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Interrupting psychological management of youth training

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ABSTRACT
The main aim of this article is to highlight how existence as well as choice in the context of young people “at risk” stems not so much from the individual young person as from the condition of possibility. A secondary aim is to interrupt current understanding of the possible conditions of young people from various backgrounds within the rise of psychological management, and of the potential role of various kinds of youth-support systems. The article is based on results of a research project investigating youth support systems in the ethos of vulnerability.

KEYWORDS
Young people; support systems; ethos of vulnerability; psychological management

Introduction

During a short training programme in prison a young adult explained that everyone was expected to set their own goals, which they were trying to reach and plan for. 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.’

In a short-term training programme for young people at risk there was a session on happiness training. Young people were told about the importance of positivity and happiness with reference to Indian people. The teacher said enthusiastically: ‘People in India might be quite poor, but despite being poor they are very happy. You can be happy, too, if you really put your mind to it.’

Young people generally are among the most vulnerable groups in society, and this is especially true in the current crisis.

(The extracts above are from individually produced data from researchers (names anonymised) working in a research project the author is currently leading.)

Previous sociological research has shown how young people are commonly conceptualised in cross-sectoral policies and their implementations as psycho-emotionally vulnerable, and this has increasingly shaped youth support systems (Brown, 2014; Farrugia & Smyth, 2015; Fawcett, 2009; Fionda, 2005; Gillies, Edwards, & Horsley, 2017; Lumby, 2012; McLeod, 2012; Muncie, 2006; teriee & gorur, 2015; Van Loon, 2008). A range of both national and transnational, as well as local, policy bodies, educational institutions and NGOs have made massive investments based on political initiatives to develop support systems intended to reach psycho-emotionally vulnerable young people and to include
them in education and work (e.g. Brunila, 2012; European Commission, 2010; Muller, Gangl, & Ller, 2003). In addition, previous youth studies have shown that young people’s inclusion and exclusion shape their societal participation and abilities to navigate in changing conditions. Nevertheless, the support systems tend to be falling short in terms of meeting the interests of young people from various backgrounds (e.g. Brunila et al., 2017; Kurki, Masoud, Niemi, & Brunila, 2017; Loncle, Cucunato, Muniglia, & Walther, 2012; Lundahl, 2011; Muller et al., 2003; White & Wyn, 2013).

With regard to young people and when societal power relations are to be taken seriously, there should be continuous awareness of discursive practices through which young people speak and understand about themselves and are spoken and understood about by others. The main aim of this article is to scrutinise how being and doing as well as choice in the context of young people “at risk” stems not so much from the individual young person as from the condition of possibility, in other words discourses that state not only what is desirable but also what is recognisable as an acceptable form of being and doing. A secondary aim is to advance current understanding of the possible conditions of young people from various backgrounds within the psychological management, and of the potential role of various kinds of youth-support systems.

The rise of psychological management related to young people

The data and results presented in this article derive from an on-going three-year research project Interrupting Youth Support systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability led by the author and funded by the Academy of Finland. The aim of the research project is to explore cross-sectoral policies and practices of support systems intended for young people “at risk” within the ethos of vulnerability, as well as to create more room for their own interpretations, responses and actions. The wider context of the project is the neoliberalization of the Nordic welfare state and especially how it takes place via market-oriented, privatised, therapeutic, psychological and medicalized policies and practices in the neoliberal ethos. The whole research group in the project is interested in how the ethos of vulnerability changes expectations, policies and practices related to youth support systems (e.g. Brunila et al., 2017; Honkasilta, 2017; Kurki et al., 2017; Lanas & Brunila, 2019; Masoud, Kurki, & Brunila, forthcoming; Mertanen, Pashy, & Brunila, 2019; Tiainen, Leiviskä, & Brunila, 2019) The project combines at least two different approaches to vulnerability: one as a psycho-emotional discourse shaping subjectivity of young people; and the other, as a beginning of new conceptualizations of subjectivity. In this article the focus is on the previous.

