructuring the welfare state, as the ideals of Nordic equality have been replaced with a more individualised focus on equal opportunities to ensure survival in the neoliberal politics (e.g. Moisio and Leppänen, 2007; Niemelä and Saarinen, 2012; Brunila and Edström, 2013). After presenting findings of our on-going research projects, we apply them to education, arguing that this turn has serious outcomes in terms of educational policies and practices that should be taken into careful consideration.

The making of youth subjectivity in the ethos of vulnerability

‘During a short training programme in prison a young adult explained that everyone on the programme was expected to set their own goals that they would try to reach, and to plan. He

continued: 'Here in the project it's really all up to you. If you try really hard and work with yourself, you can be successful and make it.' (Notes from a youth support system, 2016.)

There is a vast amount of literature heralding the birth of the neoliberal subject, or homo oeconomicus, who is self-sufficient, self-disciplined, responsible and autonomous (e.g. O'Flynn and Petersen, 2007; Brown, 2015). Accordingly, psychological and therapeutic discourses together with contemporary ideas about obligatory happiness and positivity are powerful components of this ideology, and different versions of them are to be found almost everywhere in neoliberal Western societies (Rose, 1998; Furedi, 2004; Parker, 2007; Ahmed, 2010; Cromby, 2011; Wright, 2011). Therapeutic and psychologically derived discourses contribute to the population's psychological development towards psycho-emotional well-being and security, at the same time as cultivating subjectivity and the ability both to cope with and verbalise uncertainties and also to conduct oneself in ways that are beneficial to overall happiness. The challenge with these therapeutically and psychologically oriented discourses is, as many authors have pointed out, that they tend to portray young people as deficient and predisposed to developing mental-health dysfunctions (McLeod, 2012; Ecclestone et al, 2015; Brunila and Rossi, 2017). The young people in our data had also been subjected to these types of discourses as implications of cross-sectoral policies (see also McLeod and Wright, 2012; Brown, 2011; 2015; Brunila et al, 2017).

Therapeutically and psychologically oriented knowledge has helped to produce an *ethos of vulnerability*. The concept of vulnerability could be described as one of the most significant theoretical and political developments in the management of people in Western societies (e.g. Bankoff, Frerks and Hillhorst, 2004; Fineman, 2008; Brown 2015; Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017). Several researchers refer to political and educational claims that are increasingly made on the basis of inherent vulnerability taking on a specific psycho-emotional form (e.g. Brown, 2011; Ecclestone et al, 2015). In Finland, it has been shown that the ethos of vulnerability has come to

play an increasingly decisive role in shaping educational policies and practices, and is prominent in current forms of identity politics that bases political claims on expressions of vulnerability and victimhood (Brunila et al, 2017).

Vulnerable subjectivity, as we have argued elsewhere (Brunila et al, 2016; 2017), has lately become a starting point as well as an outcome of various types of transnational and cross-sectoral governmental interventions. On the basis of our research we also argue that vulnerable subjectivity succumbs to and strengthens neoliberal rationality in terms of managing anxieties, insecurities and other affects produced by the neoliberal politics. To enhance understanding of how neoliberal subjectivity and vulnerable subjectivity coexist we engage with the concept of affective subjectivation (see Valero, Jorgensen and Brunila, 2018) referring to processes through which young people are inclined to turn themselves into manageable subjects within the ethos of vulnerability and neoliberalism. In other words, affective subjectivation is the effect of a way of governing that fabricates subjectivities prone to operating productively in terms of these ideals. In using the term, we capture the making of both neoliberal and vulnerable selves in youth-support systems. Engaging with affective subjectivation enables us to describe the affective processes by which young people are inclined to turn themselves into cultivated subjects within the support systems and in terms of neoliberal and psycho-emotional vulnerability ideals. These ideals become highly subjective and require individuals constantly to be productive and able, which have consequences in terms of how they cultivate themselves.

