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2023-09-23

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Pyry, N & Sirviö, H J 2023, 'Landscape of competition: Education, economisation and young people's wellbeing', *Environment and Planning A*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X231197303>

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EPA: Economy and Space

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/0308518X231197303

journals.sagepub.com/home/epn**Noora Pyry** 

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Abstract

This paper probes the function of competition in society through an analysis of the affective landscape that competition creates. Our focus is on education and the connected process of subjectification. We argue that the analysis of competition in human geography needs to advance through abstractions of political economy to the entanglements and relations in which competition is internalised through embodied experience. We conceive competition as a process of organising power relations that work through affective subjectivation and knowledge-production. Those processes are efficiently at work in education, and hence, in young people's everyday lives. It is our suspicion that education is increasingly organised in a way that naturalises competition and marginalises or even closes horizons from other actual and possible modes of social relations and organisational principles. This organising frame links to ideas about learning as an individual endeavour, a linear process that can be pre-planned and measured with representational evidence. To challenge the harmful ethos of personal control and responsibility of young people for their own education and life-paths, we pursue a nonrepresentational analysis of the educational landscape of competition and approach the (learning) human subject as emergent and relationally agentive. Then, also young people's wellbeing needs to be mirrored against the landscape in which it is continually built. As a case for our argument, we discuss two documents linked to Finnish education: an OECD document on education and national competitiveness, and the newly revised curriculum for upper secondary education.

Keywords

Competition, economisation, education, Finland, young people

Introduction

Competition is one of the key practices in advanced capitalist societies, and, we argue, as an affective *landscape* (see Dewsbury, 2015; Wylie, 2009), it also lies at the core of the widely discussed mental health problems of youth. More often than not, competition is assumed to be beneficial in general, and

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constitutive of the core values – such as efficiency and entrepreneurship – of advanced capitalist societies. These values are also the drivers of educational policymaking and pedagogic discourses. They take part in building the world in which young people live and learn. In recent research, the value of competition in education and for human moral growth has been questioned (Pulkki, 2016; Pulkki and Värri, 2021). We want to pursue this line of thought to make sense of the ill-effects of competition on young people, and to argue that the desire to harness education for advancing the societal goal of competitiveness is proving to be counterproductive.

Experiences of stress in the everyday have become common, and especially young people show alarming signs of stress-related problems, feelings of being overwhelmed with educational pressures – even burnout (Mental Health Foundation, 2021; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). The evidence suggests that the pressures to succeed effected through universalised competition in capitalist societies and the growing need to plan everyday life for the sake of the future, are turning toxic. We therefore ask, what is the rationale in exposing young people to high levels of stress, how does competition figure in this, and what are the consequences of this landscape to young people's lives, that is, what kind of subjects are formed through education in/for a competitive society?

Our motive for probing the concept of competition and the related political economy praxis is a wish to part from facile interpretations of this or that aspect of competition and understand how competition has come to dominate socio-spatial relations and imagination. Thorough theoretical engagement is necessary also for the purpose of bringing together the human subject and the world it inhabits in education: young people are submitted to the stress of career planning, hence subjectivated to a world of competition; and the world in turn is to be reproduced by these self-evaluating, indoctrinated subjects. We therefore seek to show that competition is not something unambiguously innate to humans, nor merely a feature of the market economy, but a central technology of power, and the 'human element' of capitalist time-space compression. To make sense of the world of competition, we thus refuse a separation of the human subject and its environment. We hereby resist the idea of the modern human subject who is detached, autonomous and in control of the world it inhabits. Following nonrepresentational theory's take on the world, and subject, as deeply relational and in-the-making (e.g. Anderson, 2014; Thrift, 2004; Wylie, 2009), we approach competition as a building property of the highly affective landscape of education from which young people's subjectivities emerge.

In our account, a 'landscape of competition' is then much more than a representational background for education. With nonrepresentational theorisation, we move away from the idea of landscape as something that is 'looked at' to conceptualising it as the spatial conditions with which humans see the world (Wylie, 2009). Landscape, with its presences and absences, is productive: it is the complex assemblage of geographical, historical, political, technological and economic conditions within which learning may or may not take place. The link between state practices and the reorientation of education for the knowledge-based economy, or the constructions of a particular world for which the learning human subject is trained, can be found in Nigel Thrift's (2011) conceptual assemblage of the *Lifeworld Inc.* Thinking with Thrift, we pursue a nonrepresentational analysis of the educational landscape of competition to unsettle the highly individualised, pronounced ethos of personal agency and responsibility of young people for their own education and life-paths – an ethos, which seems to be a damaging one.

Our discussion relates to a long-standing concern among children's geographers and other childhood scholars about viewing children and young people as 'not-ready', as non-adults, who will reach their desired state of fitness through stages of development and education (e.g. Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Philo and Smith, 2013). This framing of young people misses the fact that their lives are taking place here and now. Perceiving young people primarily as 'human futures' positions them as in need of biopolitical intervention in the name of protection (Lee and Motzkau, 2011), and as we argue

through the case of Finnish education, in the name of competitiveness. Through education and other normative practices, young people's bodies are continually shaped to fit social norms (see Aitken, 2001). Aiming to protect young people, and thus cultivate successful futures, often well-intentioned policies and practical measures insulate this *bubble-wrap generation* (Malone, 2007) from the surprises of life. Security has become an easy justification for many restrictive policies in young people's lives (Katz, 2016). In our reading, they are expressions of power that speak about a designed dynamic of a life-project subjected to a manipulative illusion of an 'individual will', paradoxically in service of collectively organised accumulation processes, a project harmful not only to young people but to all life. Ideas of security, progress and development are tied to the landscape of competition under discussion here.