The youth support systems here refer to various kinds of short-term youth-training, counselling and rehabilitation programmes and projects, psychosocial support and peer support, as well as functional activities (such as art therapy, physical activity and music). The data produced both individually and jointly 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, the researchers have investigated dozens of youth support systems in Finland, and have interviewed over 300 young people with 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 web pages. The methodology of the research project is characterised as multi-sited, nomadic and discursive ethnography including note taking, interviews, discussions involving representatives from 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 young people to envision their choices and moves. Studying these issues together with the youth workers, teachers and young people has helped to create more room for young people’s interpretations. Furthermore, the whole group has given a lot of thought to counter-politics, forms of activism, social movements and the ways in which people form assemblies to act, to influence and to resist.

Youth support systems and the sometimes rather complicated and highly pressured situation young people nowadays face are addressed discursively in the article, meaning that discourses are considered to be practices emerging within and producing power relations, which contribute to constituting the phenomena of which they speak (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014; Brunila & Ryynänen, 2016; Lanas & Brunila). One of the project’s key interests relates to extended and complicated trajectories from school to work and further education, and how they shape the interests of young people: including those outside of education and work; including those who live or who have lived in prison; including those who are considered to have mental-health problems and learning difficulties; including those who are asylum seekers or migrants; and including those involved in all kinds of support systems, short-term programmes, projects and outreach youth work; and including those who just have not found their place in a society.

One of the very first outcomes of the project research was that psycho-emotional vulnerability as a policy imperative related to youth policy steering has framed ideas of youth training and young people’s subjectivity towards diminished and deviant. As we have argued elsewhere, this has happened while the crises of late capitalism have intensified political pessimism about declining psychological and emotional well-being, disengagement and motivation amongst growing numbers of groups and individuals deemed to be “at risk”. The psycho-emotional in this article means a wider array of discourses from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to positive psychology and individually based diagnoses of emotional needs and behavior problems drawing from different strands of precision education, counselling, self-help, psychotherapy, positive psychology and mindfulness. They all involve individual and group activities and pedagogical solutions to help participants explore, understand and manage emotions.

Accordingly, as we have demonstrated earlier, disturbing behaviour of children and young people has taken centre stage in schooling and education and as among the biggest challenges currently facing the education system as a whole. The psychologically oriented professional discourses set boundaries on what can be said, thought, understood or felt in regard to situations or chains of events constituted as disturbing, risky or problematic behaviour (Lanas & Brunila, 2019)

When the whole research group looked closely at various youth support systems it became clear that to meet present-day challenges they placed demands on young people to develop individually considered competences such as self-discipline, resilience and continuous self-development in terms of a stronger employability (e.g. Brunila,
Ikävalko, Kurki, Mertanen, & Mikkola, 2016; Mertanen et al., 2019). While the idea of employability is a current aim in youth policies and practices equipping young people with necessary skills, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the wider context in which young people are seeking employment. Consequently, enhancing these competences and skills is considered to be an individual responsibility and necessity in order to “survive” broad competitive and uncertain labour markets and life trajectories.

Accordingly government implementations for young people have focused on building individualistic competences and skills. Typical initiatives and training have included supervised, market-oriented and individualised activities in various settings, such as interventions aimed at raising self-esteem and exploring and analysing emotions, as well as behavioural, emotional and happiness training, which in this article are analysed by using the term psychological management.

In a way, the discovery in terms of psychological management is nothing new (e.g. Rose, 1996). The so-called psy discourses (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, therapeutic technologies and self-help) have been closely allied with the governing of young people in various contexts. However, since the turn of the millennium they have increasingly portrayed young people as being predisposed to developing various types of mental-health dysfunctions and other personal deficits at some point in their lives (Brown, 2011; Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Lanas & Brunila, 2019; McLeod, 2012).