The problem with the ethos of vulnerability is the vagueness and blurriness of the concept. In light of such vagueness it lacks academic rigor, and instead may foster the reiteration of new types of normativity in the discursive regulation of young people, which in turn could further strengthen the interpretation of societal problems as individual psycho-emotional deficiencies. Accordingly, there is no point in trying to tackle societal problems with reference to the implicit power present in the

policies: it is the faults within specific individuals that should be addressed (Brunila et al, 2017).

Vulnerability should be recognised as non-innate. It is rather enforced and reinforced by political, social and economic factors (see Brown et al, 2017). Indeed, it has been defined in cross-sectoral policies and educational practices not as vulnerability in the face of societal structures, injustices or power imbalances, but in terms of individual characteristics such as *self-esteem, a fragile self-image, stress, anxiety, mental instability, impulsiveness, passivity, resentment, being antisocial or subdued and being needy* (Wright and McLeod, 2015; Brunila et al, 2016; 2017).

In what follows we will show how the cultivation of youth support systems is based on producing neoliberal, employable and resilient subjectivities, and how such cultivation arises from and responds to anxieties, uncertainties, mental ill-health and other deficiencies that reside in the individual, outside unequal societal structures. We will also illustrate how, through such processes, the individual becomes the focus, to be addressed and subjected to the ‘right kind of’ handling. In the production of resilient, neoliberal subjectivities, the young person is assumed to need guidance from a state of vulnerability, deficiency and dependency towards a state of resilience and employability.

Data and analysis

‘The purpose of outreach youth work is to reach young people in need of assistance and provide access to services and other support designed to promote their growth, independence, social inclusion, and other life-management skills, as well as to improve access to education and facilitate entry into the labour market.’ (Youth Act 2016, §10.)

‘The purpose of youth workshop activities is to provide training to improve young people’s capabilities to access and complete education and training, enter open labour markets or some other

service needed. The purpose is to improve young peoples' life-management skills as well as promote their growth, independence and social inclusion. Young people acquire these skills and capabilities by working or engaging in rehabilitative activities according to their ability'. (Youth Act 2016, §13.)

These two extracts from the national *Youth Act* demonstrate what we in the research project mean when we talk about youth support systems. Although the vocabulary of the Youth Act seems well intended, we raise some critical questions regarding its spirit. First, it remains unclear what is meant by 'in need of assistance', and on what grounds and by whom is it determined. In other words, what are the discourses that constitute 'the need' and who has access to them and their production (on problematizing the concept of need, see Honkasilta, 2016). Second, the concepts of independence, growth and life-management skills are not clarified even if they are straightforwardly contextualised as education and labour attainment and societal participation without an explicit rationale. The use of empty signifiers as such begs the question of what implicit ideal subjectivities are created in the Youth Act that youth support is expected to cultivate among the young people it reaches – citizens in the making. Third, and perhaps most importantly, what is the image portrayed here by policy makers of both unemployed young people and unemployment among young people, given that the provision of youth support is premised on the assumptions of inadequate growth and lack of independence and life-management skills, whatever they may signify?

The various types of youth-support systems in Finland are implementations of EU youth policies, as well as outcomes of the *Youth Act* and governmental youth policies and their implementation, which tend to be short-term support systems. The research for this article was conducted in an ongoing research project *Interrupting Youth Systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability* (2017-2021) funded by Academy of Finland. The aim of the project is to explore cross-sectoral policies and practices in support systems intended for young people considered vulnerable or 'at risk' within the ethos of

vulnerability, as well as to create more room for young people's interpretations, responses and actions. The whole research group is interested in how the ethos of vulnerability changes expectations, policies and practices related to youth support systems (e.g. Brunila et al, 2017; 2018.) The project combines two different approaches to vulnerability: one as a policy imperative shaping and controlling the subjectivity of young people, and the other as the beginning of new conceptualizations of subjectivity, or an attempt to resist pathologizing interpretations (e.g. Butler, 2004; Bankoff et al, 2004; Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008; Emmel and Hughes, 2010; Mackenzie et al, 2014; Ecclestone et al, 2015; Honkasilta, 2017). The focus in this article is on the former approach.