We are particularly interested in the (explicit and implicit) role of competition in education because of its centrality in constituting the innovative human subject in societies characterised by the logic of the *knowledge-based economy*, in which 'international competitiveness' becomes the dominant societal ambition (Moisio, 2018). Through our reading of materials on the Finnish education system (OECD, 2014; Opetushallitus, 2019), we show that although the desirability of competition in education is questionable, recent reforms orient themselves towards accentuating competition, not necessary for learning as such, but as a learning object and an internalised assumption about how the world works. We argue that the unchallenged belief in the virtues of competition and the heavy emphasis on competitiveness are among the root causes for the ills in youth wellbeing. It does not then suffice to identify the challenges in wellbeing and help young people develop their disposition or organise better to be able to take the pressure. Instead, we need to think through the consequences of competition for education at large.

Against this background it needs to be asked: Where does competition come from, and why has it developed into an institutionalised modern imaginary? This is a surprisingly understudied aspect, given that competition is an elemental social phenomenon and organising principle (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021; Cerny, 1997; Harvey, 2015; Thorbjørnsen, 2019; Werron, 2015). The mere assumption of a competitive 'human nature' ignores the processes of knowing that go beyond the individual human. What is learning in this frame? If we do not accept a conception of learning as a mere process of piling representational 'information' but instead complicate the picture by figuring learning as an *event*, in which various things come together and make up new knowledge through a reordering of the subject (and world) (Pyry, 2017), it must be much more than a manageable process of individual achievement. How does competition fit to this understanding?

We therefore seek to identify the rationalities and problems of competition in education, the interests and politics that mobilise and proliferate competition, and finally the link between competition and subject formation. In section 'Maximum effort? Mapping the landscape of competition', we start the task by reviewing recent research on competition. In section 'Economisation and the competition-oriented political rationality', we proceed to an analysis of the political rationality of competitiveness, and its mobilisation in education as the engineering of stress. We then mirror this rationality against a relational and nonrepresentational understanding of the knowing subject and probe the effects of this landscape to education and young people's wellbeing. In the empirical part of the paper, we think with documentation on Finnish education and its reforms: in section 'A non-competitive education system in the service of competitive knowledge-economy' we introduce an OECD perspective on the competitiveness of the Finnish education system, and in section 'Reforming a success story for competition? The new Finnish curriculum for upper secondary education' we read the recently reformed curriculum for upper secondary education with a focus on the subject that it pre-figures. In the concluding section, we present our criticisms and recommendations concerning competition in and through education.

Maximum effort? Mapping the landscape of competition

In this section, we map the landscape of competition based on recent literature in education, economics, anthropology, political science and human geography. By doing this, we raise questions about the history, purpose and implications of competition for constituting the world that young people are educated for. Recent research in economics has pointed out that although competition has become *the* tool of governing organisations, and few fields remain untouched by it, its preconditions and constitution are mostly left unstudied (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Competition is usually studied in its effects, but its existence is assumed to be given, rendering it a quasi-natural quality.

Against these naturalising discursive tendencies, Pulkki (2017) has presented a compelling view on the educational problems of competition. Pulkki identifies three main sources for the status of competition as a self-evident virtue: the Hobbesian view of ‘man’ as an aggressive and self-interested being; the economic theory postulating scarcity of resources and insatiable desires; and the theory of evolution as a Darwinian struggle for the survival of the fittest. These, according to Pulkki (2017), form a circular logic that is harmful both to human subjects and the world they dwell in. The world of competition surging forward from these sources cannot be accepted as a universally valid science of motives, nor an adequate description/prescription for an organisation of society. The problem that competition as a self-evident virtue poses to education is that it displaces other virtues deemed socially desirable and constitutive of common good, such as justice, moderation and kindness. Pulkki presents a solid genealogy of competitive thought, and rightly identifies the educational problems of competition. For our purposes, Pulkki’s analysis forms a starting point on which we build our argument about the harmful effects of competition on the practices of education, the wellbeing of young people and on learning. In the following, our focus is on the role of economic knowledge practices that inform education.

Pulkki (2016: 2) succinctly points out that the idea of a competitive human nature ignores the fact that competition is, to a large extent, a learned practice. In discussions of moral growth, the contradiction between altruistic and egoistic motives, or their disorientation, is a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity. The etymology of competition points to its positive qualities. It derives from (the 16th Century) Latin *com* and *petere*, where *petere* means to ask, seek or pursue, and *com* means that this is done together with others. The moral tradition concerning competition ties with the idea of meritocracy as an antithesis of aristocratic privilege and violent passions. As discussed above, competition started to acquire its contemporary meanings with the development of economics, where competition is thought to stem from scarcity.

The problem with competition in the name of moral growth, is the hardening of attitudes towards (human and nonhuman) others. Understanding the ‘self’ as separate from other beings creates an illusion of control and locates the human outside of the world it inhabits. Pulkki’s (2016: 4) key contention against competition is that ‘recognition and loving approval are made artificially scarce resources, an object of competition, even though everyone is in need of these’. Competition produces more losers than winners. It favours a ‘strong will’ over sensitivity and intellect. In an event of competition, a ‘strong will’ disheartened by experienced failure may express its frustration as aggression and intolerance. Competition is understood to reveal an empiric truth about a person’s abilities, and thus failure in competition is experienced as evidence of one’s own inadequacies, or in the case of others, taken as proof of their unworthiness. These observations point to a need to dismantle the autonomy of the modern subject.

The knowledge practice whence competition gains much of its weight is the science of economics (for seminal discussion, see Polanyi, 1944). In economic theory, competition explains how an economy secures the maximal value with given resources and technology. Together with the economically rational individual and prevalence of scarcity, competition is one of the core premises of economics (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020: 2; Jessop, 2015: 11). From this outset, competition has become

the symbol of dynamism of the capitalist society, as well as a patent solution to its problems. The hegemony of neoclassical economics as social scientific theory has greatly contributed to this status of competition in societal imagination (Thorbjørnsen, 2019). Combined with political choices and prioritisations constitutive of neoliberal political praxis, competition has proliferated throughout advanced capitalist societies. Three perspectives have dominated the theorisation in economics: competition as the presence of specific market actions; competition as structural constellation of actors in relation to a resource; and competition as framing and sensemaking of a situation (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020: 2). These perspectives fall short in explaining the phenomenon and contend to assume that competition emerges when the conditions are right. ‘Competition is the construction of relationships among actors that centres on something scarce and desired’ (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020: 2). Thus, explaining the emergence and mobilisation of competition requires attention to its institutional and organisational underpinnings.