What is argued in the research project is that the psy discourses together with the ethos of neoliberalism help to constitute an ethos of vulnerability. Ethos of vulnerability here refers to political and educational claims that are increasingly made on the assumption that inherent vulnerability takes a specific psycho-emotional form. The roots of psy knowledge could be located in individualisation and, in parallel, the individual becoming an object of study and a potential force for change (Foucault, 1977). The paper argues that psychological management works in an alliance with a neoliberal ethos because they both share a focus on the “self-steering” capacities of the subjects themselves: the ideal self is autonomous, self-responsible, entrepreneurial, flexible and self-centred, and also inherently vulnerable (see also, Davies, 2005; Rose, 1996, p. 199).

It could be argued that we are living in an era of multiple crises and where psychological management could be understood useful and efficient. There are constant concerns in the fields of economics, psychology, neurology, medicine, genetics as well as mental health, which have assumed quite a prominent role in public discussions. Major concerns have been voiced about mental health, anxieties, emotional well-being and vulnerability. Rising numbers of young people have been diagnosed with a widening array of syndromes, disorders and other psychological conditions, and often as “vulnerable”.

It therefore comes as no surprise that ethos of vulnerability enhancing psycho-emotional aspects has been internalised and associated with a vast array of individually understood psycho-emotional deficits in cross-sectoral policies and practices (Brunila et al., 2017, 2016). Furthermore, various types of support systems and interventions have been offered to help participants explore, understand and manage their emotions (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015). Kate Brown describes the ethos of vulnerability in social policy as a powerful conceptual mechanism that underpins various interventions for certain young people, which has been related to bureaucratic condescension, selective systems of welfare and social control (Brown, 2011). Accordingly, applying the policy
category of vulnerability to structural risks has tended to expand into a more diffuse spectrum of psycho-emotional vulnerabilities (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015). Hence, more and more young people have been drawn into the sphere of psychological management with its expanded agenda of psycho-emotional risks, which no longer exclusively targets specific groups but is increasingly aimed at anyone.

The ethos of vulnerability also reflects a wider societal turn where Western societies have been fascinated with emotional and psychological life and popular culture and social policy hold beliefs that talk is therapeutic and speaking about problems helps to resolve them (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Wright, 2011). The hegemony of psy discourses could be seen as emblematic manifestations of the therapeutic society which encompasses a spectrum of discourses, social practices, and cultural artefacts that discursively and institutionally pervade not just support systems but social and cultural life (Wright, 2011). Nikolas Rose in his analysis of therapeutic has argued how psy knowledges underwrite the government of subjectivity in advanced liberal democracies (Rose, 1996; see also Nolan, 1998).

When societal problems become psychologically managed

There is increasing concern that many of them (NEET not in education, employment or training young people) cannot prosper. High rates of child poverty, poor health, school dropout and unemployment among a too large number of young people, indicate a need to review the investments Europe is making in its youth starting earlier (…). (EU Commission, 2007)

In this programme, everyday life management means that the child or young person is capable of taking responsibility for his or her life, personal finances and emotional well-being, considering his or her development stage. The continuum of programmes seeks to enable all children and young people, regardless of background, to reach their full potential as individuals, members of groups and citizens. (Child and Youth Policy Programme 2012–2015, implements the EU’s Youth Strategy)

The following two extracts above show how the EU policy steering and their national implementations such as the Child and Youth Policy Programme speak about young people. In the two extracts, the individualization for prospering or economic survival intertwines with emotional wellbeing and the notion of employability which is understood as a set of “correct” skills (see also Mertanen et al., 2019). In addition, when the programme documents related to youth support systems were studied and how they referred to young people there was a noticeable pattern in which wider societal problems such as poverty, unemployment and a lack of education tended to be individualised as personal deficits and a personal lack of various things (see also Brunila et al., 2017):

- low self-esteem
- mental health problems
- fragile self-image
- criminal mind
- dependent
- depressed
- unsocial
- mentally unstable
- vulnerable
- impatient
- angry
- broken identity
- lack of problem-solving skills
- impulsive
- lack of metacognitive skills
- learning difficulties
- speech defect
- lack of initiative skills
- confused
- unclear
- tense
- gullible
- lack of emotional skills
- lack of vigilance
- anxious
- lack of life-management skills
- resentful
- lack of social skills