The young people in our data, and particularly those whose transition to education and work does not go smoothly, are commonly conceptualised as "vulnerable". Accordingly, vulnerability is associated not only with young people who have a history of mental-health or learning problems, but also with those who are considered socially disadvantaged or poor, disabled, of an ethnic minority and/or with a criminal background.

The data produced individually and jointly in the research project combines perspectives from cross-sectoral policies and their implementation, as well as from young people, youth workers, educators, teachers and other specialists. In concrete terms, since 2010 researchers involved in two consecutive research projects have investigated dozens of youth-support systems such as preparatory programmes, projects, outreach youth work, workshops and prison education in Finland. They have also interviewed over 300 young people from various backgrounds, youth workers, teachers, counsellors and other professionals who work with young people. In addition, the group has individually and jointly analysed several hundred documents about youth-support systems as well as leaflets and webpages. Young people in this context include those outside of education and work; those who are or who have been in prison; those who are considered to have

mental-health problems and learning difficulties; those who are asylum seekers or migrants; those who are in serious debt; those involved in all kinds of support systems, short-term programmes, projects and outreach youth work; and those who just have not found their place in society.

For the purposes of this article we analysed policy and programme documents and conducted interviews with young people (18–29 years old) and with youth workers involved in these support systems. The methodology of the research project, as well as in this article, has been characterised as multi-sited and nomadic ethnography, involving note taking, interviews, discussions among representatives of the groups in question, self-interrogation, statistics, register data, surveys and policy documents. We have also examined how policies and practices related to support systems affect young people's decision-making processes, and if and how they enable these young people to envision their choices and moves. Studying these issues together with youth workers and the young people helped to create more room for their own interpretations, responses and actions.

Youth-support systems are understood in this article as discursive and cultivating practices (Bacchi and Bonham 2014; Brunila and Ryyänen 2016; Ikävalko 2016), adopted in the quest for ways of guiding the subjectivity of a young person from a state of vulnerability, deficiency and dependence towards one of resilience and employability. Accordingly, subjectivity in this context is understood as discursively and constantly constructed and not determined or pre-written. Having asked how young people are understood and addressed through and by the discursive practices of support systems we were able to focus on the contextualised and situational knowledge emanating from such systems as part of the cultivation of subjectivities among young people in the therapeutic culture and neoliberal politics. In the following two chapters, our focus is on illustrating some of the paradoxes and short-fallings of these governmental support systems in Finland.

The cultivation practices of youth support systems

‘The biggest challenge is the first encounter with the customer. Even though they might feel nervous about the first time, they still have the courage to come. That first contact is important in that you have to be extremely sensitive and alert. So that you are able to approach that young person in the right way.’ (Youth worker interview, 2016.)

‘They all come here with the same thing, that they need a job and assistance with applying for it. But when you sit down with the young person and you start going a bit deeper all kinds of needs for support start to emerge. Not ready for working life although one might think so. These young persons need to be addressed personally to make sure that they understand what their situation really is.’ (Youth worker interview, 2016.)

‘Young people are vulnerable, fragile and highly sensitive. They need to be handled with care.’ (Youth worker interview, 2016.)

First of all, it was quite obvious from the interviews with young people that they encountered serious difficulties in trying to live and re-live their lives, and that these problems were fuelled by particular societal aspects such as austerity, poverty, debt, bullying, racial and other discrimination and other societal disadvantages. When we looked into how this wide array of societal problems were addressed and considered in youth support systems and by youth workers such as those referred to above we found a discrepancy. Instead of addressing and treating these problems as societal they ended up cultivating them as a rather limited array of psycho-emotional problems attached to and within the young people.