Anthropological research has identified a great variety of approaches to competition in different cultures. This goes against the assumption of the taken-for-granted nature of competition, since its content, role and significance vary greatly depending on the context. In anthropology, competition relates to ideas of status, relationships between individual and group, cooperation and conflict, structure of society and economic arrangements for distributing resources (Thorbjørnsen, 2019). For example, economic arrangements can be configured in many ways, as feminist economic geography and research on diverse economies have shown (Alhojärvi, 2021; Gibson-Graham, 2006). Apart from market exchange that goes hand in hand with the current understanding of competition, distribution of resources can be based, for example, on gift-exchange and redistribution, where competition is configured differently.

The emphasis given to competition in economics, and through its influence, in wider social discourse, is a peculiar development that depends on particular knowledge interests and accordingly selected categories. Competition as the central component of the ‘market economy’ acquired its status as part of the price theory based on supply and demand, which was supposed to be the ideal method for creating prosperity (Thorbjørnsen, 2019: 127). Central requirement for this theory to work is that competition is ‘free’, as if happening on the head of a pin. From an anthropological perspective, the theories of competition in classical and neoclassical economics are simply historical layers among many. There is little doubt that competition, rather than being a natural phenomenon, is a result of history, culture, socialisation – and education.

In human geography, competition is usually discussed in terms of a political economy approach to the spatial politics of capitalism (e.g. Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014; Harvey, 2015). Critical engagements with competition in human geography have identified it as the founding myth in the success story of capitalism. According to the myth, competition is a natural human proclivity that capitalism unleashes from social constraints and channels through the market for production of a dynamic and progressive social system (Harvey, 2015: 131). Yet, at the same time, competition seems to coexist in contradictory unity with the formation of monopolies: if given the choice, most capitalists prefer to be monopolists rather than competitors. More fundamentally, there is a monopolising power inherent in private property, the most concrete example of which is the monopolisation of spatial location through land and property ownership (Harvey, 2015: 137). Further geographical expressions of spatial competition include practices of place marketing and branding of big cities, or concerns with national competitiveness.

While we acknowledge the significance of this research and its arguments, it is our claim that there is more to be said on the felt experiences and effects of competition, especially regarding young people. The analysis of competition in human geography can be advanced by asking how political rationality modelled after the unquestioned assumptions about competition affect educational policies, what kind of subjectivities are formed in such education, and at what cost, in terms of wellbeing and opening/foreclosing futures. We can relate this kind of approach on competition for example, to Harvey’s

(1989: 240) work concerning time-space compression. From the perspective of subjectivation through education, time-space compression concerns the subjugation of life processes and their time to the time of the accumulation process. This induces social relations with instability and insecurity, and necessitates a malleable, flexible subject that is both a resilient and obsessively curious life-long learner. One adaptation to the time-space compression is to embrace it. This approach produces fast managerial subjects, living under continuous strain of high performance (Thrift, 2000: 674). The successful learner in this landscape is then one that does not question the conditions of its own being. It can be argued that this instrumental and adaptive ‘curiosity-based’ learning is, in fact, not learning at all. As the spell of curiosity works to capture the attention of the subject, moving from one piece of ‘information’ to the next, a more radical opening of worlds is effectively foreclosed (Pyry and Aiava, 2020). As Thrift (2011: 8) argues, this appearing form of continuity ensures that ‘there are no dead ends’ – no questions in the form of hesitation.

The internalisation and naturalisation of competition is a powerful mechanism of convergence, through which states, societies and subjects become alike. Competitive pressures and associated metrics produce homogenisation of state practices, spatial strategies and human subjects. In the process, financial institutions, for example, credit raters, exercise significant power. Regarding subjectivation, intense competition leads to a situation where ‘those who compete with each other will quite automatically come to resemble each other’ (Ringmar, 2005: 14). From the perspective of power, the contradictory unity of competition and monopoly (as a suspension of competition) manifests itself also in the fact that the capacity to protect oneself from competition is the key sign of social prestige and status, if not power itself. It seems that people have historically found it necessary to shield themselves from ‘capitalism’, or as we argue, from competition, through a number of elaborate social and institutional protective arrangements such as family, guilds, trade unions, corporations or certain state forms for example, *Rechtsstaat* and welfare state (Ringmar, 2005: 20). These arrangements always play a double role: they protect their members from the market forces and competition, yet at the same time they prepare their members for them. This double role is also key to understanding the complexities of education.

These analyses in the vein of political economy succeed in identifying the centrality and usefulness of competition in capitalist practices. As a founding myth, the value and inevitability of competition are assumed to be given. On the other hand, competition is clearly an efficient technology of power that produces the subjects and objects of capitalist social formation, and functions as a tool of their convergence and management. However, as a research task, the unveiling of the machinations of capital and workings of social power are not enough, which is why we need to probe the mobilisation and learning of competition in education.

Returning to recent education research relevant for our purposes, Janne Sääntti, Petteri Hansen and Antti Saari (2021) have analysed the rhetoric of future in educational policy and reforms. As they point out, the future is constantly referenced, but seldom conceptualised. The scenarios of future in education policy documents are selective and perform a function of self-fulfilling prophecies, enacting the very futures they predict. From a nonrepresentational point of view, these scenarios are more than (re-)presentations of an existing world; they actively take part in building the landscape of education. Competition locks the world to a single ontology and therefore closes horizons of diverse possible futures. In the rhetoric of educational texts, there is a strong tendency to mobilise pathos in the sense of evoking discontent at the purportedly outdated Finnish education system. This ties with the research on neoliberalisation in the competition state (Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014), where the evocation of crisis or critical condition is a standard rhetorical device. This suggests that the education reforms are articulated based on a common competitive political-economic rationality. Finally, Sääntti et al. (2021: 862) draw attention to the role of the OECD in reining in education systems in the service of economic production and technological innovations: ‘Thus, after the turn of the millennium, education has become a solution for enhancing competitiveness in the labor market and for helping nations succeed as a “knowledge society” in the global economy’.