The following list is collected from youth support systems in Finland between the years 2010–2017. The author has used this list together with policy documents with her undergraduate students. On the discursive level she has pointed out how descriptions
are never neutral and also have effects. Furthermore, they produce certain conditions of possibility for young people: in other words they take part in setting boundaries on what can be said, thought, understood or felt with regard to the situations or chains of events young people face. When she shows this list to her students they are either confused or do not necessarily take it seriously. Sometimes they ask her whether she is somehow against acknowledging that these problems truly exist. She replies that she does not deny that there might be a problem, but where the problem is and how it should be addressed should be considered more critically.

On the discursive level, and related to the conditions of possibility, one could argue that what we think of young people and their circumstances affects what we set as objectives of support systems and the way we pursue them. In other words, conceptualising something as problematic entails understanding that it is never merely a neutral description of something; it also produces a particular reality with certain effects (see more about the effects of psy-disciplines Petersen & Millei, 2016).

Young people need more diagnoses for their problems. Diagnoses are good, they have a soothing effect as well. (Youth worker interview, 2015)

Young people have low-self-esteem issues. (Youth programme document, 2016)

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

Young people have so many personal problems. They have low self-esteem, mental-health problems, learning problems, attitude problems, all kinds of problems (Youth worker interview, 2016)

Growing mental illness amongst young people is one of the most serious public-health challenges (Youth programme document, 2016)

More and more young people face mental-health problems. (Youth programme document, 2016)

The support systems analysed in the research project aim to enhance psy-oriented vocabulary and attributes of emotional literacy, emotional management, resilience and self-esteem. With regard to young people these initiatives have included activities such as interventions to promote emotional well-being, activities for raising self-esteem, emotional guidance, positive pedagogy as well as happiness training, which have had various effects:

It cannot start elsewhere than from yourself if you really want the 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)

Psychological management, related to support systems, is neither neutral nor innocent. It works by ensuring that the problems young people face lie in the young people themselves. Becoming a recognisable young person means learning how to present oneself and one’s emotions in the “right way”. When looking at this closer it seemed that the support given in the support systems was about psycho-emotional work such as creating emotional attachment and mutual trust. In our data emotional work is an
important part of psychological management that positions young people as psychoemotionally vulnerable. This was understood to help and guide them in the right direction.

Accordingly, once young people had been categorised as psychoemotionally vulnerable or “at risk”, for example, they were expected to learn how to belong to that particular category, and thus to become submissive to psycho-emotional vulnerability or riskiness. If the young person did not succeed in producing the right kind of discourse, the responsibility remained a personal problem for them. Furthermore, this kind of orientation towards psycho-emotional vulnerabilities tended to ignore young people as potentially capable and active in spite of their sometimes rather critical comments. In terms of power relations psychological management tends to produce a number of problematic effects, including the reproduction of societal power relations as individualised problems, as well as the pathologising of young people.

In other words, psychological management works in our data by individualising societal problems in terms of attributing the problem to the individual and, specifically, within the individual. This reflects the wider spread of psy disciplines in which the focus is on psychological and psychiatric – and increasingly neurological – explanations about genetic traits and psychological accounts of the lasting legacies and barriers created by early childhood experiences (see also Petersen & Millei, 2016).

As a whole, psychological management produces a certain type of professional discourse in which the structural, cultural, historical, political, historical and social aspects of the problems young people face may be ignored. In addition, societally and culturally embedded differences such as gender, ethnicity, health, social class and disability may be misinterpreted as personal deficits or challenges. Given the subjectivity of psychological management, agency and emotions may be abstracted from their cultural, social and political context, and de-contextualised as psy-oriented assessing and addressing.

Talking to the young people made psychological management and its effects seem a little more complex:

Could you tell me what you do in this project?

Well, we talk a lot about our emotions. I know it’s supposed to be good for me and people are really nice here but sometimes … You know, I would like to educate myself because when I get out of here I need to get a job. (Youth Interview, 2014).