The support systems we analysed tended to use psychologically and therapeutically oriented vocabulary and to promote attributes such as emotional management, resilience and self-esteem. With regard to young people this support included interventions encouraging them to acknowledge

and analyse their emotions and their emotional well-being, as well as activities aimed at raising self-esteem, offering emotional guidance and happiness training. In terms of affective subjectivation, once the young person has been addressed and categorised in accordance with the given vocabulary, he or she is expected to learn how to belong to that particular category, and thus to become submissive to it:

‘It cannot start elsewhere than from yourself if you really want to change. Of course, you get help there, but the responsibility is really yours.’ (Youth interview, 2015.)

‘I was told that I should not get my hopes up too far, that I have certain skills that are suitable for certain jobs. And I have to work on myself more, especially with my emotions.’ (Youth interview, 2014.)

‘Here (in the support system) I’ve been helped well. There’s only myself to blame for my failures, nobody else. I can soon live on my own and I feel quite good about it. (In the youth-support system) 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, 2017.)

‘You really cannot blame anyone else than yourself. When you fail you cannot blame anyone else.’ (Youth interview, 2016.)

‘It is really up to you if you want the change to happen.’ (Youth interview, 2015.)

What we argue here is that this type of cultivation is neither neutral nor innocent. It seems from our results that it works by ensuring that the problems young people face lie within the young people

themselves. In other words, becoming recognisable means learning how to present oneself and one's emotions in the "right way".

Throughout the analysis we wanted to stay open to the insights of the young people who had experienced the support systems as well as to understand how the cultivation works. All the young people we talked to were on the margins of social life for different reasons: they were not necessarily educated nor in the labour market. Many of them lived in serious poverty and debt, and some were dealing with mental-health difficulties and diagnoses or with a criminal record. Some of them had experienced discrimination and racism. Our findings show that the interviews reflected rather ambivalent views in terms of these support systems.

The interviews repeatedly illustrated how young people wanted to make a change in their lives and that they believed the responsibility was mainly their own. Some said they had finally learned to believe in themselves because of the support systems. One could argue that the cultivation serves empowering and emancipating functions providing a means of support in terms of forging new and meaningful subjectivities. Several of the interviewees acknowledged the importance of recognising and handling emotions. However, in the end we interpreted this as a way of forging subjectivity that evolves from an understanding that potential and relevant change depends on dressing and presenting oneself in a certain way. Once the young person has been addressed and categorised in accordance to the given vocabulary, he or she is expected to learn how to belong to that particular category, and thus to become submissive to it. As a consequence, the subjectivity offered to and taken up by these young people was built mainly on a form of resilience in that the taking up meant recognising, managing and overcoming their own vulnerabilities, injuries and emotional problems such as anxiety, low self-esteem and stress.

Learning to carry one's choices and responsibilities as well as to manage one's emotions was considered relevant and ideal. We understand this in the ethos of vulnerability as a form of resilience, the cultivation of both vulnerable and neoliberal subjectivity. This type of subjectivity is connected with the illusion of individual autonomy, which in turn is created as a consequence of "autonomising" the self and making it accountable.

Interruptions

Our findings revealed various types of interesting tensions between the aims of the support systems and the views of the young people and youth workers. There were moments when both groups challenged the content of the support systems, such as describing activities as limited, tiring or disappointing, or as brainwashing. Some of the young people described how the support system made them feel as they were a burden, stupid or scum, whereas the youth workers wondered whether these support systems could even hinder young people's access to further education.

'We should be grateful, it feels like they have already done a lot for us, and it's our fault if we haven't found a job. We feel we are weak. We keep asking ourselves when this circle will be over. We already studied a lot previously. We appreciate new things, learning new things in general, but this has become more like: you can't find a job because you need more training and learning (...) When will we reach the right level of learning!' (Migrant youth interview, 2017.)

'I was never a burden, but the system made me feel as if I was a burden. It even makes me want to give up trying.' (Migrant youth interview, 2017.)