The provisional outcome of our venture into the landscape of competition so far is the rejection of the idea that competition is a natural human ‘behaviour’, and the identification of the role of institutional constituents in its construction (organisation of actors, relationships, scarcity and desire), combined with the insight from human geography and anthropology that the practices of competition are productive of spatial organisation and situated human subjects. Linked to this, refusing the pathological understanding of learning and wellbeing as individual qualities is relevant to probing what this landscape does. We now move to analyse competition as an organising principle and technology of power in its relation to neoliberalisation and the political rationality of the knowledge-based economy, through which the pressures on education and the subjectivation of young people assume their current form.

Economisation and the competition-oriented political rationality

As discussed, competition needs competitors and prize-givers, but if we do not buy into the claim that competition is natural for humans, we need to look for its managers. In this regard, one would be hard pressed to ignore the formation of the competition state – a state form geared towards economic performance in the conditions of advanced capitalism (Cerny, 1997). In it, competition, most often articulated as international competitiveness, becomes both the key objective of state practices, including education, and a means of solving various problems faced by the state, such as the increasing (age) dependency ratio. Through the competition state, economic interest groups and enterprises exercise influence on societal practices. Informed by economic knowledge, concepts of competition, market and growth gain an accentuated status and become established as objects of public concern and state governance. On this basis, specific interest groups that have access to the policy processes, slide their concerns and conceptualisations into education and curriculums. Through the process of reform, the logics of competition, growth and market have increasingly come to channel subjectification processes in and through the education system. By raising the concern with competition, defined as competitiveness of different sectors of economy or public services, the logic of the market is (more or less successfully) reinforced in education with the purpose of inducing economic growth, above all by increasing the productivity of the individual human subject.

The discourse on competitiveness is a constituent part of the *economisation* (see Çalışkan and Callon, 2009) of politics and society. As national competitiveness, it emerged in the OECD circles in the 1980s and has become a political reasoning that binds together various state and business elites (Ahlqvist and Moisiso, 2014: 22). According to its logic, the stability of the public sector must be sacrificed for enhanced market performance. The conditions of competition are produced by active state intervention in support of commodification and expanding markets. ‘In that sense neoliberalisation can be equated to the desire to organise social life within polities according to the principles of competition as well as the attempts to encourage enterprising subjectivities’ (Ahlqvist and Moisiso, 2014: 22). This subjects the territory, population and state institutions – including the education system – to the rationality enforced by the market. Apart from constructing a particular rationality, these principles produce a peculiarly narrow horizon for the future, a world where competition on all levels reigns supreme, and is further amplified by institutional reforms conducted in its image. This dominant social aspect of the time-space compression is embodied and experienced as stress. The socialisation of young people to competition through stress is an alarmingly harmful part of the process.

Eligible visions of the future are governed by influential imaginaries and discourses, successfully marrying knowledge with power (Foucault, 1982). The dominant master narrative in advanced capitalist societies since the 1990s has been the development of a knowledge-based economy, often taken as a global fact (Moisiso, 2018: 13). The growing relative significance of knowledge in wealth creation is seen to offer a competitive advantage, which leads to special significance attributed to research and development, information technologies, media and entertainment and education. The imaginary holds

a promise of limitless economic growth through innovation, despite environmental limits: it constructs an idea of dynamic and comfortable urban life accessible through success in high-skilled jobs and entrepreneurship, and most importantly, guarantees the flow of profit and growth of investment value infinitely. The material core – in this context always a bit ambivalent – of the knowledge-based economy consists of three circuits: production (especially in the high-technology sector), built environment (technopolisation and urbanisation) closely linked to investment and finance, and knowledge production (human capital, academic capitalism, knowledge brands), which concerns the spaces and processes of learning and science, research and education (Moisio, 2018: 21). The emphasised significance of education in the knowledge-based economisation puts strong pressures on the skills and mind-set of a learning young person. The human subject is constituted as a site of valorisation, or as an entrepreneurial subject forming the human capital in knowledge-intensive capitalism (Moisio and Rossi, 2020).

One of the most influential concepts contributing to the transnational process of knowledge-based economisation, and one widely promoted in the OECD circles, has been national competitiveness (e.g. Porter, 1998). It is a prize object of consultant knowledge, and at the same time a problematic conceptualisation: what concerns firms in a market is questionably generalised for the state and society. It could hardly be said that states are in a win-lose situation against each other in the current conditions of trade, nor are they primarily wealth-creating social organisations. Despite these vague intellectual grounds, concern with competitiveness has become a central political tenet in many spatial contexts (Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014), having influence at a systemic level, as the discourse on competition states indicates.

Knowledge-based economisation produces political communities as objects of competition (Moisio, 2018: 70). This is articulated in comparisons where different political communities (cities, regions, states) are said to succeed or fail. Basis for these comparisons is provided by calculative practices that produce metrics, graphs and maps representing the status of different units in the ‘fierce international competition’ for wealth, prestige and vitality. Attention to these knowledge-making practices is important because they seem to be key to the construction of this ‘fierce international competition’. Virtual spaces of comparison assemble the knowledge-based economy by identifying its objects: these (re-)presentations create hierarchies of places that exercise considerable pressure on collective consciousness of localities, cities, regions and state populations, and consequently inform policies and development projects by governments and other actors. ‘The virtual spaces of comparison are thus not only descriptive but also, and more importantly, highly affectual, productive and even disciplinary with respect to other social and governmental practices’ (Moisio, 2018: 72). The objects of competition are formed through methods of gathering, analysing and sorting of data concerning individuals, research units, schools, cities or countries. These are evaluated and ranked against each other, premised on the omnipresent assumption of competition, which gets constituted and made visible in the process. The distribution of these metrics and their manipulative content in a matrix of brands and prestige is a core business of the knowledge-based economy, but their influence is greatest in informing policies and reforms concerning for example, education in different national contexts. The representational knowledge-claims of virtual spaces of comparison aptly summarise the process of producing actors, relationships, scarcity and desire constitutive of competition. The description becomes a prescription. This knowledge production contributes to the narrowing and managing of potential futures. These assumptions and the whipped up competitive dynamism materialise in the organisation of education, where the problem of competition assumes yet another form.