Sometimes I think I am considered some kind of idiot here. I know these people try their best, but I can’t help feeling this way. (Youth interview, 2015).

I guess I just have to be here. I’d rather get education that would lead to something but what can I do? They directed me here. (Youth interview, 2015).

These people are all nice here. But what’s the point? I do what I am told to do. Otherwise I will lose my benefits. (Youth interview, 2016).

This is actually my third project already. But at least you have something to do. (Youth interview, 2017).

Our conversations with young people showed how different discourses and ways of being and doing are situated in youth support systems, which also means that the mutually conflicting and sometimes rather critical discourses that young people took up
were not necessarily given equal status. Although some young people seemed to be content because they at least had something to do while they were unemployed, they also expressed noticeable disappointment and disengagement with the activities in which they were taking part. There were various types of tensions between the aims of the support systems and the young people’s own views and interests. There were several occasions when young people challenged the contents of the support systems, for example by describing the activities as tiring, disappointing or as brainwashing (e.g. Brunila, 2012). Sometimes they described how the system made them feel as burdens (e.g. Masoud et al., forthcoming). In general, the tensions between the aims of the projects and the youth workers’ and young people’s own interests were only indirectly evident. When asked about what they thought would happen after the programme, there was often a long silence. Many thought they would end up being unemployed or moving to another intervention in the system. Some referred to themselves as at the bottom of society, or as scum who would not interest anyone. Several youth workers also expressed more critical views of the situation:

Sometimes I really wonder what we are doing. I know it’s a financial question, project after project, and we need these projects in this organisation for funding but what about these young people? Does anyone think about them? Who cares about them when the project is over?

I think that sometimes these kinds of activities can even hinder access to education or working life.

What else could we do in this situation? The Ministry funds these activities and we do what we get funding for. And quite frankly, we are the only people who seem to care.

It is politics of course. What else could it be?

I try to do my best, but I know it is not enough.

The young people here are great but the system sucks.

(extracts from interviews with youth workers, 2014-2018)

The youth workers revealed in the discussions that they considered individual-based activities useful in terms of individual young people, but they also took a more critical perspective. Several of them mentioned strictly regulated and predetermined goals, a complicated and byrocratic system and a constant lack of resources and repetitious reporting to the funder. Many seemed to accept the situation because it guaranteed at least some opportunities to continue working with young people. Many said that if they weren’t there there would be no one for the young people. Many of them were heavily involved in their work, but in their own words they considered the possibilities of resistance rather limited. Some admitted that what they report or tell to the funder is something else than what they do with young people.

**The (false) promise of psychological management**

According to our research findings, psychological management has life-enhancement potential in terms of resolving personal problems and developing individual resilience and determination, which of course go rather smoothly together with the
neoliberalisation of the Nordic welfare state. We have earlier argued how the neoliberal ethos with its alliance of therapeutic and psychological vocabulary and methods has formed a joint framework for the rise of the therapeutic Nordic welfare state model in order to build its’ citizens as resilient and competitive. We claimed that neoliberal welfare state reform is not only intensified by the therapeutic and psychological ethos, but that the state also acts as a powerful instrument of this reform. Therefore it is not only competitiveness and efficiency that are shaping citizens, but even more persistent changes in the ways in which they are perceived and how they should perceive themselves both as vulnerable but also necessarily resilient and competitive. (Brunila & Ylöstalo, forthcoming.)

With regard to youth support systems, its potential is connected to selfhood, meaning that the autonomous and individualised self is able to discover itself through psychologically oriented interventions aimed at getting rid of psychic and emotional chains and strengthening self-discipline. The neoliberal ethos and psychological management are complementary in terms of benefitting employment markets and producing a more flexible and self-oriented labour force. This claim is justified on the grounds of their potential to provide the necessary resources to ensure success in life.