'I feel that I am considered some kind of idiot here.' (Youth interview, 2016.)

‘Most of the interventions I know treat young people as broken or problematic.’ (Youth worker interview, 2018.)

Accordingly, several youth workers demonstrated critical views, especially of psycho-emotional and diagnosis-based approaches:

‘What damages these young people and can damage anyone is this diagnosis-based and biological understanding of human beings, in which case it is a stamp on the forehead and I am sick, as if it were some kind of bacterial disease. First it makes it easier for you to explain why you feel so bad. And then it starts to work like a self-fulfilling prophecy. And when drugs don’t make it go away, it has become a really difficult disease. We’re shooting these diagnoses down when we can. (...) They are just invented, none of them can be verified in any clinical way ... However, people are given some sort of targeted drugs but they don’t work. People do not "recover" because of them.’ (Youth worker interview, 2018.)

Youth workers working with young people diagnosed with a mental illness, such as the one quoted above, likened the medical treatment to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which in her view did not help people out of the position of being mentally ill but strengthened their position as vulnerable. The same youth worker also mentioned the lack of information about alternatives to drug treatment, implying that diagnoses and drug treatment were both taken as self-evident even though the side-effects may make people unable to live their lives:

‘One phenomenon for which individuals are also blamed is institutionalisation. They are institutionalised to be users of these care systems. And it is a big problem. We are trying to advise these long-term service users to think about it themselves, use their brains. But it isn’t down to them, it is not that they are losers. It is in these structures. (...) But they are still burdened by the

system that says it is because you are like that. That is why they don't even try because they don't want to lose the benefits they have. If you get into the school, you have to live on 200 euro per month. If you get income support, it is 600 euro per month. It's these structural things.' (Youth worker interview, 2018.)

We interpret the above extract to mean that young people caught up in these support systems learn to blame themselves for not being a productive part of society and thus strengthen their position as vulnerable. They have been used to the position provided by the support system that addresses them in a specific way.

'The crucial thing when people come to us is their own motivation and that they commit to improving themselves, which means participating as much as they can. They (young adults) don't come here because they were not heard, they do not necessarily know that they were not heard. But it is often the observation they make here. "Hell, I have been seeing that nurse for five years and all she can offer is to tell me to take more exercise".' (Youth worker interview, 2018.)

Some of the youth workers such as the one above we interviewed said that the young people and young adults could not share their thoughts, problems or feelings even though they had been seeing various types of professionals for many years. The support systems, which did not address the young people as psycho-emotionally vulnerable and deficient, therefore provided another opportunity to talk more freely without the burden of psycho-emotional problems or illness. In general, the tensions between the aims of the systems and the views of the youth workers and young people were only indirectly evident. When we asked the young people what they thought would happen after the intervention, there was often a long silence. Many thought they would end up being unemployed or moving to another intervention in the system, but at the same time they had to stay positive and resilient. Many youth workers shared their scepticism, admitting that these

interventions were not enough. Some even put their own time and money into helping young people to cope.

We acknowledge that there is potential in addressing vulnerability as a progressive attribute, as a contingent nature of humanity or as a universal dimension of identity (see also Butler, 2004; Ecclestone and Goodley, 2014; Brown et al, 2017; Brunila et al, 2016; 2017). It could be argued that support systems help to build a certain type of character, as do therapeutic and psychological interventions, especially in terms of taking responsibility and working towards change. We also acknowledge that there are potentially fair trajectories of vulnerability generating new understandings of subjectivity and agency. However, what we discovered about the alliance of vulnerability and neoliberalism in our data was indicative of a rather limited and individualised subjectivity based on self-blame and guilt: the young people tended to learn to blame themselves for the problems they were facing.