Education in and through competition is part of the process where the state can turn its contradictions productive by engaging with the processes of knowledge-based economisation, enabling an assemblage, which Thrift (2011: 11) conceptualises as the security-entertainment complex. The economic sectors of security and entertainment, and their involvement with the state are at the core of authoritarian capitalism of the neoliberal era (Thrift, 2011: 12). The knowledge intensive economy

thrives on *technologies of power* (Foucault, 1977) that provide two key means for centralising and exercising governance: control through surveillance and distraction through entertainment. In the logic of security, young people tend to get identified as objects of policing. The sense of powerlessness and alienation that the exclusion from public life creates, makes it easy to sell ‘safe’ experiences to youth. As insecurity increases in public space, parents fight harder to keep their children safe – and are willing to pay for it (Aitken, 2001; Katz, 2016). For the operations of capital, formal institutions of democracy do not need to be challenged, because the new technologies of power deliver political passivity, and give privileged elites the control over formal politics. The media system is at the core of political discourse and entertainment, where the two constantly mix, and prominent politicians are seen as a part of the celebrity crowd. The primacy of economic practices organised through competition produces political passivity by taking away time (and space) to engage with public concerns and political action, and by orienting human consciousness to the pursuit of private pleasures. In a world that feels open, everything is accessible and often only a click away, as algorithms capture people’s attention by tailored content (Karppi, 2015). In this affective landscape, a new consciousness and subjectivity are produced within a system of energetic exchanges and sociocultural devices forming ‘a phenomenology machine’, or phenomenal awareness consisting of surfaces appearing as flows that Thrift calls the Lifeworld Inc. In it, the supposed authenticity of the lifeworld, ‘[. . .] becomes a market value that can be constructed through the calculated marriage of apperception and feeling [. . .]’ (Thrift, 2011: 15).

Thrift identifies the intelligence of intelligence and engineering of stress as two capacities that integrate the security-entertainment complex to state practices and allow it to grow. Both are linked to the increased interactivity through sociotechnical convergence. For our agenda, the engineering of stress is particularly interesting, because it can be used to link competition as a technology of power to the geographical and bodily experiences of competition as stress. This is based on common knowledge that ‘events nowadays come freighted with stress’ – that is, as cultural organisation of emotions by the calculations of the security and entertainment complex (Thrift, 2011: 13). Thrift’s outlining of the Lifeworld Inc allows us to consider competition as the late capitalism’s technology of power and probe the processes of education attuned to the conditions of this world. Education is the core process of socialising youth to a particular world. We identify ‘engineering of stress’ as the core concern in attempts to further mobilise competition in the context of Finnish education (more in section ‘Reforming a success story for competition? The new Finnish curriculum for upper secondary education’). From this perspective, education is a field of struggle. It can provide both, knowledge to challenge the claustrophobic space of the Lifeworld Inc, as well as acceptance and malleability to its practices. The history and achievements of the Finnish education favour non-competitive practices, yet the pressures growing in the surrounding society through projects of state and economic elites, have led to a situation where competition is increasingly becoming part of the education and experiences of young people, as we now will discuss.

A non-competitive education system in the service of competitive knowledge-economy

In this section, we dig deeper into the relationship of competition and education. The OECD is an important forum for disseminating information on competitive practices in Finland. Thus, a document assessing the Finnish education system from the perspective of (non-)competition, and as a model for another national context (South Korea) is highly relevant for our discussion in its knowledge interest. The book chapter, *Finland: A non-competitive education for a competitive economy*, frames the discussion as a ‘double success’ of Finland: in PISA (OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment) ranking, and assessments of economic competitiveness – while stating at the outset that the success of education is based on an emphasis of cooperation and networking, rather than

competition. At the same time, in a peculiar move, the non-competitiveness of education is recuperated into the framework of economic competitiveness.

In the OECD narrative, Finland is a model country with the PISA performance as evidence. For a policy document, the narrative is strong and comes with a catch: educating young people to be competitive may not require their education to be based on competitive practices, but on principles of equality, care, wellbeing and trust (OECD, 2014: 175). For our purposes, the most important part of the OECD document is the analysis of the relationship between educational practices and economic competitiveness. In the document, the success of Finnish education is attributed to its alignment with the needs of a competitive knowledge economy. The traits that contribute to this are the emphasis on cooperation rather than competition, the flexibility of the educational system (and the parallel flexibility of economic regulation), the provision of career guidance and counselling, and the valuing of experimentation and creativity (OECD, 2014: 179–180). More generally, the strengths of Finnish education are identified to be academically trained high-quality teachers, efficient and minimalistic educational policy, and teaching practice with a right balance of formal instruction and informal learning, student diagnosis and early intervention, creativity in the sense of risk-taking, flexibility, initiative, collaboration and deep sectoral reforms, that is, systematic building of professionalism and trust in schools and teachers. The last point attributes the success of Finnish education to the shape and functioning of the educational system itself, which is antithetical to continuous programmatic initiatives from a central government, as well as to competition-oriented external inspections, standardised testing and non-public governance of schools (OECD, 2014: 183).

Despite its commendable argument for a non-competitive education, the OECD book chapter constitutes an attempt at appropriating education for the purposes of knowledge-based economisation. The success of a non-competitive education in contributing to a competitive economy implies that it produces the right kind of human subjects. The qualities that are deemed useful in the knowledge-based economy are creativity and innovation, which are brought about by inclusive educational policy that seeks to mobilise ‘everybody’s imagination and creative talent’ (OECD, 2014: 7), and a relaxed atmosphere at schools, which encourages initiative and inspiration. Through calculations, compensations, competition and representation of measurable results, the technocratic logic produces a subject that is detached from others. To be able to compete means that the situation needs to be identified as competitive and as involving competitor(s). In learning, this means that the results must be somehow measurable or represented (by PISA or other tests) – how else to compete?