In terms of efficiency, the question is not whether to intervene, but which type of psychological management is more effective and useful. The type of management identified in the data links psychosocial well-being with security, and fosters ideal subjectivities that could cope with risk and insecurity. Hence, an individual’s sense of psychosocial well-being is not simply an individual concern: it is an aspect of efficient psychological management aiming at harnessing existence to achieve neoliberal gains, meanwhile ignoring the systematic and social pressures that put young people under stress. According to the results, psychological management could be characterised as a form of neoliberal ableism that, in the end, obviates the need for neoliberal state support.

The current psychological management can be linked to the current labour-market focusing on getting the most out of workers by releasing the psychological striving of individuals for autonomy and creativity: in enhancing employability and pre-determined skills such as self-presentation and self-management it serves purposes related to individualisation and agency, and fosters autonomy and the taking of responsibility.

In addition, psychological management could be linked to the production of certain types of subjects in the current climate of multiple crises related to the transition to the economics of austerity. As Maurizio Lazzarato (2014) famously notes, the politics of austerity is not delimited to the economic sphere. By destabilising and overriding welfare-state structures it fashions a new type of citizen, one subjected to endless debt. The term debt here coins a host of techniques that impose economic indebtedness and its risks on individual citizens rather than on the system, and also to an ethos that intensifies individual responsibility and guilt, thereby obfuscating the potential of collective democratic interventions (Saari & Brunila, in review).

However, in spite of its promise, current psychological management tends to promote a rather narrow, shallow, individualised, decontextualised and instrumentalist approach. There is another interesting aspect as well. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, some of the support systems provide so called happiness training and
positive pedagogy for unemployed young people. In one case the youth worker told the young people that they did not need to have a lot of money to be happy, citing as an example poor but happy people in India. If one considers psychological management as a form of governance, one could conclude that these support systems tend to educate and train young people to make the choices they are expected to make, such that every young person learns to know their “right place” in society.

It therefore came as no surprise in our data that young migrant women were guided to taking care of the elderly, young migrant men were encouraged to drive buses, and young people in prison were guided towards the vocational sector and to working in restaurants, factories and as car mechanics, for example. Various types of support systems are expected to minimise the conditions of psycho-emotional vulnerability, but they may also reproduce them. To become a recognisable young person means learning how to present oneself in the “right way”. Once the young people involved in support systems had been categorised as “immigrants” or “criminals” because of their backgrounds, they soon learned to belong to that particular category, and thus became submissive to their “immigrant-ness” or “criminal-ness” (e.g. Kurki & Brunila, 2014; Masoud et al., forthcoming.) When they then acted as they were expected to act, such as remaining ineligible for education or work, the problem could be reflected back on them.

According to our analysis, youth support systems – although well-meaning – tend to be unable to meet the demands or resolve the contextual issues of the young people they are targeting. Such systems may, of course, be helpful in enabling some individuals to move on, but from a wider perspective, the rise of psychological management suggests a shift in which societal problems as well as education become a personal responsibility, meaning that institutions and governments have fewer obligations and endless individual-based activities offer solutions to individual-based problems. Despite the significant increase in the number of support systems however, the problems remain the same.

Finland, as one of the Nordic welfare states claims to provide equal opportunities in terms of education and training. However, with young people “at risk”, there seems to be discrepancy between what is needed and what is available for many which restricts their opportunities to achieve further education or getting into labour market. Furthermore, the support systems alongside their psychological management do not tend to ensure the full inclusion of the various groups of young people into a society. Therefore, a more critical conceptualisation of the politics and practices of education is needed.

**Conclusion – the slow death of education?**

As educationalists we do, of course, need to ask what the rise of psychological management means in terms of education. A number of researchers across the world are referring to a crisis in education taking place within the larger ethos of neoliberalism which has enabled un-educational and de-politicised ways of thinking about education (Tiainen et al., 2019). Alongside crisis, the current educational situation is characterised with a sense of disorientation about the purpose, content and values of education as well as confusion about what society ought to expect from its citizens. The role of education seems to be slipping away from knowledge-based activities towards training of skills, competences and specific types of emotion, namely the positive.
It could be argued that psychological management is here to stay. Previous research has shown how educational institutions and training have played a key role in disseminating psy knowledge (Burman, 1994; Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Petersen & Millei, 2016; McLeod & Wright, 2015; see Popular psychology, selfhelp culture and happiness industry – research network). The application of psychology in education has been crucial to the spread of therapeutic ideas and practices and to the whole therapeutic culture and therapeutic state. In the broader context, as Katie Wright (2011, p. 91) has argued, psychology’s alliance with education coincided with an increasing concern with the scientific management of populations from children to adults.