Because the young people we interviewed were on the margins and were not always able to navigate the changing labour markets we found the psychological and therapeutic discourses of little use and even problematic when the problems they experienced were gendered and racialised, for example, but were still considered the problems of individuals. Accordingly, one crucial finding was the importance of recognising the implications of using vulnerability to frame ideas of youth support systems and young people's subjectivity: the outcomes should be further explored from a more cross-cultural and intersectional perspective. In principle, of course, managing emotions and developing individual resilience go rather smoothly with the neoliberal politics. The ideal narrative is that the autonomous self discovers itself with the help of support systems, and by getting rid of psychic and emotional barriers against current ideals of positivity and happiness as dynamic fields of potential and opportunity (e.g. Binkley, 2014; Duffy, 2017). Understood in this way, vulnerable and neoliberal subjectivity cannot be considered a passive target. Instead, it should be thought of as

active, especially in terms of managing anxieties and insecurities, and of mobilising affects and emotions in accordance with the neoliberal politics.

The role of education in terms of young people

As a group of sociologically oriented educationalists we share a concern towards the future of education. Therapeutic and psychologically derived discourses enhancing psycho-emotional vulnerabilities are not new, and have been acknowledged in education as well (Saari, 2011; 2017; Brunila, 2014; Ecclestone et al, 2015; Petersen and Millei, 2016). For over a century, so-called therapeutic and psychologically oriented interventions in the field of education have been closely allied with educational research and governance systems, including students, teachers, researchers and other specialists (Popkewitz, 2008; Petersen and Millei, 2015; Saari and Harni, 2016).

However, within the ethos of vulnerability and neoliberalism the concern is with the shifting role of education (see Lukianoff and Haid, 2015). In terms of purpose it seeks to engineer, equip, enable and support people to cope in a way that is held to be emancipating and empowering. In other words, education is shifting towards personalised and individualised precision based on highly targeted learning and datafication, whereas the sciences of genes, neurology, behaviour and psychology, alongside various types of learning designers and facilitators, provide insights into learning processes (see also Brookman-Byrne, 2018). This cultivation operates through the generation of intimate and personalised data and the constant processing of information about bodies and minds. The aim is to find out as much about learning as possible, and in doing so to subject everyone to tailor-made learning in accordance with their predetermined abilities, equipping them to deal with and overcome personal difficulties and deficiencies. This, in turn, leads to strength-based learning and resilience in the sense of surviving socially, and most importantly coping in the labour market. Sadly, our findings imply that this coping is more like a survival game:

‘This is what young people talk about all the time, how to survive this day, till the next pay day, till the next therapy visit’. (Youth worker interview, 2018.)

In line with several researchers, we see a strong tendency towards de-politicising, narrowing and individualising education, which in turn requires a specific type of ideal subjectivity as a target to facilitate legitimation. In accordance with the ethos of vulnerability and neoliberalism, people are supposed to become employable, resilient and entrepreneurial, choosing education based on their expected individual needs and what they wish eventually to achieve in life. Moreover, vulnerable subjectivity is strengthened by various types of specialists who claim that the self can achieve a better and more satisfying life through the application of psychologically and therapeutically engineered knowledge and professional skills.

Conclusion

As we have shown in this article, in terms of youth support systems, young people become speaking subjects through discourses available to them while being subjected to their constitutive forces. It is therefore crucially important to consider the discourses from a more critical perspective.

In sum, we should resist “turning inwards” enhanced by psychologically and therapeutically oriented cultivation, and becoming a target of precision engineering mastered by learning designers. If we consider these discourses offered by support systems more widely they tend to rely on a rather simple idea of subjectivity, which can be easily improved with enough amount of a certain type of support. This easily leads into performative short-term support instead of proper education. Instead, we should discuss the ways in which education could and should strengthen subjectivities to foster critical thinking and political activeness as well as enhanced awareness of existing societal structures and inequalities. Indeed, the way education seems to be shifting towards the type of

future addressed here should be part of a wider discussion involving researchers, teachers, policy makers and young people themselves.

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