Conceptualising learning as something that must be represented narrows down the idea of what it can be. If learning is discursive, purposeful, individual and measurable, the relational and emergent nature of the world is ignored. Competition then re-produces a rift between subject and world, and places value on certain kinds of knowledge and (human) capacities. The entrepreneurial subject, capable of competition, is also one that resides outside of its world. As Thrift (2011) suggests, (neo-) Kantian idealism lies at the core of prevailing understandings of knowing and knowledge. A move from knowing *about* the world, based on a clear subject/object divide, towards a provocative awareness of how the world is continually built, is needed to open new modes of (human) existence, and critically question the grip of the Lifeworld Inc. This awareness arises from radical events of (re)congnising the world: thinking that escapes fixed points and calculation. This generative push for new associations is felt in the event of learning as *hesitation* before the already known (see Thrift et al., 2010: 196). This form of transformative eventual learning can be understood as knowing *with*, an orientation of in-built experimentalism and variation (Pyry, 2017). The learning subject emerges from the practices of knowledge-making, it never pre-exists them. The understanding raises serious questions about the value of representational tests in education, as they seem to add to the production of subjects detached from others and the planet. The OECD document usefully complicates the understanding of competition by disconnecting competitive practices in education from the process of learning to become competitive. The recognition of the autonomy of the education system as the

precondition for its excellence is a crucial point. What is also indicated, however, is that education does not have to be organised competitively, but it can still orient itself towards competitive practices through subjectivation. This links directly to young people's wellbeing. If we agree on a relational and emergent world, wellbeing is never a quantifiable inner characteristic of a discrete, separate subject (Smith and Reid, 2018: 818) – nor is the governing of it the responsibility of an individual young person. Wellbeing arises from complex and powerful relations that build the everyday geographies of youth (see Phillips et al., 2015). The OECD analysis hints at an uncomfortable conclusion: it is not the organisation of education, per se, that is undermining the wellbeing of youth. Rather, the expectations and practices of the competitive society do so, since they appropriate education and young people's lives for pre-determined goals that prevent genuine engagement, experimentation and sensing with (what goes on in) the world. Welcome to the Lifeworld Inc. The dialectic between competition and non-competition concerns the way education is organised: practices of education that do not directly rely on setting up conditions of competition have proved to produce better educational results. Thus, the societal goal of competitiveness is served through the performance of the educational system, which is enhanced by shielding the students from harmful effects of competition. The interventions to the autonomy of the education in the name of producing economically useful subjects seem to be completely ignoring this relationship between non-competition and competition.

Young people are drawn into imaginaries of competition in their extracurricular activities in a way that freights their experience with stress, regardless of the organisation of their education. The desire produced in the appropriated, materialist and commercialised Lifeworld Inc builds expectations concerning individuality, achievement and success. The desired economic values, and social status attainable through them, are acquired in the marketplace through high-value jobs, or the 'golden touch', that is, the connection to capital established otherwise, embodied in the cult of celebrities. The real or perceived scarcity of various objects of desire creates relations of competition that may produce heightened activity of economic value, but they also produce human subjects that are detached and stressed – and then ready to buy their way out of the felt anxiety. These experiences heavily influence how young people engage with each other in different spatial networks, often creating 'bubbles' muted to each other, hereby increasing polarisation in the society.

The organisation of society according to competitive principles, and the horizon of expectations created in the process, produce the affective landscape of competition that is felt by young people even if their education emphasises cooperation and care. We now turn to the reformed curriculum of Finnish upper secondary education, asking if its framing leaves space for being/thinking *otherwise* – a question that directly links to young people's wellbeing. The discussion on reforms of the Finnish education system through the example of upper secondary education curriculum lays ground for concluding the discussion with reference to the recently evoked sense of crisis on the dropping performance of Finnish education in international PISA comparisons.

Reforming a success story for competition? The new Finnish curriculum for upper secondary education

Renewal of the curriculum for upper secondary education in Finland started in 2017. The new curriculum has been in effect from August 2021. In short, the objectives of the reform are to enhance the wellbeing of students, to provide them with more comprehensive skills for higher education and work, and to provide more individualised support for students' needs and learning (Opetushallitus, 2019). The first and last of the three points that motivate the educational reform have to do with the concern for young people's wellbeing. The middle one is aimed at enhancing student performance.

The stated purpose of the reform is 'to raise the level of education of the nation' (Opetushallitus, 2019: 9). The goal is that more than 50% of the age group receive higher education (currently 41%). The reasoning behind this is the anticipated rising demand for highly educated expert workforce in the

rapidly growing business sector. One specific aim of upper secondary education is to smoothen the students' transition to higher education. This is believed to require more individualised and flexible study paths, as well as increased transdisciplinarity. These goals are well in line with the logic of the competition state and the imaginary of the knowledge-based economy. The motivation for the reform is provided by the representational practices of comparison – metrics that constantly reproduce stress about the success or failure of the 'competition state' in the 'international arena'. The future-orientation of capitalism means that any achievement is always on the verge of obsolescence. This necessitates the constant reform of practices, institutions and human subjects.

The logic of the curriculum is integrated by a central concept of transversal competences (Opetushallitus, 2019: 10). The concept provides us with a wealth of material for probing the subject that the reformed curriculum is expected to produce. The other core elements of the curriculum – values, conception of learning and the working culture of upper secondary education – form the foundation for building transversal competences that integrate various disciplinary knowledges and orient them towards praxis. The transversal competence areas that integrate the disciplinary knowledges with the overall educational objectives are (1) competences in wellbeing, (2) interaction competences, (3) multidisciplinary and creative competences, (4) societal competences, (5) ethical and environmental competences and (6) global and cultural competences. The purpose of conceptualising these competence areas is to orient the disciplinary knowledges towards 'practical life' or studying, working, leisure activities and the everyday (Opetushallitus, 2019: 10).