Therefore it is not a surprise that psychological management has worked towards depoliticising, narrowing and individualising education toward highly tailored precision education, and this in turn has required a specific type of ideal subjectivity as a target to facilitate legitimation. Positioned as a target of psychological management, people are supposed to become employable and entrepreneurial choosing individually tailored precision education and learning based on their individual needs and what they wish eventually to achieve in life. Moreover, psychological management is strengthened by various types of specialists who claim that the self can be discovered and achieve a better and more satisfying life through the application of psy-oriented knowledge and professional skills. As it was shown in the article, in terms of youth support systems, young people become speaking subjects through these discourses while being subjected to their constitutive force so it is utterly important to pay a more critical attention to these discourses.

As it has been shown in the article, the view of the psychological management is that being and doing are individual processes requiring the intervention of psy knowledge. This could be interpreted as an outcome of the neoliberal ethos, which requires people to submit to their own vulnerabilities such that a lack of socio-economic activity is an indicator of personal deficiency. However, psychological management might not be enough in a more economically-driven ethos, which may be why we seem to be witnessing yet another shift, this time from psy knowledge to neuro-based knowledge and behavioural genetics giving power to predict and engineer individual strengths and vulnerabilities from birth (e.g. Gillies et al., 2017; Plomin, 2018).

Poverty and other social disruptions throughout a large part of their lives have made the world a more uncertain place for many young people. More caution is called for if the solution to economic and other societal problems is psychological management and instruction in how to attain resilience, wellbeing and even individual happiness. Thinking outside this kind of taken-for-granted framework requires a great deal of courage among those attempting to reconstitute themselves. It is crucial to remember that discourses are also unstable and open to resistance and change.

As educationalists we should perhaps be more interested in what is happening. In the current ethos it seems that people are unable to learn unless they are happy, enthusiastic and resilient, and possess confidence, self-understanding and social skills. This clearly represents the psychological management type of governance: psychology first, education later. In fact, the whole educational field is shifting in emphasis from educational sciences to learning sciences, from teaching to learning, from knowledge to emotions, from structures to processes and performance management together with
the self-development self-learning of individuals. In parallel, the focus in welfare states is turning towards the wellbeing of individuals.

These aspects are already changing the form and content of what has been called education towards helping and equipping subjects to cope with societal problems such as personal difficulties in a way that is held to be rewarding and empowering. It is a process through which subjects learn what they are supposed to learn, including dealing with their emotions in a certain way, which in turn leads to resilience and survival socially and, most importantly, to coping in the labour market.

The current psychological management discussed in this article seems to offer new types of explanation, underlying assumptions and a set of associated practices through which people make sense of themselves and others. It therefore has the capacity to provide plenty of opportunities for example for more personalised and individualised career planning and management. It promotes policies and techniques for becoming a desirable subject: someone who is answerable, accountable, manageable, reliable, dependable and suitably independent; someone who has development potential, who is trainable, capable of self-discipline, flexibility and continuous self-development; someone who knows their place and makes realistic plans to achieve it. Some more critical scholars would, in the words of of Lauren Berlant (2011), describe this as a slow death, the physical wearing out of a population under capitalist regimes of structural subordination and governmentality. Others who are oriented towards opportunism would call it the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing – depending on the condition of possibility: discourses that prescribe not only what is desirable, but also what is recognisable as acceptable forms of being and doing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Kristiina Brunila holds a professorship of social justice and equality in education. She directs AGORA-research centre where their CRISP (Critical sociology and philosophy of education) – research group is located. The whole group focuses on policies, cultures and practices of education, as well as on power, differences, and inequalities in educational systems.

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