The human subject pre-figured in the curriculum is well-rounded and versatile yet curiously one-dimensional and subservient. Obviously, the curriculum seeks to be comprehensive in the sense of providing instruction and learning opportunities in relevant areas, and it is hardly assumed that any one student will be strong in every competence area. Still, the comprehensive set of competences can also be read – against the landscape of competition – as a set of requirements. It is as if everything is loaded on the shoulders of the young individual.

The focus on the individual is perhaps the feature of the curriculum that places it most clearly in the landscape of competition. The progress and success of the student requires individualised attention to smoothen (and accelerate) their way to higher education. Behind this focus is the recognition that students need varied support. Alongside the well-intended care for individual students, the curriculum sketches an individualised conception of learning: 'a result of the student's active and purposeful action' through which 'the student interprets, analyses, and assesses data, information or knowledge represented in different formats based on earlier experiences and knowledges' (Opetushallitus, 2019: 18). The curriculum rests on an autonomous knowing subject, a *cogito* capable of reflecting on its 'own' development (towards adulthood): 'A student aware of their learning processes can assess and develop their learning and thinking skills and become gradually more and more autonomous/self-guided' (Opetushallitus, 2019: 19). As the landscape is constitutive of the subject, the rationalities of the educational policy and its reform work towards an entrepreneurial subject capable of self-organisation – a process that adds both to disconnecting the human from the world it inhabits, and to the competitiveness of the society.

The curriculum expresses concern for students' physical, psychological and social wellbeing and seeks to provide skills for their upkeep. This goal is one of the transversal competence areas, which attests to its great importance. Discussion focuses on concrete topics such as exercise, rest, food and the community as the site of wellbeing. The concern for the wellbeing of students foregrounds the double role of education as a protective arrangement that is also to prepare students for competition. The concern points to an implied understanding of the societal ills compromising the wellbeing of youth. In its current form, the curriculum accentuates the socialising function of education through a focus on providing skills for taking care of oneself in the process of becoming a resilient subject. Unfortunately, the emphasis on the individual and competitive subject narrows the space for collective wellbeing. Following Berlant (2011), this is a relation of cruel optimism: putting the

responsibility of wellbeing on young people's shoulders misleads them to think that they alone could (and should) govern their life paths. In the end, they are asked to adjust to a situation that fundamentally causes their stress, depression or anxiety. In a landscape of competition, all efforts to care for young people seem to eventually point to their development and renewal for the vampiric system.

The concern with the continuing success of the Finnish education from the perspective of metrics and national competitiveness has been expressed in policy discourses (Säntti et al., 2021) that have contributed to governmental initiatives and regulations. The law on upper secondary education (Lukiolaki, 714/2018: 15§) states that the student must have the opportunity to develop international, working and entrepreneurial skills as well as their capability for higher education. These foci influence the content of the current educational policy in a way that has been detectable in the project of the Finnish competition state from the 1990s onwards. These contents are prioritised so that it is mandatory for schools to cooperate with universities and businesses. In the reformed curriculum, there is a distinct flavour of intervention into the autonomy of education. This is linked to learning goals that seek to define practical skills and work in an economised and instrumentalised rhetoric. The section 3.6 *Higher education, working life, and internationality* (Opetushallitus, 2019: 24–26) stands out in this regard.

Section 3.6 brings together the central tenets concerning the subject and world of competition (Opetushallitus, 2019: 25). The student is encouraged to familiarise themselves with the international and global business opportunities as well as with forms of economic activity, entrepreneurship and work, and to plan their studies accordingly. Activity, open mindedness and opportunism are encouraged as a part of an entrepreneurial way of operating. The world is conceived as an 'operating environment' that is fast-changing. Education is to encourage the student to share and reflect on entrepreneurial/business themes and skills actively and systematically. 'Educational content in different disciplines, broad skills and applicable extra-curricular activities open perspectives to a meaningful life, in which work is a central part' (Opetushallitus, 2019: 25).

An important arena for subjectivation through education is student supervision. Students are required to make a personal education plan (Opetushallitus, 2019: 29), which consists of (1) a study plan, (2) a matriculation examination plan, and (3) an education and career plan. This kind of planning seems to leave very little space for transformative encounters, that is, learning conceptualised as an event of opening new space for being/thinking differently (Pyry, 2017). From the viewpoint of transformation, learning is a break in the established knowledge – not a linear process of preparing the subject for optimal performance (also Yacek et al., 2020). In fact, in our reading, the planning effort is as if designed to foreclose the possibilities of learning altogether. Study planning is both a protective arrangement for the student who is entering the unforgiving markets, and a practice of engineering stress. Through stress management, competitive pressures become bodily experiences potentially leading to hyper-performance, but also to exhaustion, anxiety and health problems.

Against this aporia – the desire to enhance performance in the race of competition, and the simultaneous desire to enhance young people's wellbeing – it is necessary to think through our understandings of the human subject. From a relational point of view, the learning subject never precedes the event of learning but is formed with it. This understanding ties together the knower and the known (world). Likewise, wellbeing needs to be understood relationally, not as an individual business. As discussed by Pyry (2017) in her earlier research, separation of the knowing subject from its environment forecloses wonder and care for the world. Here, care is understood to arise from genuine dwelling *with* others, human and non-human. Care links to wellbeing since it emerges from a shared affective landscape of opening towards difference and otherness. The hyper-individualisation of our time then adds to foreclosing both care and learning, and, in the process, also dismisses young people's worry for the Planet and its others. Therefore, any effort for the wellbeing – or truly transformative learning – of young people is sadly undermined by the very landscape they live and learn with.

Conclusion, and some openings

‘What is happening currently with Lifeworld Inc is that practical vocabularies for understanding and constituting this ontology are running ahead of any theoretical vocabulary. That might not matter if these vocabularies were a benign development but many of them are not’ (Thrift, 2011: 23).

Thrift’s concern with the theoretical vocabularies for understanding contemporary experience is well-grounded. The case of obscurity and naturalisation of competition attests to this. It is not that we lack theories of competition or vocabularies to formulate its ills. By engaging with the affective landscape of competition in education and learning, this article has addressed ‘the effects of the fetishization of competition as a principle of societal organization and its role in subordinating society to the logic of profit-oriented, market-mediated accumulation’ (Jessop, 2015: 23). Yet more is needed, not only to explain or understand, but to *feel* the consequences of these machinations in the flesh and blood of human subjects – and to make space for something *else*. At a time when ‘data’ is flowing via every interface – and any information is quickly yesterday’s news – a new provocative awareness is needed in the security-entertainment complex to imagine alternative worlds and learn associative open-ends. This is especially important in the context of digitalisation, which is heavily shaping the worlds of young people. The indirect influence of global technology companies through digitalisation strategies can be felt also in education.

If learning is an event of becoming aware of the conditions that make up the world, then educators must create situations where young people learn to probe the conditions of their life. This requires an experimental mode of being in the world, a counter-experimental examination of the experimental economy and its continuous event creation. But, how to hesitate and question, when you might lose the competition if you stop for a minute? How to dwell in uncertainty and wonder when ‘knowledge’ is available right at hand, and goals are pre-determined? Our worry for young people’s wellbeing and learning has to do with the speed and overtly curious quest for the new, and the cruel optimism about the powers of the individual subject. With this worry, we return to Thrift’s (2011: 8) concern for the continuity that gets its ‘phenomenological grip from ensuring that what should be an experience of dislocation is experienced as an intuitive plane of motion – always going somewhere – through a whole host of techniques which are designed to sink into the background and to be background: conceal innards, eliminate dead links, make sure there are no dead ends. . .’. The landscape of competition orients us to value certainties, efficiency and instrumental reduction. It orients education to dismiss the eventfulness and movement of the world. There is no disturbance of the (competing) subject.

Recent development in phenomenon-based learning, emphasised in the new Finnish curriculum, is promising in its encouragement for affectually engaged knowledge creation. Although still resting on the idea of a separate knowing (human) subject, phenomenon-based learning inspires the students to explore the world in more open-ended terms and learn to be receptive to their environments and its multiple others. This is an important move towards fighting the current hyper-individualisation and fetishism of representation. It is also a much-welcomed move towards breaking the artificial division of thought and affect (see Manning and Massumi, 2014; Pyry, 2022).

We began our discussion by addressing the role of competition in advanced capitalist societies and by pointing out its obscure origins and neglected implications. By conceptualising learning as event, we made an argument against the instrumentalisation of education for economic performance accelerated through competition. Through making visible the landscapes of competition forming in the processes of the competition state, economisation, neoliberalisation, knowledge-based economy, culminating in the conceptualisation of the embodied experience at the grips of the Lifeworld Inc, we outlined the pervasive nature of competition as an organisational principle and central form of power. Moving on to education, our key findings from the OECD perspective on the Finnish education system is that it both recognises and effectively instrumentalises the virtues of a non-competitive educational praxis, and the professional autonomy of the Finnish education system. The pressures put on

education in name of future connect to the central role of organisations like the OECD in the instrumentalisation of education. From this perspective, the location of competitive pressures that young people are facing are not so much in education than in the society of the Lifeworld Inc.

Our reading of the curriculum reform of the upper secondary education provides grounds for critique of governmental intervention to educational autonomy, and to ineffectual concern for students' wellbeing. For learning and wellbeing alike, the individualisation and requirement for planning are problematic from the perspective of learning as event. The trouble with the focus on student wellbeing is that the desire for protective arrangements does not reach the core of the problem: it is the world students are prepared for that is making them sick in the first place, the appropriated and instrumentalised Lifeworld Inc. Mindfulness exercises or career planning are not going to cut this cruel cycle of individualisation and affective subjectification; they only train young people to adjust to a vampiric system of competition. This logic ignores young people's despair by defining stress as a personal issue that can be managed with sports, better sleep and diet, or depression as (only) a psychological problem.

The implications of competition require more research attention, for which the fact that, in research, competition is already the air that academics breathe, creates its own complications. This paper is therefore a call for both slow learning, and slow science. Competition is the dominant modernist imaginary, the taken-for-granted assumption and naturalised knowledge, proliferated through neoliberal practices. At a time of serious problems in young people's wellbeing, the ideology of competition seems to thrive stronger than ever – sad and ironic from the viewpoint of the needed renewal of the workforce. In light of recent public discussion, and moral panic, concerning the downward turn of the relative quality of the Finnish education, we have reason to believe that the intensifying competitive orientation is also counterproductive to the very goal of 'competitiveness'. Competition is at its most efficient as a practice of wielding and re-presenting social power, which is the reason for its continuous proliferation despite its ill effects – it is part and parcel with the Lifeworld Inc. That is why the benevolence and universality of competition needs to be challenged and politicised.

As practical recommendation, we suggest that the autonomy of the education system is the best guarantee for high quality education; added emphasis on competitiveness does not help produce more creative subjects. Education is also not the main site where the wellbeing problems of young people can be 'dealt with'. Their wellbeing can only be partially nurtured in education because the real problem is with the affective landscape of savage competition effected in the Lifeworld Inc. If the concern with young people's wellbeing is genuine, it is this landscape that needs to change. It means that we need a less competitive society. However, our analysis also reveals the inadequacy of the dominant theories of learning in dealing with the unease of young people. Understanding learning as an event of transformation points to the opening of space for difference and being/thinking otherwise – that is, experimentally questioning the mass-produced phenomenological encounter of the Lifeworld Inc. We therefore need a stronger cultivation of ethical subjects critical of the world they dwell in. We need to take young people's distress and depression in front of the ecological crisis seriously, and not treat those as individual problems. By placing the human knowing subject in the world of its dwelling, also young people's trust in formal education will hopefully be reinstalled.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Heikki Sirviö's research and work on this paper was funded by the Department of Geosciences and Geography, Helsinki University (grant: Pyry, 7510155).

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